

## The Unlikely Uses of Technology in a Second Language Classroom

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## **THE WHY: TECHNOLOGY AND SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING**

With the advent of the 20th century, the world has experienced a technological revolution. In less than 20 years, people around the world have gone from phone calls and fax messages to texting and emails. Wii Fit and Wii Just Dance have replaced the once popular games of hopscotch and jump rope. The ease of getting directions from apps like Google Maps has left the glove compartments in cars empty of the physical maps that once took rent in them. In short, technology has changed, and mostly improved, the lives of people everywhere. There are of course arguments that it has also ruined some aspects of life, such as face-to-face human interaction. However, it is impossible to disagree with the fact that it has a strong presence in our modern lifestyle.

Why, then, does teaching resist or limit the use of technology? Whether it be in or out of the classroom, why does it seem that fighting is the only way to combat students' addiction to laptops and cell phones? This can especially be seen in foreign language classes around the world. When depriving students of their normal means of communication - their native language (L1) - the first thing they will do is go back to something familiar and useful to them. Then with this inevitable knowledge, why still refrain from the use of technology in second language teaching? Does it actually hinder or help students acquire language? If helpful, what methods have been researched as most beneficial? Are there factors that go into choosing to use or disregard technology? These questions have guided researchers since the advent of technology and continue to be researched till this day.

## **UNDERSTANDING: WHAT IS *TECHNOLOGY*?**

It is important to first understand what *technology* is in reference to second language teaching. According to Lam, technology is “any machine that can be used for L2 (second language or target language) teaching” (2000:394-395). With this definition, it can be assumed that a machine can include everything from overhead projectors that were commonly used in the late 20th century to something more modern such as computers, smartboards, the internet and even video games. This essay focuses on the later modern devices that are constantly being updated and changed in our everyday lives.

## **DISCERNING THE VALUE OF TECHNOLOGY IN SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING**

Just as the opinions on the use of technology in our everyday lives varies, so do the opinions on its use in second language teaching. Throughout Hadley (2001), learning a language is described as not learning about the grammatical structures of a language. It has shifted towards using the language in cultural and contextual settings. Hadley advocates that to help students acquire the language, teachers are advised to use a task-based system within the parameters of a cultured and contextualized setting. An example of this can be found in Thomlinson’s *Materials Development for Second Language Teaching* (2011). He mentions that an authentic task is something similar to writing to a pen pal or looking at authentic train schedules when learning about time. Of course, there is still a use for traditional grammar rules such as fill-in-the-blank, but for further student acquisition of the second language, Hadley’s (2001) model and goals are the most useful and widely accepted. With these goals in mind one must determine the use of technology in second language teaching. To clarify and ease the

access of information, a breakdown of the benefits and hindrances of using technology are provided below.

### ***The Benefits***

Researchers would argue that the first benefit technology brings to the classroom is quick access to authentic materials relevant to a lesson plan (Warschauer and Kern 2000), (Hadley 2001). Teachers and students alike can easily go on the World Wide Web and access culturally relevant, contextualized, and up-to-date information in the form of a written text, video, or image. This allows teachers to show students that the target language is being used somewhere around the world, which in turn is a motivating factor for students. Just as the World Wide Web provides access to authentic materials, it also provides access to authentic methods of communication. Such methods of communication include the effective practice of emailing or video messaging a fellow student in the target language country (Lam 2000).

Technology also gives students who are usually more reticent to speak in class a chance to share their thoughts (Warschauer and Meskill 2000). Through the use of in-class chat messages, students message their ideas anonymously in the target language as a group, while teachers facilitate a discussion about what students have posted. These new methods of presentation are beneficial because they present the language in a new way that keeps students' interests engaged. In addition, technology can also provide teachers with a record-keeping tool on the improvements of students' language output. With a second glance, the positive benefits technology can bring to second language acquisition become very clear.

### ***The Cons***

Despite the plethora of reasons for using technology in the second language classroom, there are still reasons which oppose its use. First and foremost, teachers and administrators alike are unsure if technology is a distraction in the classroom, or if it is actually helpful. According to Lam's (2000) research, some teachers who have difficulty with technology find that their attempts to use it are distracting. The lesson focuses on the inadequacies of their technological abilities versus the actual lesson plan. For this reason some teachers still prefer to avoid the use of technology.

