

TLE-1041

Nouvelles Technologies et Enseignement des Langues

Reflection Paper

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BREA02587409

Interactive Communication Technologies (ICTs) are rapidly becoming an integral part of second language teaching. However, not all teachers seem to welcome this evolution. While some believe that ICTs will eventually replace teachers altogether, others simply prefer to stick to traditional methods. Either way, the growing popularity of ICTs, as well as the advantages they offer will no doubt change the role of the teacher in the classroom.

In this paper, I will reflect on the many different ICTs studied during the semester. We will discuss how these new tools can benefit second language learners. We shall also consider the downfalls of using technology in the classroom. Finally, we will reflect on the evolving role of today's teachers.

When I reflect on my own experience as a young learner in elementary school and in high school, I remember blackboards, chalk and giggling when the teacher accidentally broke the chalk while writing on the board. I remember what a treat it was for a teacher to bring an acetate projector in the classroom. Nowadays, acetate projectors are considered ancient. Whenever a teacher uses a projector, students cringe. White boards eventually replaced blackboards. Erasable markers replaced chalk. But now, in many classrooms, a new teaching aid is gradually replacing white boards: the interactive smart board.

The smart board offers many advantages for both the teacher and the learner. Unfortunately, we did not have the opportunity to learn more about the smart board during class. Although we were offered training sessions outside class, it would have been much more convenient for these sessions to be held during class. My personal, school and working schedules did not permit me to attend any of the

sessions, which makes me feel like I missed out on something important. I believe that this should be considered for future courses on new technologies. Nonetheless, we still discovered many interesting and inspiring tools that will undoubtedly prove to be assets in our classrooms.

Word and Excel Games

Software such as Microsoft Word and Excel offer certain possibilities when it comes to ICT teaching and learning. Although we can create games using these types of software, the building part can be very time consuming. In my opinion, there are other, more user-friendly tools one can incorporate in their classroom.

The Web Quest

The web quest is an interesting way of presenting a lesson plan. The students are directed to a specific web site where they can find all the information they will need to complete their quest. Building the web quest itself can be time consuming for first time users, but it can also be quite amusing. Using a web quest can make learning interesting for the students while allowing them to develop the three ESL competences: C1 (interacts orally in English), C2 (to reinvest understanding of texts), and C3 (to write texts). Web Quests can be designed in many different ways according to the tasks to be accomplished. They mostly involve research using the Internet, as well as analysis and interpretation of the findings.

Illuminate/ Blackboard

This tool is often referred to as the “virtual classroom”. It can be very useful for distance learning or for tutoring purposes. It can also be used to attend Webinars. The virtual classroom is quite interesting as it allows teachers and learners to

communicate verbally, using a headset and a microphone, while in the comfort of their own homes. The interface has a board on display allowing the participants involved to write or draw using the various tools available. According to a study by Elizabeth Murphy (2009), there are many benefits associated with the using this ICT in a classroom such as “independence and peer learning; authenticity and motivation; anonymity and confidence; enhanced self-esteem”. The drawbacks include multi-tasking for the teachers, problems related to the sound quality as well as other technical difficulties. Of course, there are also solutions to counter these issues: “use of student moderators; audio tutorials and direct messaging; activity tutorials; technical support and capacity building”. (Murphy, 2009)

E-Portfolios

E-portfolios are a great way of illustrating one’s accomplishments. They can include as many pages as one desires. The E-portfolio allows the user to post links, images, documents and audio files. Developing an E-portfolio may offer advantages for the person who wishes to expose their work publicly as well as for the individual consulting it. The owner of the portfolio apparently gets to control the information on his or her portfolio. However, one question comes to mind: how much control over their portfolio do authors really have? An article on E-portfolios by Lorenzo & Ittleson (2005) demonstrated that the author the E-portfolio does have complete control over the material posted but has minimal control of how and when his or her material will be used. This can be problematic. One of the potential problems is plagiarism: students could use e-portfolios to copy someone else’s work. However, as my colleagues have mentioned, E-portfolios could be used as a tool to help

students reflect on their learning and their work. It would appear that the E-portfolio also has a few weaknesses and privacy issues are one of the main concerns. It is my belief that learners should have the freedom to decide whether or not they wish to explore and use the E-portfolios. Although this is a tool I personally appreciate, it is not a tool I would use with younger learners.

