

## Language learning and technology

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Based on a route map established by Comenius and the insights of educationalists, psychologists and linguists of the last 100 years, we might now agree that successful language learning is a social activity which involves a number of key features — INTERACTION, ENGAGEMENT, A RICH MULTI-SENSORY ENVIRONMENT (images and sound and words). It also takes place in a range of contexts and at different times — not simply in the school lesson.

Even though Comenius could not have imagined the power of our technologies to provide sensory experiences, nor the immediacy of our communications, I believe that each one of these characteristics can be traced back to his fundamental ideas.

Significantly for our argument, we can see that perhaps for the first time they cross reference to the characteristics of the technologies of Electronically Mediated Communication:

<b>TECHNOLOGY</b>	<b>LANGUAGE LEARNING</b>
INTERACTIVE	INTERACTION
SOCIAL	SOCIAL
CONTENT RICH	RICH MULTI SENSORY ENVIRONMENT
LEARNER CHOICE DRIVEN	LEARNER ENGAGEMENT
FLEXIBLE — NON LINEAR (HYPERTEXT)	FLEXIBLE
ANY TIME ACCESS	ANY TIME
PORTABLE	OUT OF SCHOOL

The match is a good one. So, it may be asked, what is the problem? As often in education, it could be to do with the time lapse between the possibilities of the real world and the actual practice of the classroom. As we have already suggested, language learning through technology has to be more than the same approach with better pictures if we are to devote so much time and money to it. Now, although I am no longer a practitioner and no expert, I have spent some time looking at what is happening, mainly in the UK and so in conclusion I will share some of that but also speculate on what might happen next.

I hope that it will not be seen as hopelessly antediluvian if I do not refer much to Flipped Classrooms. Or Blended Learning. They are no doubt useful terms, but in all honesty, to me, there is something about them of old wine in new bottles. For “flipped” you can read preparation and homework (or indeed Comenius’ division of the learning day into “instruction” and “private learning”). For

“blended” we can read integrating different approaches and media, which is actually not blended but integrated, which is maybe a matter of semantics, or maybe a misconception.

Where such concepts are important, however, is in establishing a key principle that beyond all the flipping and the blending, there has to be a choice, a decision of what is appropriate and where and how to access or use it. What is best for face-to-face activity or in social groups, what is best with a native interlocutor, what is best with a screen or an on line community?

So what are some of the interesting applications of the new, more dynamic and interactive technologies? It seems to me that there are 5 areas where technology is currently having a potentially positive effect on the teaching and learning of languages, as well as a sixth direction, which, like the sixth sense, is a place of great promise that we have only partially understood.

As a non-practitioner, or rather ex- practitioner) I am indebted to colleagues for some of the concrete examples which are taken from actual practice in relatively normal contexts:<sup>1</sup>

### 1) Language input

This is where technology has traditionally been thought to have a key role — as presenter of language, or indeed as a teacher substitute. Much, however, of what has been produced has been problematic — whether the “operant conditioning” model of “drill and kill” computer programmes which leads the learner to low levels of competence and high levels of boredom, or the “learning by osmosis” approach - random exposure , which also had limited success. Although much of what is currently on offer is still a text book by any other name, there are undoubtedly greater possibilities for the development of a more dynamic, rich and flexible learning environment, enabling the learner to choose a learning path and to have access to support when needed.<sup>2</sup>

Increasingly, however, it seems more likely that teachers will seek to guide their learners into ways of accessing the seemingly inexhaustible resources of the web rather than devising tailored courses (for whom?).

### 2) Mutual support and exchange of ideas

The growth of Web2 means that there is increasing familiarity with the use of social media for supporting language teaching through on line discussion. One example of this in the UK (and beyond) is the so called “twitterati”. It has been reported that the teachers using this very obvious resource feel “part of a large group of like-minded colleagues where they can share their classroom experiences and be supported when experimenting with new ideas. ...They can reflect on their own practice through informal discussion with others and feel they have become better teachers as a result”.

As well as existing social media, like Twitter, teachers are also communicating in real time through “flashmeetings”. Potentially also this kind of technology can be used by learners — although most examples of which I am aware tend to be restricted to learners in single institutions as a support for classroom activities. The potential is of course endless — one recent pilot linked to the Lingu@net WorldWide resources ([www.linguanet-worldwide.org](http://www.linguanet-worldwide.org)) is aiming to promote such fora as a realistic proposition for learners and teachers across the world.

### 3) Investigation and preparation

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<sup>1</sup> In particular I am indebted to Joe Dale for examples from schools and to Anny King for HE.

<sup>2</sup> One example is the “Languages at Your Fingertips” suite developed by the Cambridge University Language Centre.