Another negative is the question of its actual time and monetary value. In some schools, accessing technology ends up becoming too expensive and time consuming. A lot of finances are required to be able to buy, train, and maintain the technology. Many departments from the undergraduate to middle school level do not have those kinds of fundings available to them. Furthermore if they do have the funding, a school might not have the time to adequately train teachers. In this kind of setting, teachers have felt pressured to use technology simply because they had it available to them. This goes against the original purpose of technology as an *aid* to language instruction. If teachers do not understand, comprehend, or have enough time in their planning to organically include technology in their lesson plans, then the whole purpose of having the technology is lost. Because of these misunderstandings, technology can negatively impact a second language classroom and distract the students it is supposed to be helping.

#### **THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF TECHNOLOGY IN SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING**

In Lam's research (2001), when teachers were given a questionnaire to fill out, many of them responded that the only technology they used in the classroom was computers. However, when they were performing an oral interview, many of them mentioned watching videos in

classrooms or listening to audiotapes. From this it became very clear to Lam that teachers often forgot that technology was incorporated in so many more aspects than just computers.

Computers are only one facet of the technology gem, and the whole thing must fully be mined to see all of the possible ways that technology can be incorporated into second language teaching settings.

### ***Computers & Internet***

The most common and widely accepted technologies in second language teaching are computers and the internet. Some separate the internet and computers into two separate categories, but oftentimes the internet will be accessed in class through a computer. Therefore for the purposes of this paper, the two are combined into one.

As mentioned before, computers and the World Wide Web have provided access to millions of authentic materials that were difficult to find and use beforehand (Hadley 2001). Something that is not commonly thought of that computers successfully bring to a language classroom setting is the ability to set up a lesson using different colors, text sizes, presentation methods, and so on to feature a new grammatical structure (Lam 2000). By using certain programs, teachers can hide, then reveal certain aspects within a lesson. This allows students to see patterns in the target language in a new way.

*Chat Rooms.* The internet and computers also give access to chat rooms - text or video based. Through these chat rooms, foreign language learners can communicate with native speakers of the target language and practice their skills. (Godwin-Jones 2005). The most successful of these exchanges occur when the instructor has arranged with the student and the

native speaker to have a purposeful, contextualized conversation that relates to course expectations (Warschauer and Meskill 2000).

Another chat room format can occur within a classroom. Instead of students responding orally to a question, they might write the answer, which then goes to a pool of responses that is shared with the class. This real-time feedback system might be wonderful for novice language learners who feel more secure writing something down than sharing aloud (Hadley 2001). It is clear that all of these methods of communication, once thought of as insignificant, can have positive uses for second language acquisition.

### ***Media (Videos and CDs)***

Although its abilities in a classroom setting are obvious, videos and CDs are often overlooked in the realm of technology. Teachers and students alike forget that these can be used in a second language teaching setting very practically. Sharing authentic movies, news reports, songs, and radio announcements are all very helpful in a second language classroom. In a study conducted by Warschauer and Meskill (2000), students were given a news report to watch, and then had to do an oral presentation on another issue in the exact style as the one they were given. This technique is quite helpful for advanced students who would like to become fluent. Most teachers only watch videos or listen to songs and media for vocabulary comprehension and general information. However this example by Warschauer and Meskill (2000) makes the video a tool to aid in furthering knowledge, rather than being a supplement to developing listening and comprehension skills in language acquisition.

### ***iPods, Music Players and Voice Recorders***

It might seem strange to have a separate section for videos and CDs, then iPods and music players. However, the difference in use is quite drastic. While videos and CDs are used to watch and listen to media, iPods, music players and voice recorders can be used to access audio or video files in the target language (Kiernan 2004). The University of Washington, for example, is striving to buy iPods for the language department so students have access to them. Then they will be able to listen to sample texts. These devices also allow students to record in-class reading sessions so they can review the teacher's pronunciation, explanation, comments and assessments outside the classroom. The teacher could even ask students to record themselves at home reading a passage, or having a conversation with a native speaker. This allows time in class to be utilized to the fullest, and teachers to help each individual student with their specific needs.