Blogs

I've said this in one of my discussion posts and I will say it again: blogging is part of daily life. It has become a communication tool that allows members of a community to exchange information, knowledge and opinions. Blogging is also good for students who might need some help with a particular topic or assignment. They can reach out to their peers through the blog. In addition to the blog, we have emails, social networking web sites, etc. I am not surprised that recent studies have revealed how blogs can improve literacy and fluency. The Blog is a simple, effective communication tool available for a variety of purposes: information sharing, for comments and communication, to monitor learning, etc. Along with advantages, blogs also have their drawbacks. As mentioned by other colleagues, classroom blogs need to be closely monitored by the teacher. This can be very time and effort consuming. Another weakness could be the lack of interactive communication. There is also the factor of negative (language) acquisition, which must be considered. Teachers must devise strategies to counter this problem as it would most probably hinder the learners' learning process leading some to question if this tool is not, in fact, counter-productive.

Wikis

Wikis are fun. They are fun to create and easy to use. Having a class wiki to which each can contribute was definitely one of the things I most enjoyed doing during class. This is definitely a tool I would consider using in my own classroom. Students can post the different projects that were completed during the semester. It can be used as an easy reference point for the teacher to monitor student progress with given assignments. It also allows instructors to verify the development of each ESL competency. A highly organised and demonstrative study conducted by Paul Sze (2008) showed the benefits of this tool for students who got to participate in meaningful tasks that represented their reality. It has been proven that collaborative writing offers many advantages: communication, cooperation among students, sharing ideas, opinions and knowledge, etc. Wikis are an excellent resource for book reports, brainstorming, class wikis, etc. However, as mentioned by Andreja Kovacic (2007), "(...) the use of a wiki in ESP courses required careful planning and preparation, monitoring and moderating of students' work, as well as reflection and adequate feedback to the students (...)." It is therefore imperative that teachers monitor the wikis. This would ensure that everyone is participating and contributing equally. By supervising the wikis, the teacher can also make sure that students' ideas are considered and respected by their peers. Deletion of comments by other classmates remains a potential problem, but I am certain there is a way to counter this.

E-Tandem Learning

Although E-tandem learning offers many benefits for students such as: team work, peer collaboration, and communication. This can be an enriching experience for both parties involved. However, there is not enough data proving the benefits of this type of learning. This specific study included a relatively limited sample of learners, which tells me that the findings can't really be applied to L2 learners in general. A study published in 2005, by Paige Ware described the tensions that arose when students from different cultural backgrounds tried to collaborate in online discourses. The following quotation, taken from Ware's paper, fits in with my personal concerns when it comes to e-collaboration or e-tandem learning situations: "In short, research has shown that telecollaboration does not automatically promote the kinds of language learning that educators often anticipate (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002)". E-tandem learning may prove to be beneficial for some, however I would certainly appreciate more data on this type of learning situation, as I am not quite certain that the overall benefits cancel out the drawbacks.

Glogster, Voice Thread, Wordle

These tools are also fun to use. They allow the learners to demonstrate their creativity while learning. These tools appeal to different types of intelligences: artistic, writing, visual, musical, etc. Glogster and Voice Thread are definitely among my favourite tools and I would welcome the opportunity to use them in my classroom. More importantly, each of these tools allows learners to develop the ESL competencies in one form or another. Voice Thread could be used to verify C1: communicates orally in English. Glogster could be used to incorporate C2: reinvests

understanding of texts as well as C3: produces a text. The tools are highly amusing and entertaining. I would imagine that learners would have a lot of fun showing their work to other classmates. The tools can be used for solo activities or for cooperation activities. Studies have demonstrated that Voice Thread is particularly useful with students who have learning disabilities. I enjoyed using Wordle. It is relatively easy to use and produces fun designs. However, it seems that Wordle's use is limited. It is, as described on its web site, "a toy for making word clouds". It's fun, but not what I would call a necessity. I would still introduce it to my learners, but more as a "toy" – not necessarily for educational purposes.

