

KEY PRINCIPLES TO INCORPORATE INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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There are many controversial issues in the area of technology-enhanced language teaching. In this article there is an attempt to explore some of these areas of disagreement; it concludes by revisiting three key principles which can help teachers incorporating ICT (information and communication technology) in their courses.

Connotation

For some people, the term “blended learning” has a positive connotation: 1+1 is more than two. In other words, the best of the teacher plus the best of the technology could result in positive learning outcomes. The students who spend their time on-line hate crossing the busy city to attend the face-to-face lessons. For others, blended learning has a negative connotation: it is the worst of both worlds. On a blended course, the students who love the classroom do not contribute to the knowledge-building on the forums. The course ends up pleasing no-one! So, when someone mentions the ‘virtual’ classroom, what connotation does it have? For one person it’s exciting; for the next, it’s scary.

Terminology

Using technology for different areas of language study

While technology has had a major influence on the teaching and learning of languages, a lot of disagreement surrounds areas such as the teaching of grammar, vocabulary, language skills and testing. Here we can notice how terms can have different definitions. For example, the phrase “blended learning” means different things to different people. In language teaching, the classical definition is a combination of face-to-face classes (same time, same place) and web-based training. However, this definition excludes using CD-ROM, since they are not delivered over the internet. What this means is that when teachers begin discussing concepts such as “blended learning” they soon discover they are arguing about completely different things! Even the term

'f2f' can now be qualified as 'f2f online' when used to describe teaching via tools like Skype.

Grammar

The increase in the number of interactive exercises on CD-ROM and the web has undoubtedly benefitted the analytical learner. However, many teachers and material writers would argue that this kind of practice is based on an outdated, stimulus-response methodology. Students can practise and receive instant feedback. These grammar exercises 'skewer' the language, so on-line practice focuses on 'crisp' areas of language at the expense of 'fuzzy' areas. Here's a good example of this distinction:

Crisp: Is 'I went there': (a Present perfect)? (b) Simple past?

Fuzzy: What is the difference between (a) 'I've done it' and (b) 'I did it'?

Skills

In the area of the receptive skills, listening and reading, the effect of technology has been huge. At the same time, much of this material is clearly unsuitable for language learners. The Internet has provided a vast range of material, offering many more opportunities for exposure to authentic materials, both audio and text. The debate continues as to how useful YouTube is and to what extent is technology 'responsible' for the rise in plagiarism in EAP (English for academic purposes).

The influence of technology on the productive skills of speaking and writing is, arguably, less. If you wish to improve fluency, many students would argue that nothing is better than a face-to-face language lesson, a discussion class with the teacher. Can the same be said about taking a fluency class using Skype, a web-based program such as Illuminate or a class in the virtual world, Second Life? What value does 'Voice recognition' have? However, not all learners wish to learn from each other, and prefer only the teacher to correct their work, rather than a peer. Wikis enable students to compose an essay together at a distance, making them a suitable medium for collaborative writing.

Vocabulary

Arguments are currently raging about the use of electronic translators. These provide many benefits, allowing students to cross-check between bi-lingual dictionaries

and mono-lingual dictionaries, and encouraging them to review language. Yet, when used for production, they seem to encourage the selection of the wrong word in English, and teachers can quite easily spot an essay written with the help of one of these small machines. They also inhibit fluency if students take them out in discussion classes – which they frequently do.

The digital divide

Almost no other technology symbolises the ‘digital divide’ as much as the interactive whiteboard (IWB). Those with access to this technology are currently exploring how best to exploit it in the classroom; detractors suggest it can be a way of going back to ‘teacher-centred’ approaches. In some parts of the world, using such technology is a distant dream.

Testing

There has been an explosion of on-line testing in the last few years. Such test materials use the same formats as multimedia materials: gap-fill, multiple choice etc. Is this a match made in heaven? Some would argue that on-line tests actually favour students who use computers, and ignore the assessment of ‘affective factors’ such as personality and learner type.

Theory vs practice

This is a world which is driven by technology. The world of theory (of evidence and research) is, arguably, lagging behind what is happening in the classrooms. The innovators innovate, and later, pedagogy plays catch-up, as teachers try things out. In other words, if you wait for a case study to justify whether or not Twitter has value, you may be waiting a long time, and the technology will have moved on by the time the research has been done.

Still, there are many controversies in the use of ICT in the teaching and learning of languages. This article has just touched on some of them – there are many more:

How effective are language classes in Second Life?

Do we accept text-talk when we mark writing?

Can students learn using a mobile phone?

Actually, there are three key principles which can help teachers implement technology. These are:

1) Separate the role of the teacher.

It is important to understand the respective roles played by the teacher and the technology in the learning process; the teacher could deal with the ‘fuzzy’ areas mentioned above.

2) Teach in a principled way.

Whenever a new technology emerges (such as, say, podcasting), it is important to go beyond the ‘wow’ factor and think about the pedagogical reasons for using it.

3) Use the technology to complement and enhance what the teacher does.

“It’s not what it is, it’s what you do with it.” [2, p. 172] So it is not the interactive whiteboard which could improve the learning experience, but how it is used.

References

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