The application of technology in teaching languages

How might technology be most effectively applied within this context?

The use of technology in schools has been associated with small positive associations with educational outcomes (Zhao & Frank, 2003; Ager, 2013). However, this does not necessarily relate to a causal relationship as this may relate to the fact that more effective schools are often those that use digital technologies to teach (Higgins et al., 2012). In a meta-analysis of research concerning the use of technology in teaching, Higgins et al. (2012) suggest that technology is most effective as a supplement rather than a replacement for teaching. Furthermore, the use of technology in schools may vary according to the context, with some subjects and classes being more suited to the technology uses (Adamson, 2004). This essay will consider the application of different forms of technology to teaching languages. This will consider the teaching context of ten adult learners of an intermediate standard. To examine the possible uses of technology, the traditional uses of technology will first be considered in the use of a number of the more mainstream uses of technology in the teaching context will be considered. This will be followed by a discussion of some more innovative methods of learning that are currently being developed, such as Web 2. 0 technology.

Audio playback offers an effective use of technology in the language-learning context. The benefits of this include the fact that learners may hear the language spoken by other voices than the teacher (Najjari et al., 2012). Given that when languages are learnt, the teacher will attempt to outline the words as clearly as possible, being able to listen to audio recordings allow the listener to establish the use of language in other contexts where less attempt is being made to establish clarity (Ibrahim, 2013). The use of audio

recordings may be used in a gradated approach according to the difficulty of language and the complexity and speed of the spoken word (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). It may provide the examples of language use in everyday situations, such as playing back transcripts of discussions when making purchases in shops. Audio recordings can thus be used effectively and by providing a questionnaire or using it to provoke discussion, the listener may be effectively engaged with the listening task, rather than simply listening to the presentation (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). This allows the development of comprehension to form a part of the listening approach. The teacher may thus use it to supplement teaching by providing clear indications of how the language is spoken.

The drawbacks to the use of audio playback to aid teaching may include the fact that listening to spoken language means that the listener is engaging in a relatively false scenario of listening to a transcript rather than being able to observe the discussion in a real-life example (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). It also has drawbacks in its use for beginners in a language-learning context because they may be too challenging before some facility is gained with vocabulary (Najjari et al., 2012). However, for intermediate students, as a supplement to the teacher's discussion, and as providing examples and comprehension exercises, the uses of audio playback are invaluable but only as part of a structured aspect of the teaching experience (Najjari et al., 2012). The listening comprehension exercise is thus a useful way of supplementing the teaching experience. In the teaching context specified, it is important to use a listening comprehension exercise sparingly to avoid it become a routine test, such as every other lesson rather than every lesson.

Television offers some similar advantages to the playback of audio recording if applied to a teaching context, but offers some other potential benefits (Ibrahim, 2013). First, the use of visual cues to supplement the listening exercise may be beneficial and provide additional ways in which the language material may be developed and learnt (Ibrahim, 2013). In audio recording, only one method is available for the student to comprehend the material, whereas through the body language of the actors, text, or visual graphics, cues can complement the use of speech to help the learner (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). However, the use of television may prove more difficult when compared to audio technology because audio technology allows the students to take notes while listening, whereas television often demands a greater level of attention from the student (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). This can undermine the impact of the use of television, and it may often prove easier for students to reduce their attention and avoid paying attention. Some programmes used involve pauses in order to allow students to take notes, but this can often undermine the flow of the programme and there is a need to predict how long the students may need. The overall impact of television may thus be minimal, in that its use may be limited; it does not necessarily achieve anything that may not be achieved well through audio technology. In the teaching context, television may be used relatively sparingly, approximately two or three times per week (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Audio recording technology may also provide a useful role for the teaching context as it allows students to hear themselves. In particular, many students may find this a useful approach to establishing pronunciation

difficulties by being able to hear how the language sounds when played back (Al-Saraj, 2014). This is a useful approach to teaching spoken English because the potential for students to become reflective listeners of their own attempts to speak English. A drawback with this use of technology is that students may find listening to themselves embarrassing or the sound of their own voice may prove a challenge if played back to the class (Cook, 2013). The approach may therefore benefit from setting a task whereby students listen to their own exercise and provide feedback on it, or where students may listen to their own recordings. This thus offers a benefit but must be used according to an effective context.

