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SOME PECULIARITIES OF DIGITAL LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

***Summary:** The article is devoted to digital language learning and teaching. It analyses certain opportunities as well as challenges in relation to the use of digital technology for language learning and teaching. It describes the ways in which technology can be implemented to enhance student engagement and motivation. It also considers the use of specific technological applications in the classroom to achieve learning goals in the process of language learning and teaching.*

***Key words:** digital technology, digital tools, language learning and teaching, motivation, student engagement.*

For many years, researchers and educators have placed much focus on understanding different methods and strategies for optimizing the student learning environment. As time progresses and the education system continues to advance, teachers dedicate ample time to developing new ways to communicate course material effectively and in a way that benefits all learners. With technology becoming more prevalent in our modern society, methods for implementing digital applications into the classroom have become a major focus in the educational community. The almost universal use of the Internet, of

smartphones and of connectivity has opened up enormous opportunities for language learning and teaching. However, the same opportunities also present many challenges. There are numerous programmes that address the issue of developing teachers' digital skills and their critical awareness of online teaching resources so that these can be integrated effectively into teaching. In this context it is possible to consider the impact of the digital revolution on language learning and teaching. Thus, this article analyses certain opportunities as well as challenges in relation to the use of digital technology for language learning and teaching. It also describes the ways in which technology can be implemented to enhance student engagement and the use of specific technological applications in the classroom to achieve learning goals in the process of language learning and teaching.

To begin with, it is necessary to point out that in recent years reference to 'digital technology in the classroom' can be taken to mean digital processing systems that encourage active learning, knowledge construction, inquiry, and exploration on the part of the learners, and which allow for remote communication as well as data sharing to take place between teachers and/or learners in different physical classroom locations.

It should be noted that there are certain benefits as well as challenges/criticisms of digital technologies in the classroom. It is obvious that the potential benefits of digital technologies in the classroom are that they can foster dialogic and emancipatory practice. Dialogic practice is that in which students are active, engaged and empowered participants in a conversation from which learning emerges. Emancipatory practice is that in which an individual student's ideas go beyond the learning prescribed by the teacher/syllabus as they draw on knowledge gained outside formal education to construct understanding [1].

In addition, different technologies can improve learning by augmenting and connecting learning activities. For example, in English lessons two classes

in different schools may link up via the internet to explore cultural differences in relation to a particular global issue. The groups can work together to understand not just the issue itself but its impact on communities and individuals by talking to real people. In situations where bandwidth is limited this could be done at a whole class level via video or even over email or SMS (Short Message Service) messaging.

Digital technology can also be exciting for learners and offers a potentially more engaging alternative. At the same time it is important to take into account that some learners may be less confident in learning with digital technologies and steps need to be taken to ensure equality of access.

Despite the above-mentioned benefits, there are certain challenges/criticisms of digital technologies in the classroom.

- A lot of time and resources are currently being invested into technologies and applications that have yet to be proven to be effective or efficient when compared to more traditional classroom learning contexts. Teachers and schools need to think carefully about when, why and how to use technologies as well as evaluating their efficiency and effectiveness.

- There is a 'digital divide' – the divide between those who have access to digital technology and the internet, and those that do not.

- Implementing and then maintaining technology is costly particularly as systems can quickly become out of date.

- There may be problems with the existing infrastructure, for example, internet connections may be inconsistent and/or slow.

- Safety for students and teachers is a key challenge with prevention of cyber-bullying, the hacking of personal information, access to illegal or banned materials and distractions from learning (such as social networking and mobile phone use) all being high on institutional agendas.

- Some uses of technologies can be harmful. For example, poor posture and eyestrain are common problems when working at desktop computers for prolonged periods [1].

In general, numerous studies have supported the idea that implementing technology into the classroom facilitates meaningful learning, greater use of prior knowledge, hierarchical cognitive structure, elaboration, greater depth of processing and innovative practice. This integration shifts the focus of the learning environment to being more student-centered and allows for them to develop autonomy and control over their learning.

When introducing a technological application into a classroom, it is important to consider whether the features of that technology are suited to meet task outcomes. It is preferred that the technology is designed in such a way that it is easy to use for both the instructor and students and possesses all the features necessary to promote student learning.

