Thematic Article

Using Technology for Foreign Language Learning: The Teacher's Role

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Recommended citation:

Nagy, T. (2021). Using Technology for Foreign Language Learning: The Teacher's Role. *Central European Journal of Educational Research, 3*(2), 23–28. https://doi.org/10.37441/cejer/2021/3/2/9347

Abstract

The spread of information technology has changed the role of language teachers considerably. Being a good educator and an expert in their field are not enough anymore, but teachers are expected to be modern, which means, to possess the ability to design interactive classes (often by using digital tools) and use teaching methods that engage students in a creative way. Today it is a general requirement for teachers to know their way around technology and to possess the know-how of implementing it in a way that fosters language learning. To this purpose teachers need to take into account all facets of technology use, including the advantages and disadvantages of technology-mediated tasks, their usefulness for language learning (e.g. if they are related to the topic of the lesson, are challenging enough for students), helpful resources for students, etc. Technology is regarded as a supplementary instrument to traditional teaching methods that can impact students' motivation to learn in a positive way, provided it is used for activities that are in line with their needs and expectations. Task-based activities are considered to be especially useful in this regard, allowing students to practice their language skills in an authentic context and also develop creative thinking and problem solving abilities. Web 2.0 technologies (e.g. software programs for creating quizzes and polls, language learning websites, chat programs, wikis, etc.) offer a variety of valuable resources both for activities in the classroom and for practice at home.

Keywords: technology-mediated tasks, task-based learning, use of technology inside and outside the classroom, language learning, student motivation

Introduction

The challenges that teachers face in the digital age are manyfold. First, teachers need to have a general knowledge of how information technology can be used for language learning inside and outside the classroom, be clear about its advantages and disadvantages and how it can be combined with traditional teaching methods. The use of technology for a specific task needs careful planning and consideration from the part of the teacher (when and how to introduce technology in classes, whether students would benefit from its use, the type of activity that would be suitable for students, how they should be carried out, etc.). Apart from situations that make face-to face teaching impossible (like the Covid outbreak that has transferred teaching to online classrooms) teachers have the freedom to decide whether or not to introduce technology in the classroom. Technology-mediated activities can lead to an overall positive learning experience provided they meet students' needs and expectations; because of this it is advisable that teachers also take into consideration the factors that play a role in student motivation and how they can be linked to the use of technology. It is believed that task-based activities can be beneficial for students as they offer a learning environment in which they feel at home and can also use their potential (language skills, but also creativity and critical thinking) to the fullest.

Teachers need to give students the possibility to use their language skills not only in the classroom but in their daily lives, too. While the Internet and Web 2.0.technology contain valuable resources for learning, students may not be aware of them. Drawing students' attention to such databases and giving them tasks that involve the use of such resources can affect language learning positively. In addition, teachers can also

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encourages students to navigate their own learning and discover things for themselves, which can lead to incidental learning in an enjoyable and effortless way. All in all, teachers need to take up the role of a mentor who motivates, guides and supports students in their learning process.

In what follows, an insight will be given into the key aspects of a teacher's role when it comes to teaching with technology. They include acquiring knowledge about ways of using information technology for language learning, the barriers to implementing technology in the classroom, the advantages and disadvantages of technology-mediated tasks and things that need to be considered when the use of technology is planned.

1. Ways of Using Information Technology for Language Learning

Information technology (the Internet, Web 2.0 technology, computer technology, smartphones) can be used for language learning in a variety of ways. Task-based learning activities that put students in real life-like situations can be especially effective for all ages and levels. Such activities are often carried out in small groups, so that learners work together on a given task, trying to create something, discuss some topics or find a solution to a problem. They can be done in the classroom or given as a homework assignment, also depending on how much time it would take to accomplish a given task. In addition, there are also tasks that are more appropriate for individual work, giving language learners the chance for individual development.

Examples of task-based activities could be watching a video (e.g. a TED video) on a specific topic and discuss it in pairs or small groups (3 to 4 students) while focusing on some discussion points. Depending on the level of students, the teacher might need to prepare a list with unknown words and expressions beforehand and introduce it to students before the activity. Other tasks may involve students (working in pairs or small groups) using the Internet to look up information on a topic (each group would look up different data) then share this information with the class. They can also be asked to evaluate the data they find in the Internet (e.g. the design of specific websites in business classes). Quizzes and games are also a great way to introduce students to a specific topic or test their knowledge about it: e.g. a *kahoot*! activity played in a team mode (students working in small groups sharing one device) or *googleforms* are not only appropriate for such activities but they also lighten the mood in class. Similarly, digital flashcards (that can be created for example on *quizlet.com*) can be used for a variety of group activities that include the use of specific vocabulary (e.g. asking students to write the definitions for specific words or word combinations or to create flashcards themselves on the topic discussed, etc.) and also games (e.g. charades, where groups play against each other and need to guess each other's cards; in this case, the teacher may need to prepare separate flashcards for each group).

