

English language teaching through technology: Emerging possibilities

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to explore how the widespread percolation of technology in our daily life can be used favourably for English language teaching and learning. The learning spaces created through the establishment of language labs in schools and colleges could be expanded to include smartphones and wearable devices. Such liberating spaces can not only make language learning interesting, but also render it flexible to the varying levels of the learners. There are also possibilities of combining electronic language learning with traditional classroom methods. Technology is not new to the contemporary learner, though it might be to some members of the teaching community. The present learner is born into the world of technology and therefore, any classroom divorced from technology would make the learner feel like fish out of water. But with technology, the modern student can be scaffolded from “remembering” to “creating”, which is the ultimate stage in Bloom’s Taxonomy.

Keywords: English language teaching; Technology in language teaching.

Technology has become so ubiquitous that it has slipped to the background in our daily life so much that we have stopped noticing the impact of technology in our daily life. For instance, when we order food through an app on our phone, we take for granted the change that technology has made in our eating habits. This paper tries to explore how this widespread percolation of technology can be used favourably for English language teaching and learning.

One of the major advancements in using technology for English language teaching has been the establishment of language labs in schools and colleges. However, with

technology becoming very mobile, the language lab has almost become a restrictive space like a classroom. As Chapelle (2003, pp.11-12) observes:

“Twenty years ago the computer lab was a place for peers at a university to meet and work on the computers, but the modern day version of communication and collaboration among peers at their computers has expanded beyond the computer lab. Rather than requiring learners to meet in a single physical location, the Internet is host to new spaces in which learners communicate through chat rooms, e-mail, and discussion groups. Some of these meeting places are

constructed specifically for ESL learners, but most, like the physical computer lab, are places where people come to meet with their peers while they are working or playing.”

These spaces that Chapelle refers to include but are not limited to smartphones and wearable devices. Such liberating spaces could not only make language learning interesting, but also render it flexible to the varying levels of the learners. While the language lab also could have such varying stages according to the learner’s attainment, the environment of the classroom provided by the set-up prevents any practical implementation of individual learner-centric approaches. Further, the overemphasis on accent and accurate pronunciation in the language lab could drive many a learner away from seriously attempting to acquire the language skills. Pronunciation is only one aspect of the multiple facets of a language. However, this is not to undermine the relevance of the language lab, which continues to be the mainstay of technology-assisted language learning.

Chapelle (*ibid.*, p.16) also raises the question whether the emergence of interactive voice response systems (IVRS) do not also necessitate the English language learner to become proficient in that kind of communication apart from the now existing oral and written methods of communication:

“In many language programs, the curriculum distinguishes between oral and written language teaching explicitly (e.g., with different courses) on the assumption that the two modes should imply different

abilities to be learned. But what about computer-mediated communication? Does this represent a third mode, and a third set of abilities that students should be learning?”

One of the reasons why such a mode of learning becomes necessary is that artificial intelligence systems use specific patterns of language functions for communication.

There are also possibilities of combining electronic language learning with traditional classroom methods. It is possible for the teacher to use the evidence of an actual communication made electronically to demonstrate the errors of omission or commission that the speaker/writer makes.

One major benefit of technology-assisted language learning is that the learner gets an opportunity to listen to and interact with native speakers without having to travel and meet them. So, it is not entirely an interaction with an automated system as in a language lab, but an example of computer-assisted language learning (CALL). Learning new words does not need interruption of the task at hand because of the presence of online dictionaries, which help in the development of vocabulary. Chapelle (*ibid.*, p.58) observes:

“Research has also investigated the effects of learners’ focusing attention through modification of what might be considered the normal interaction in the CALL task, e.g., continuing to read or listen without stopping for help. The most prevalent of these studies investigates vocabulary acquisition through reading tasks which are supported with on-line glosses.”