Although the features of the technology thus far described have long been a part of the classroom, recent advances can help the ease with which they can be used. Audio recordings may now be more easily made by the student using an ordinary laptop computer, whereas until relatively recently such technology was not as easily accessible (Cook, 2013). The potential for setting tasks for students at home may be allowed by asking them to watch a video on a video hosting site, which was previously a more difficult task to complete where only videotape was used (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). However, there are also some challenges that are brought to the unsupervised use of such technology as audio technology may be used to slow down or to stop and start a section repeatedly (Beatty, 2013). On one hand, there is no harm in this being done to practice, and may in fact represent a useful tool for the student to work at their own pace without feeling penalised by the classroom experience (Cook, 2013). This can allow a more student-centred approach to language learning, allowing the students

to complete some tasks at their own pace, freeing up space in the classroom for class-based activities.

The use of Web 2. 0 technology can prove of significant benefit to this teaching context (Pailly, 2013; Kaliampos & Schmidt, 2014). This refers to the use of dynamic web pages that are created through user-generated content with a strong emphasis on interaction (Stevenson & Liu, 2013). In particular, this can help with classroom learning by allowing the class to develop as a community of practice (Wenger, 2011). Communities of practice are a key way in which tacit knowledge may be developed amongst students, which is defined as that knowledge which is generated and shared through an informal conversation (Wenger, 2011). Such knowledge is possible to contextualise and embody, but can pose challenges for the teacher if it is codified and expressed as part of an information segment (Wang & Vásquez, 2012). An informal forum is thus an effective way in which this may be developed as part of the language learning. Communities of practice using Web 2. 0 technology may thus allow such knowledge to be developed and this can form a useful model for aiding language development.

Web 2. 0 may thus provide a way in which information processing can be integrated with everyday activities. Social networking between the students and the teacher may allow for the tacit knowledge in language use to be acquired more effectively than might be the case in a didactic teaching situation (Kaliampos & Schmidt, 2014). Likewise, it has been proposed that using situations such as Second Life, where each user is given an avatar with which to interact with each other can provide a way for students to

participate in the learning process (Wang & Vásquez, 2012). However, there are also some dangers in the uses of such technology, as in interacting with each other without censure, there is the danger that mistakes may become more deeply ingrained. However, the advantages of using such technology are that they can break down barriers to learning. In many cases, participation in classroom learning, particularly in language learning, is dominated by 20% of students (Pailly, 2013). The classroom environment can overcome this issue to an extent through the use of pair-working or smaller groups that give an opportunity for the different students to take part (Beatty, 2013). Interactive web technology can provide a safe environment for other students to interact.

The use of Facebook or other social media may be used to supplement language learning in this teaching context because it may be used as a method to enhance communication and collaboration between students (Kaliampos & Schmidt, 2014). This is already a popular format among students, and thus any encouragement to use it to improve upon learning goals may be achieved. Social media forums may be set up by the classroom itself, with exercises set to allow students to engage in discussions can also help ensure that such communication can take place (Kaliampos & Schmidt, 2014). This can be achieved by setting tests where students are given assignments to present a short forum subject, and then to comment and discuss another individual's work. This can give the students the opportunity to participate in discussion and gain experience and confident in such discussion (Beatty, 2013). However, the extent to which this may reflect a real-life experience can be questioned. To an extent, the fact that the

students are using their learning language may reduce the extent to which they provide this work (Blake, 2013). Furthermore, the fact that the students are encouraged to communicate in an informal setting may mean that they adopt a more colloquial method of writing, which may achieve communication while being largely inaccurate.

The benefit of using the interactive technology may thus be gauged according to the aims of the class (Blake, 2013). If the aim is to achieve a perfect understanding of the language then the extent to which encouraging students to interact in their own time may be questioned (Beatty, 2013). However, if the aim is to provide a medium in which students may practise their writing and reading work, allowing them to interpret the meaning through reading other students' work, and ascertain their clarity by examining the response, then this technology may prove an important way to supplement the teacher's work (Kaliampos & Schmidt, 2014). There may be different approaches to the assessment of exercises, but perhaps the most important method in this is to encourage participation, language practice, and this can prove of benefit to overall language learning goals (Pailly, 2013). It would therefore seem an effective contribution to this teaching context as it not only complements the provision of learning in school but provides the possibility of allowing language learning to cover aspects not easily covered through formal teaching.

In conclusion, there are a number of ways in which technology may be applied to the learning context in language teaching. Many of these have been used in different forms to complement language teaching for some time, and the use of audio playback and television has been a mainstay of

language learning since such technology has been made available. However, with the rapid development of computer technology, it has become possible to streamline these approaches, allowing such media to be combined. Furthermore, Web 2. 0 technology provides the opportunity for communities of learning to be developed online, which can allow tacit understanding of language concepts to be developed as well as different features of language use to be explored. Ultimately, it seems unlikely that technology can replace the traditional centrepiece of teacher-based language learning, but it can offer some important complementary activities that can benefit learners to a great extent.

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