Technology can also be used for tasks that require creative thinking and problem solving skills. The can range from giving talks about a certain topic in front of the class to creating a short movie or a poster on a topic given, showing students a silent short movie and asking them to write the script for it, writing adverts for a specific product (for e.g. in a Business English Class), etc.. While such activities are more appropriate for advanced learners as they already require a good command of English, there are other activities that lower-level students might find enjoyable, such as asking them to take pictures related to a specific topic discussed beforehand and present them to their colleagues, watching a short movie with subtitles in class and then make students reconstruct the storyline in small groups, giving students the summary of the story but also include some inconsistencies that students need to correct, asking them to finish a story they read about or watch beforehand, etc. All these activities are best done in small groups, the time allocated to a task depends on the level of students and also the complexity of the task given.

Learning a foreign language requires that students have regular contact with the language outside the classroom as well. The Internet contains several free reading and listening resources that can be used for individual language practice at home. The possibilities of using Web 2.0 technologies are numerous, so that many websites offer reading and listening activities at various levels. These websites often contain exercises that test students' language use and comprehension, nevertheless creating tasks that involve students in a creative way (focus on them and their experiences) can be more compelling for them.

Websites that can be useful in this regard are for example *Linguapress.com*, *learnenglish.britishcouncil.org*, *tweentribute.com*, all of them containing reading resources at various levels and occasionally also the audio version of texts, along with glossaries and vocabulary games. They offer a variety of topics that might interest younger and older students alike (animals, education, art, entertainment, science, technology, etc. (tweentribute.com) and also introduce language learners to American and British topics and some specialized use of English (technical English) (Linguapress.com). Useful sources for listening can be found on Youtube. For example, the account *Learn English through History* has hundreds of recordings

(that indicate the age group for which they were intended) on a variety of topics and they all come with subtitles. Similarly, the account *Learn English with TV Series* can be useful for language learners with more or less advanced language skills. It contains excerpts from movies or interviews and breaks them down into pieces, drawing language learners' attention to several aspects of language use.

Last, but not least, technology can be used to connect with other language learners from around the world. There are several apps, like *bottledapp.com*, *slowly.app* or *hellotalk* that have been specifically created for language exchange and can be downloaded on any android device. Such apps can be used both for language practice (on several apps, like *tandem.net* members indicate what language they are intending to learn and which language(s) they can help others with), or just for casual chat with others in a specific language.

2. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Barriers to Technology Use in the Classroom

Concerning the challenges of using information technology in the classroom, there may be intrinsic and extrinsic barriers that hinder its implementation (Celik and Aytin 2014). Intrinsic barriers may result from teachers' deficiency in digital literacy or their lack of know-how when it comes to teaching with technology in a proper way. In addition, teachers' view on the usefulness of digital learning and their appreciation of technology as an instructional tool vary. Russell et.al's (2003) study of teacher' use of and attitude towards technology points to a rather infrequent use of technology in classes (teachers tended to use technology mostly for preparation) and also different behavioural patterns between young and less experienced and older, more experienced teachers. Contrary to the expectation that young teachers with advanced computer skills would favour the use of technology, it seems that although they are more confident with regard to the use of technology than they older or more experienced colleagues they are also more ready to pinpoint its negative effects on education. More experienced teachers, on the other hand, were willing to use technology in the classroom to a greater extent (p. 305). A more recent study (Madsen et al. 2018) compares technology use in education in Norway and New Zeeland, more specifically the relation that exists between the education policy and its manifestation in teaching practices. While both countries strive to include technology in the teaching practices (New Zealand in a more tentative way than Norway, where the use of technology is mandatory in the curriculum) teachers' attitude differs when it comes to the usefulness of technology in education. According to the data, teachers in New Zealand considered it important to use digital tools in classes, whereas the majority of Norwegian teachers did not find digital tools as a requisite for good teaching and did neither think that the use of technology would be necessarily productive in classes.