### ***Cell Phones***

It is very clear that cell phones are becoming a need in everyday life rather than a luxury. According to the Consumers and Mobile Financial Services 2015 (Brown 2015), approximately eighty-seven percent of the United States adult population has a cell phone. If this percentage is so high, then how can incorporating cell phones into second language teaching occur?

In Kiernan's study (2004) , students were asked to perform a variety of tasks by communicating through cell phone e-mails, e-mails via computer, and only through speaking. The aim of this was to see which group would retain the most new vocabulary from these interactions. Comparing the pretest and posttest results, none of the groups actually acquired anything new, which they admit might have been due to other factors. However, the researchers found that students adapted very well to mobile phones using only the target language. They also found that students were able to use their cell phones for things they knew how to do. When it

came to unknown aspects, students did not use their phones. One hindrance found was that it became difficult for students to write long strings of dialogue when they only had their two thumbs, a time constraint with limited characters. Therefore from this example, reviewing tasks or vocabulary could overall be a good way to use cell phones in classrooms.

Another use of cell phones in learning a second language can be found through M-Learning (Godwin-Jones 2015). This program has started in the European Union and its goal is to “reach out to young adults who have not done well in traditional learning environments” (18). The method hopes that students will reach out and learn in a setting they are most comfortable to better acquire the language. Further research is being conducted on its effectiveness since it is a fairly new program.

Mobile blogging (or moblogging) is also a fairly new language acquisition tool. Its goal is for someone with a cell phone to update content of their blog in a non-traditional blog-writing place (ie office space, home). Mblogging’s main feature is to upload pictures, videos, and text as content. These two new methods can be used at home as study aids for students. If they are in the supermarket and they learned the vocabulary for different fruits and vegetables, for example, they can create a blog post with pictures on what they found at the supermarket using those vocabulary words they just learned. This allows students to realize the practical use of learning another language as well as practice their use of the vocabulary on their own time, in a way that might be best for them.

### ***Gaming***

Though gaming seems to be quite a strange use of technology in the classroom, it can be quite a useful tool. Looking at Kiernan’s research (2004), so many young people spend vast

amounts of time video gaming. At first glance, they may seem to be a waste of time. When looked over again, however, multiplayer games in particular prove to have plenty of focus on complex problem solving, understanding of environment and surrounding, collaborative learning, and social skills. These are the same skills second language educators have been trying to adapt into their curriculum. Therefore video games, whether performed in a classroom or outside as homework, in the target language can provide many useful skills for the language learner. Kiernan mentions an example of a helicopter video game in which students must give the pilot directions to complete a task. If the students give them the wrong directions, they cannot complete their mission. This actively makes students' use of vocabulary and grammar arrive at a point where they become second nature.

Another great function video games have is the huge online fan base that follow games. Students would be able to practice their writing and reading skills on online forums. This once again shows the relevance of learning a language, and can possibly motivate the students to continue their education and acquisition.

## **THE OUTCOME**

Based on the evidence, technology can be another tool in the teacher's toolbox to help further second language acquisition. It has been argued that technology, specifically computers, does not actually aid in language acquisition. Warschauer and Meskill (2000) disputes this by comparing technology to a book. Who knows for certain how beneficial a book is in second language acquisition? Seeking to answer whether technology is the key to learning a language is pointless. Instead, the shift should be made to see technology as a *method* to achieve language acquisition. Just as teachers would often provide a handout with fill-in-the-blanks for vocabulary

or grammar, technology could provide the same. The results might be achieved in a different method, and it might take longer to develop a thorough lesson plan, but the evidence for technology as a positive tool in the classroom is abundant. This is especially crucial knowing that students are in a world immersed by technology. If teachers and students alike could find a balance of its use in the classroom, it would be seen as something beneficial. The opportunities for growth and “creating richer opportunities for language” (Kiernan 2004) could be achieved.

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