In a traditional classroom, the learner would be hesitant to interrupt the teacher to understand the meaning of a difficult word. The teacher too would not want the flow of the class to be disturbed for offering clarification to a single student. In fact, the presence of the computer is not as an inert tool, but as an active facilitator, which can take the role of assisting the human teacher in the human-computer interaction (HCI). Chapelle (*ibid.*, p.105) goes on to explain how the machine successfully slips into this role during the teaching-learning process:

“For example, the computer offers help, gives help, judges responses, etc.; the learner requests help, responds, declines offers, etc. This perspective adds a pragmatic dimension to HCI that opens the possibility for comparison with the types of functions that learners can engage in across different learning environments, including a variety of programs for learner-computer interactions, those for learner-learner interaction and class-room interaction, as well.”

Thus, it can be seen that the computer plays a complementary role in the language-learning process rather than function as a substitute for the human teacher, though it can take up the role of one if needed. In fact, the human teacher can keep track of the learning process of the students with the machine as a go-between in the teacher-student relationship. Erben et al. (2009, p.49) observe that “according to Vygotsky, the individual is inseparable from his/her social context and consequently cognitive development is viewed as an essentially

sociocultural activity.” Vygotsky’s study in the development of thought and language in the human child is worth considering here. Vygotsky (1986, p.94) argues that thought and language development is not a natural consequence of biological growth:

“Thought development is determined by language, i.e. by the linguistic tools of thought and by the sociocultural experience of the child. Essentially, the development of inner speech depends on outside factors; the development of logic in the child, as Piaget’s studies have shown, is a direct function of his socialized speech. The child’s intellectual growth is contingent on his mastering the social means of thought, that is, language.”

Thus, a case can be made for moving from computer-assisted language learning (CALL) to mobile-assisted language learning (MALL). It is a fact that the modern student spends most of her/his value time in the virtual world, especially preoccupied with social networking apps like WhatsApp and Facebook. Instead of attempting to divert the student’s attention from them to the “real” classroom, it would be more worthwhile to take the learning tools, or even better, the classroom itself to the virtual world. Erben et al. (*ibid.*, p.65) remind us of the famous Chinese proverb: “Tell me, I’ll forget. Show me, I’ll remember. Involve me, I’ll understand.” This saying is quite popular among all teachers as a major principle of effective teaching. However, the authors (*ibid.*, 65) suggest that the changing times need to take this saying to a new level by adding to it: “Differentially instruct me, I’ll

internalize. Use technology with me, I'll participate, I'll transfer, I'll employ and I'll create."

Technology is nothing new to the modern learner, though it might be new to some among the teaching community. The modern learner is born into the world of technology and therefore, any classroom, including the English classroom, divorced from technology would make the learner feel like fish out of water. But with technology, the modern student could be scaffolded from "remembering" to "creating", which is the ultimate stage in Bloom's (1956, pp.1-2) Taxonomy: "Teachers building a curriculum should find here a range of possible educational goals or outcomes in the cognitive area ('cognitive' is used to include activities such as remembering and recalling knowledge, thinking, problem solving, creating)."

It may not be either possible or even necessary to induct the student directly into websites entirely dedicated to education or the English language. Rather, it would be easier to create a WhatsApp group of the learners. The advantage of such a WhatsApp group is that the students could participate in the learning process without inhibition. It is observed that people in general and students in particular open up in virtual spaces like social media better than they do in real life. Such a situation could be favourably tapped by teachers of the language. In case a student does not wish to post her utterances in the group, she could communicate with her teacher with a personal message using the same app.

To motivate the students to communicate well in the group, they should be encouraged to understand that it is normal to make errors in all aspects of language. Vygotsky (1986, p.221) says that it is not possible to use language which is free from errors: "Absolute correctness is achieved only in mathematics. It seems that Descartes was the first who recognized in mathematics a form of thought that, although originating in language, goes beyond it. Our daily speech constantly fluctuates between the ideals of mathematical harmony and imaginative harmony." While this is true of adults who have been using the language for quite a long time, hunting for errors in the baby steps of the new learners would be nothing less than utmost cruelty. The benefit of using social media platforms like WhatsApp is that the possibilities of such persecution could be avoided primarily because it is a virtual space.

References

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