Besides intrinsic barriers there are also extrinsic obstacles to implementing technology in the classroom. Such obstaces can be the lack of a computer lab, poor internet connection, computers breaking down, etc. In addition, there might be no training available for teachers on how to teach effectively with technology nor enough time or financial means to successfully integrate technology into the curriculum.

3. Advantages and Disadvantages of Teaching with Technology

Despite being an extensively discussed topic over the last few decades, there is no general consensus as of yet over how technology impacts language learning and whether teaching methods based on the use of such technologies are more effective than traditional ones. Several studies (Agarwal 2010, Celik and Aytin 2014, O'Donough et al. 2004, Lynch and Campos 2014, Harris et al. 2016) focus on the use of information technology in the classroom, outlining its possible advantages and disadvantages. One advantage of technology-mediated tasks often mentioned in these studies is that they improve the performance of students, especially of shy language learners, who may feel inhibited in the traditional classroom setting. By offering learning conditions that students are familiar with (being digital natives), digital technology can give learners a higher degree of control over the way activities are carried out, and can make them feel more in charge of the learning process. As Agarwal 2010, Lynch and Campos 2014 note, students feel not only more empowered when solving technology-mediated tasks but they also tend to find them more interesting and challenging. Moreover, technology offers flexibility with regard to how and when it can be used and also fosters individual language learning, allowing users to do the activities at their own pace and time. It also makes adaptive learning possible, so that students can retry a certain activity without feeling pressured by their teacher or colleagues. Other advantages of technology-based learning include the fact that students have access to authentic materials and can receive immediate feedback on their work (some learning platforms even provide explanations regarding the uses of specific constructions).

An important disadvantage of technology-based learning is that it can distract students form the lesson, especially if the interface of a website is difficult to use (its design is not user-friendly) or there are special visual and sound effects that are distracting. This may result in teachers and also students feeling frustrated for not being able to carry out the task properly, losing their interest in the task at hand and eventually may also lead to teaching technology instead of teaching with technology.

4. Incorporating Technology in the Classroom Needs Careful Planning

Analysing the effects of introducing 1:1 technology in the classroom Harris et al. (2016) mentions two importance factors that teachers need to consider. First, as 1:1 technology is a relatively new phenomenon it should be introduced with careful consideration. (371). Teachers should use technology as a teaching tool that facilitates learning and never as a replacement of other effective teaching methods (Harris et al. 2016, Lynch and Campos 2014). González-Lloret (2017) notes that the excitement and initial motivation linked to the use of technology do not guarantee its effectiveness. This is an important observation, as implementing digital tools in the classroom does not necessarily make the lesson more interesting nor the learning more successful. It is therefore paramount that teachers be equipped with language learning expertise and also have the know-how as to when and how to use technology effectively for teaching. This implies that teachers assess the usefulness and usability of technology-mediated activities both in the planning phase and as a follow-up (by also getting feedback from students) and take into consideration all facets of technology use (e.g. carrying out a technology-mediated task may require a different timeframe and form of communication from a traditional setting). In line with González-Lloret (2017) it is assumed that a task-based learning approach is an effective way of using the potential given by technology, as it not only allows students to be creative but also to use their language skills in an authentic learning environment.

In order to be effective, technology-meditated tasks need to be goal-oriented, communicative and oriented to the concept of learning by doing. They also need to be appropriate to student's level and age in order be stimulating enough for them and catch their attention; similarly, they should be made relevant to the lesson material (so that students can see how the task is related to what is being studied) and last but not least, group dynamics (some groups are more action-prone and open to new experiences than others). Another aspect that teachers need to consider is whether the use of a specific digital tool is more appropriate for individual work or for group work (even whole class activity) or if it is suitable for both. Regarding group work it is important that the teacher allocate enough time to the activity (depending on the level of the group and the complexity of the task at hand) and also that each student get a specific task within a group and feel equally in charge of carrying it out. Students very often specify who does what within the group, in case they don't, teachers should ask them to do so, to make sure that all students know what they need to do and to feel their contribution is important.

Technology-mediated tasks offer a language learning environment where students focus more on a specific interface and the possibilities offered by it than on the teacher. While this has the advantage of students getting more involved in a specific task, teachers should get feedback from students in order to make sure that they understand the task and all their questions are cleared up.