It is important to consider how students will receive technology when implementing it into the classroom. When students perceive that the attributes of a given technology are engaging and beneficial to their learning, they are likely to adopt that technology and use it to enhance their understanding of course content. Some features that make technology appealing to students are flexibility, accessibility, ease-of-use and overall engagement. Studies show that students report high levels of satisfaction with the use of educational technology as it allows them to interactively engage in learning. Students also believe that technology facilitates a greater understanding of course content, contributes to higher academic achievement and better prepares them for the technology-dependent workforce [2].

It is worth noting that computer technology has enjoyed decades of use in the field of second and foreign language education, but efforts to integrate technology have at times presented various challenges to educators due to rapid advances in technology and occasional changes in language teaching methods.

The following presents certain challenges with technology use in language education.

- Exposure to different types of online genres provides opportunities for learners to become acquainted with informal language not typically found in textbooks.

- As learning becomes more personalized, teachers are increasingly required to take on new roles such as facilitating and guiding. Adoption of new roles may be disruptive for some teachers, particularly those who lack the know-how to effectively adapt technology for use in their specific context. They will need to take on the responsibility of researching and testing tools for learners to use inside and outside the classroom.

- To reasonably assess the use of the technologies they wish to incorporate into their teaching, teachers need to acquire practical knowledge of such tools. They should be prepared to train learners, even the most tech-savvy ones, to use various tools effectively, to reduce anxiety and cognitive load, and enable achievement of language learning goals [3].

Contemporary studies have supported the idea that overall student motivation and engagement in learning is enhanced by the implementation of instructional technology. More specifically, technology engages students behaviourally (more effort and time spent participating in learning activities); emotionally (positively impacting attitudes and interests towards learning); and cognitively (mental investment to comprehend content). Whether technology is integrated during class time or after school hours, students are given more opportunities to interact with instructors, collaborate with peers and engage themselves in the learning process. Specific technology examples that enhance student engagement include web-conferencing software, blogs, wikis, social networking sites and digital games [2].

With the dozens of educational technology resources and applications offered, instructors can customize lesson plans that will not only facilitate higher

academic achievement for students, but also prepare them for a technology-based workforce. Digital tools provide a range of opportunities for learners to practise their language skills at their own speed and level, to communicate and collaborate, and to work creatively and use language in real world. Whether teachers use an e-book or a virtual learning environment such as Moodle to deliver a whole course online, or to help learners to access resources in lessons or for homework, it is essential to understand the tools available to teachers, how they help them to deliver learning and, most importantly, which digital tools best suit their learners' needs [4].

As already mentioned, technology offers new opportunities in both practical and pedagogic dimensions – it makes it possible to share materials in a way where access of them is logged and monitored; it allows new forms of material that encourage interaction, and it allows the setting and monitoring of computer based assessment. One of the ways in which it is possible to utilise technology to potentially improve motivation and engagement is through assessment. Assessment is recognised as an effective way to direct student effort. Pedagogic approaches of formative and summative assessment become more flexible with the benefits of computer based assessment. Utilising assessment in this way is considered an extrinsic motivator. Appropriate assessment can assist students in identifying what topics and material are essential for them to understand and apply. It can assist in managing their time, and typically provides clear end-points to material.

Team Work is another way to improve engagement – since the students become active in encouraging and managing the active participation of their teammates. Traditional difficulties – of inappropriate pressure and behaviours or of difficulties in teams actually meeting can be mitigated through technology. Team- or group-ware – such as Microsoft SharePoint, collaboration tools (such as Google Docs) or the team facilities within VLEs mean that students need not physically meet, and the activity can be logged in a way that encourages

appropriate and professional behaviours as well as providing an audit trail in the event of issues.

A major use of computers today that clearly demonstrates motivation and engagement is social computing. Exploiting the social and networking properties of social computing enables teachers to let students work together. Working together in groups – either synchronously (by using a phone as a phone) or asynchronously (texting or email) – can exploit the benefits of group working (knowledge sharing, team work, peer-peer interaction, individual support, team motivation, task delegation or role playing). Teams do not need to meet in physical locations and timing issues are also changed in the context of mobile learning [5].

