

# Technology both inside and outside the classroom

**Kat Robb** describes how learning is changing and recommends some of her favourite tools.



## The effect of technology on language learning

The changing trends in the way we humans communicate and socially interact with each other has had a huge impact on how people approach education, and as McCarthy (2016) points out, 'there is some agreement that technology has changed the way people – especially young people – think and learn' (McCarthy, 2016: 1). The emergence of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), was game changing for language learning, and with the increase in computational

power and the ubiquity of the internet, radical changes were made to the way teaching and learning could be delivered. Due to the availability of increasing amounts of free content on the web, emerging technologies, and the range of devices on the market, it becomes a challenge to know how to best implement educational technology and ensure that pedagogical goals are also met. I feel like Ed Tech has a true Marmite/Vegemite effect; oftentimes, teaching practitioners steer away from it through fear of not knowing how to best exploit it, or they go to the other end of the

spectrum and prompt learners to use apps and quirky websites at every opportunity. As long as the learning objectives are met, I personally don't think it matters which side you fall on. Here I suggest some ways that I feel tech can be beneficial to learners both inside and outside the classroom.

## In, out, shake it all about!

As we continue to dart around from A to B, we are speeding up the cogs of society and constantly seeking ways of saving time so we can fit even more into our 24-hour day. In this way, the term mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) was coined. 'As mobile technologies flourish around us, it's important to pause and ask ourselves: why should (or shouldn't) we be using these tools' for education?' (Pegrum, 2015: 24). Learning on the move or 'm-learning' is not actually that new but new devices with enhanced capabilities have dramatically increased the interest level. MALL has provided a convenient alternative to attending face-to-face language classes or studying at home, by taking advantage of time spent on mobile and smartphones engaged in other less cognitive activities and encouraging learners to take their learning outside the boundaries of the classroom by learning on the move. Here learners are creating their own user-generated learning contexts incorporating elements of the real world. MALL also offers the learner a

personal mobile learning option while inside the classroom, where mobile devices serve as personal computers and push aside the need for a computer cluster; 'what used to be phones with added-on computing capabilities have morphed into mini-computers which can also make phone calls' (Godwin-Jones, 2011: 2). In this way, computer assisted language learning (CALL) has morphed itself into a more modern-day and mobile version of itself; MALL. At the beginning of the twenty first century, Bax (2003) claimed 'CALL will reach this state when computers probably very different in shape and size from their current manifestations are used every day by language students and teachers as an integral part of every lesson like a pen or a book' (Bax, 2003: 24). The current trend of language learning with technology demonstrates clearly that Bax (2003) predicted correctly, and we are steadily on the path to the normalisation of technology in language learning where they 'become invisible, serving the needs of learners and integrated into every teachers' everyday practice' (Bax, 2003: 27).

### A few of my favourite digital tools

Aside from the plethora of language learning apps that are available, there are other apps that are not language learning specific that can also be exploited with the same objective.

#### Padlet

Padlet is basically an interactive pin board that is web- and app-based. The settings can be private or open and creating a new board is quick and easy. I use Padlet both in class and outside the classroom, to gather ideas and collect work from students in an informal space that is open for peer review and if they are working in pairs/groups, can also be a collaborative space. It is a great place to pin the main points of a lesson and any accompanying documents which can be referred to by students who were unable to attend class or need to look back at what was covered, as a refresher. The standout feature for me

is the fact that it is a live collaborative document which does not require any private information to access it.

#### IM apps

Instant messaging apps work much in the same way as Padlet does, with the exception that learners are probably using WhatsApp, WeChat, Line, or Telegram anyway, so the familiarity appeals to them. Again, a group can be set up by the teacher or one of the students, to share ideas, information and documents, but also to work on collaborative activities both inside and outside the classroom. I have used both WhatsApp and WeChat, and the advantage of the latter is that users can join a group without sharing personal information. For me, it is a space where I can interact with learners informally regarding work I have set them and provide open feedback which can help everyone learn and develop. It also enables peer review which is useful for learners and prompts them to question the language choices their peers use. Activities I have set include watching a video clip and writing a 100-word summary which is later discussed in class. I also ask learners to read each others' summaries and comment in class which I have found helps build confidence among learners to question language and encourages peer feedback in addition to teacher feedback. Synonym races are another fun activity which I do at the beginning or end of a class as a warmer or a review. I type or say a word and in pairs/groups learners have to type in a synonym. Once all have been typed, the first group with the correct synonym wins a point. This is a great way for learners to be exposed to a wider lexical range, and also have a place online where they can access the lexis in their own time later should they wish to use the vocabulary.

#### Dictaphone apps

Perhaps my favourite Ed Tech tools are the dictaphone and voice recording apps because learners often express a keen desire to improve their speaking skills and attend lessons with this objective in mind. Having the courage to speak in front of unknown people is intimidating enough, add speaking in a

foreign language to the equation and it is perfectly understandable why many learners fear speaking in English. With the common trend of sending voice messages via IM apps to our friends and families one would hope we are used to hearing our own voices. Using a voice-recording app is a great way to practice pronunciation skills. For example, I ask my learners to read a short passage and record themselves. This serves as a record or logbook for them to listen back and see how they have progressed, in addition to being able to identify weaknesses in pronunciation that need to be worked on.

Ed Tech tools are rife, and I feel there is no do or don't as long as the pedagogical aims are clear and learning objectives are met. There is no doubt that technology is an integral part of our lives, and this includes low-resource contexts. So, if there is a way that Ed Tech can help promote learner interest and motivation and this helps learning to be more effective, then I think that can only be a good thing.

#### References

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