Finally, in order to integrate technology-mediated tasks successfully, teachers should learn about student motivation and figure out how technology can boost students' confidence and make them motivated to learn (Harris et al. 2016, p. 372). When analysing the motivation of English language learners the following factors are usually focused on: students' reasons to learn English (also called orientations) including their short-term and long term goals (personal or professional), their determination and the effort made to achieve these goals, the interest in the subject, students' attitude towards English and English speaking countries, their enjoyment of the language learning process, and finally the way students self-regulate their learning efforts over time (Lamb 2016, p. 314). One of the earliest works in language learning motivation is that of Gardner and Lambert (1972) who define motivation in terms of language learner's orientations or goals, which can be integrative (a positive attitude towards L2 language and culture in general) or instrumental (practical reasons, such as good grades or a god job). According to Gardner's perhaps most influential theory, the socio-educational model (first proposed in 1985, then gone through various variations) defines motivation as being fuelled by three elements: effort (to learn a language), desire (to achieve a goal) and positive attitude towards learning. Other influential theories include Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self Theory (Dörnyei 2009) focusing on language learners' self-image, *the ideal L2 Self* (one's ideal self in L2), *the ought to Self* (that language learners aspire to and also *the L2 Learning Experience* (the immediate learning environment and experience) or the Self Determination theory of Deci and Ryan (2000) with the distinction between intrinsic (a person's internal motivation) and extrinsic

motivation (external factors) that are imagined to exist on a continuum (with no motivation also taken as a possibility).

Kellers's (1987) ARCS theory of motivation, though not created in the framework of language learning can also be applied to study language learning motivation, due to the theory's detailedness and integrative nature. The acronym ARCS stands for attention, relevance, confidence, satisfaction - factors that according to Keller (1987) play an important role in raising and keeping student motivation. Each category (*attention* - getting and sustaining students' motivation, *relevance* - related to students' future goals but also their specific needs (for achievement or affiliation), *confidence* - building language learners' confidence and ensuring them that with enough work success is possible, *satisfaction* (stimulating intrinsic satisfaction by extrinsic reward) is defined with further subcategories. By giving a detailed description of these categories and their subcategories Keller (2000) shows how motivational strategies can be incorporated into the lesson planning (Table 1). While not designed with technology-mediated tasks in mind, the questions can help teachers create motivational strategies even in the case of teaching with digital tools.

Table 1.

Attention
• Capture interest (Perceptual Arousal) - What can I do to capture their interest?
• Stimulate Inquiry (Inquiry Arousal) – How can I stimulate an attitude of inquiry?
• Maintain Attention (Variability) – How can I use a variety of tactics to maintain their attention?
Relevance
• Relate to Goals (Goal Orientation)- How can I best meet my learners' needs? Do I know their needs?
• Match Interest (Motive Matching): How and when can I provide my learners with appropriate choices, responsibilities, and influences?
• Tie to Experiences (Familiarity): How can I tie the instruction to the learners' experiences?
Confidence
• Success Expectations (Learning Requirements): How can I assist in building a positive expectation for success?
• Success Opportunities (Learning Activities): How will the learning experience support or enhance the students' beliefs in their competence?
• Personal Responsibility (Success Attributions): How will the learners clearly know their success is based upon their efforts and abilities?
Satisfaction
• Intrinsic Satisfaction (Self-Reinforcement): How can I provide meaningful opportunities for learners to use their newly acquired knowledge/skill?
• Rewarding Outcomes (Extrinsic Rewards): What will provide reinforcement to the learners' successes?
• Fair Treatment (Equity): How can I assist the students in anchoring a positive feeling about their accomplishments?

Source: Keller 2000, p. 4.

Conclusions

With the spread of technology teachers have to face new challenges and take up additional roles. In addition to having good technical skills teachers today need to have the know-how of using technology efficiently (when and how to incorporate it in the classroom, the advantages and disadvantages of technology use, useful resources for students, etc.) and consider the way it can affect students' learning processes, including their motivation. There are many ways technology (the computer, the Internet, the smartphone) can be incorporated in the learning process both inside and outside the classroom. Web 2.0 technology in particular offers valuable resources that are best used for task-based language learning, allowing students to use their creativity and problem-solving skills. Similarly, it gives language learners the flexibility as to when and how to use it and also the possibility to practice their language skills at their own pace, without the pressure felt from the teacher. It was assumed that when used in the right way, as a tool that facilitates learning, technology can offer an enjoyable and effective way of learning foreign languages.

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