Prezi

Although I do grasp the potential of this tool, I feel it is somewhat time consuming and not "user-friendly" as I understand the meaning. I experienced some difficulties in trying to develop a presentation using this tool. I would qualify the overall experience for the beginner as frustrating. This type of tool offers an interesting way of presenting, however one must take the time to familiarize their self with Prezi.

Online videos

Throughout the semester, we also watched different videos dealing with the use and incorporation of ICTs in the classroom. One of the videos we watched featured Howard Gardner, a well-respected psychologist at Harvard University. Dr. Gardner is also the creator of the multiple intelligences we studied during the TESL 1 class. In this video, Dr. Gardner discussed what he calls "Digital Youth", more specifically: "The Good Play Project" which deals with ethical issues in regards to young learners

when using the Internet. According to Dr. Gardner, a disappointing number of young boys and girls have no idea of what it is to be ethical. This is where Dr. Gardner's project comes into play. He and his team have defined the word ethical using the following terms: "identity, privacy, ownership, trustworthiness, credibility, and a sense of community". There is so much easily accessible information on the Internet that can be obtained by anyone. Therefore, many new challenges, such as coaching learners to synthesize and analyse the information they discover. Helping young learners develop critical thinking has become increasingly important. Teachers will most certainly be called upon to provide guidance to young learners in this respect as well as teaching them ethical "web behaviour". As mentioned before, there are so many advantages to incorporating digital media in the classroom that it is now perceived, by some, to a necessity in today's world. As a matter of fact, Henry Jenkins, a media professor at the University of Southern California, feels that if we limit access to these tools, we are failing our learners and widen the "participation gap". According to Professor Jenkins, technology allows students to develop communication skills, social skills and cooperation skills. The use of digital media gives students a sense of empowerment and entitlement. During the video, Professor Jenkins underscores the importance of collective intelligence, social networking, responsible information sharing as well as ethics. He does not believe in blocking certain web sites which could contain potentially harmful or inappropriate information, rather he feels that by limiting access to those sites, we are "de-tooling" our learners as, according to Jenkins, many of these sites contain useful information in terms of research and learning. After reflecting on the

video I watched, I realised that there is a participation gap in certain communities and that many schools do not possess the necessary equipment to encourage the use of digital media, which is often expensive. Budgetary constraints are often at the root of this problem. Many learners do not have access to digital media at home, either. This impairs their learning experience if and when they do have the opportunity to work in the classroom as they do not know as much as other students and may require extra help. This, in turn, may harm their chances of enjoying the digital media experience and everything it has to offer. Another inspiring video we watched featured Ms. Vicki Davis, a teacher from rural Georgia, USA. This innovative teacher explained how the use of media tools could connect students to the rest of the world. By maximising the use of different technologies, Ms. Davis believes that she is increasing each student's chance at success. Ms. Davis strives to empower her students to share and help each other. She insists on the importance of students becoming thinkers – something I definitely support. Giving students the freedom to be independent and autonomous thinkers is capital in teaching. Empowering them to apply strategies and find their own solutions is absolutely crucial.

Conclusion

Throughout the semester, we have seen a myriad of different media tools that can be incorporated in our classrooms. Collaboration among peers is crucial. The benefits, as demonstrated, are exponential. Learners not only acquire a new language, they also learn about different cultures, traditions, points of view, etc. In the modern world, learners can connect with other students across the globe, as can

educators. Media tools can be used in so many different ways allowing students to connect, discover, create, share and collaborate.

It is an exciting time to become a teacher as we have so many tools at our disposal. These tools assist us in passing on knowledge in an interesting, exciting and inspiring fashion. However, my opinion is that one cannot rely solely on the use of technology for teaching. Internet connections, as well as the online tools we have discussed are not always reliable or accessible. It is important, as with a “paper” learning and evaluation situation, to always have a back up plan.

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