Technology provides many possibilities for pursuing individual needs even at the level of grammar revision, or more excitingly in finding new meanings. One example of this is the use of QR codes for grammar revision (requires preparation by the teacher) and more general, on-line searches to prepare for classroom activities

#### 4) Presentation

Perhaps the most frequent use of technology lies in the field of presenting language created by the learners. There are a wealth of existing resources — iPads, iBooks, Youtube and programmes such as Animoto which people are using. One recent fascinating example of this has been the use of digital media for story telling — a collective activity which meets most of our language learning characteristics with some often inspiring results.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps it is also important to add a health warning. The seduction of the visual and the potential of animation can often distract from actual learning.

#### 5) Communication

It is one step from presentation to sharing and then communication between learners. This indeed is what Jeremy Fox suggested twenty years ago could be the key to the future use of technology. The existence of blogs and Facebook and on-line communities (which is more than a teacher or learner support group) as part of the daily experience of most people under 30 (and many older than that) is making this a reality.

### **Looking to the future (the 6th way)**

This new reality brings us back to the core of the matter — the teachers. I began by saying that we can be daunted by technology, in ways that our learners probably are not. I think, though, that the challenge is not primarily technical but pedagogic. What, in this brave new world, is the role of the teacher?

In some important senses it is what it has always been. As for Socrates, the teacher is a listener and questioner who will guide the learner — engaging in dialogue. As for Comenius, she will understand the needs of the learner and provide opportunities for both reflection and practice — learning by doing. In the words of Yves Châlon (1970):

A la question “Les professeurs pour quoi faire?”, nous serions tenté de répondre, des professeurs pour se taire — ou plus exactement, des professeurs pour écouter.

Despite this degree of continuity — at least for “good” teaching — the possibilities of the new technologies do undermine certain of our preconceptions.

Knowledge becomes much less hierarchical, as it is potentially at everyone’s finger tips, and yet the interpretation of that information becomes even more complex. The dominant feature of the web is its interrelationships — the hyperlink, which is a challenge to our more traditional concepts of progression (*ad Parnassum*). The big question is whether we have yet developed a pedagogy for this. Indeed it can be argued that the speed of change is such that in many instances we have not yet integrated the core principles behind Communicative Language Teaching and even less of learner autonomy. This may explain the continued good health of operant conditioning!

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<sup>3</sup> Critical Connections: A Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project coordinated by Goldsmiths College, London <http://goldsmithsmdst.wordpress.com>

As always, there are the advance guard and the enthusiasts, and the rest of us who may still be coming to terms with old technologies like the video recorder! But in the world outside the classroom nothing stands still. Learning is increasingly taking place outside school at times when people want or need to learn. Language itself is changing — we have witnessed for example the development of text-speak, a phenomenon not confined to English. And in our big cities in particular, code switching and new “ethno-dialects” are becoming ever more prevalent. For language teachers the opportunities and also the challenges offered by the web are immeasurable, and such change is not confined to one language. It has been commonplace to say that the web is dominated by English, but in fact as the web grows so, too, does it become more multilingual.<sup>4</sup>

All of this rapid change and volatility is giving a whole new impetus to learning beyond school. This was discussed at length by David Crystal at our 2010 conference ([LETPP](#)). He described our era as the dawn of “a genuinely multilingual internet age” where there was a huge gap “between the political agenda, the technological possibilities, and the educational realities.” He pointed out how the Internet may be providing a context for new concepts of citizenship and social identity.

Many of those who are frequent users of the Internet say that they think of themselves as members of an online community first and of their national community second. They call themselves Netizens — citizens of the Internet.

David went on to argue that the task was to provide these citizens with enticing material (much as Comenius wrote over 300 years ago!):

Once an attractive online multilingual presence is established, we can forget about the need to persuade young people to explore it. They will do so, of their own accord... We need to work towards presenting children with an enticing online multilingual experience, with plenty of age-appropriate material — an experience where good role models (the celebrities they admire) affirm that languages are cool, where characters in their favourite games act out their roles in different languages, where forums happily switch between different languages, where code-mixing is seen to be expressively enriching, where errors are thought of as natural and not criminal, and, in short, where all the good things we have noted as good practice in European linguistic decision-making are seen enacted online in Facebook forums, on Twitter, in YouTube videos, and in Second Life.

It may be that Professor Crystal’s view occupies the more idealistic end of the policy spectrum, but the point is a powerful one. There remains a strongly held vision, held by educators and policy makers alike, which assumes that progress in learning and understanding is a linear process which takes place in educational institutions through instruction from authority. Even our models (metaphors?) of progress — Frameworks and levels — reinforce this view. I have argued that this was not the view of some great thinkers about learning and languages, and in particular our Comenius. Now the power of the web and the way that users access it are showing us that progress is actually asymmetric and that the domains for the application of language use and the affirmation of complex identities are no longer solely the innately hierarchical ones connected with school and university.

Both our pedagogy and our policy will have to adapt to this reality. Along with Comenius and his pupil we are being called to go out into the world and study all things:

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<sup>4</sup> According to [w3techs.com](#) 61% of content on the web is in English (which still leaves a lot of space for other languages!). Yet, while the number of English users is the greatest (over 550 million), Chinese users are close behind.

IBIMUS IN MUNDUM ET SPECTABIMUS OMNIA