It is obvious that new media are revolutionising the learning and teaching of languages in a number of ways: the Internet provides access to authentic material and examples of foreign languages; smartphones, Skype and E-mail enable learners to have direct contact with others all around the world; social media promote immediate connectivity and comment on what is happening in the world. The task for language teachers is to find innovative ways to use the new opportunities to make language learning and teaching more effective and more interesting – and to maintain the qualities and values of more conventional teaching. Doing this raises the following issues and challenges:

- Keeping up with technological development – the rate of change is so fast that choosing the right hardware and software is a constant preoccupation, leaving aside budgetary implications.
- Learning to use the new media as classroom tools – new skills which are often more quickly acquired by the students.
- Developing methodologies which incorporate the new media as integral and efficient features of curricula and syllabi.
- Complementing the use of new media with books and other more traditional forms of input [6].

There are a number of freely available online tools and open educational resources for language teaching and learning. Let us consider several digital tools and open educational resources that can be used in the classroom to enhance student engagement and success in the process of language learning.

Zoom is a user-friendly video conference tool for online lessons. Zoom's features allow teachers to explore and assess the four skills through rich interactions with students. Zoom offers many useful tools to support teaching and learning such as screen sharing, recording features and a range of annotation tools. Screen sharing allows teachers to share digital material (including video and audio) with their students and recording lessons gives learners the opportunity to revisit the content at any time and at their own pace. The annotation tools allow teachers to really engage with their teaching and learning materials by drawing, writing and highlighting anything on the screen. This helps to make the learning both accessible and visually appealing [7].

Google Classroom is a time-saving platform that allows teachers to combine the sharing of learning resources with the dynamics of a social network. This online platform is designed to manage workflow and communication between teachers and students. Teachers can create online classrooms, invite students to attend and create and share resources. Teachers and students can instantly communicate, and teachers can send announcements and start class discussions [8].

LearningApps.org is a versatile tool for learners, teachers and teacher trainers who want to use or create a variety of different activities to practice the full range of language systems (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) and language skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing). Teachers can create their own activities from scratch using one of the templates provided or they can adapt activities already created. LearningApps.org activities can be used with all levels of learners. There is a range of templates for simple language or skills focused activities. There are games and quizzes such as matching, identifying,

categorising, gap-filling, crosswords, filling in answers, ordering, putting things on a line and multiple-choice tasks [9].

Moodle is a free Learning Management System or a Virtual Learning Environment. It is an application which allows teachers to create online activities for their students, store materials for them, manage their students' grades, etc. In general, Moodle is a useful course management system.

Edmodo is an educational website which allows teachers to share materials with students, give quizzes, have students collaborate on projects, etc. This social media platform is a great tool for organization and facilitation of activities, assessing and grading.

Google Docs is a useful collaborative tool and free web-based office software that allows users to create, utilise and share their text documents through any web browser. One of the best features of Google Docs is the possibility users have, to work simultaneously on the same document. Its 'Revision history' option maybe useful for teachers as they are able to see who and in what amount contributed to a document, making a collaborative task more transparent and more easily assessed.

YouTube is the most widely used online tool by language teachers as a source of authentic material. There is a quick way to experiment with a flipped classroom. Instead of spending valuable classroom time on listening exercises, teachers can tell their learners to watch a YouTube video and complete comprehension exercises as homework. Then it is possible to follow up with an in-class discussion or role play. YouTube can also be a collaborative tool where students create their own video projects, upload them on a class account on YouTube, and comment on each other's videos [10].

Quizlet is an efficient and engaging flashcard tool. Teachers can use tools like Quizlet to make simple online quizzes for homework. Quizlet also allows learners to create flashcards to memorise and review vocabulary or topic

content. They match language to text, images, sounds and video through games and activities [11].

Considering the opportunities and challenges in relation to the use of digital technology for language teaching and learning, it is possible to conclude that technology solutions offer certain ways to enable the improved engagement and motivation of students. The task for language teachers is to find innovative ways to use the new opportunities to make language learning and teaching more effective and more interesting – and to maintain the qualities and values of more conventional teaching. In order to address these issues, it is important that traditional education systems change to accommodate the learning needs of this new generation of digital natives, as well as learners who are not part of the digital generation, but who want to use technology to make learning more flexible.

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