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INTEGRATING FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS WITH THE POTENTIAL OF TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract*: Utilizing different types of technology in the EFL classroom increases overall comprehension, meaningful learning, time management, allowing for combined learning methodologies. Technology provides great opportunities for making learning more effective and motivating. The paper examines the role of technology in teaching the integrated skills approach focusing on the use of different digital devices associated with online technology in the context of language teaching and learning.*
Key words: *EFL learning, online technology, integrated skills*

1. Context

The way technology is incorporated in the English as a foreign language classroom has determined teachers to search for classroom teaching practices that could be adapted to digital contexts (Howard, et al. 2020). Technology has become utmost important as it offers resources that can support the quality of teaching but this new trend requires teachers to learn the basic digital operations and either integrate new content into their instruction or change the instructional goal. (Guggemos & Seufert, 2021)

2. Integrated skills in EFL class

The integrated-skills approach, which combines listening, speaking, reading, and writing is an effective way to develop students' communicative competence and the ability to use English in everyday life situations. Different from presenting a language skill in isolation, the integrated-skills approach presents all language skills in conjunction with each other with the main aim of attaining communicative competence in the target language while ensuring a real and meaningful communication. Integrated skills teaching is regarded as instrumental in developing learner overall communication skills in the foreign language; Widdowson (1978) argues that integrating the four language skills will raise learners' proficiency levels as well as enabling advanced language learning. The integrated skill approach promotes authentic use of the language and challenges learners to interact naturally in the target language by using instructional materials that enhance effective communication. The web/internet is seen as a "primary source of information in different languages, and therefore privileged language learners with authentic foreign language input" (Zeng, 2020) combining all skills and **giving students the opportunity to learn in a realistic way.**

3. Digital technology

Digital technology has become a pervasive reality in everyday life. Teaching and learning are influenced by technology. (Chapelle & Voss, 2016) The term Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is fundamentally based on computers (Kern, 2006), comprising a wide range of technology tools such as PCs, cell phones, electronic smartboards, and so on. Other similar

concepts are: Internet-Assisted Language Learning (IALL), Web-enhanced Language Learning (WELL), Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL), and Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL). A number of technology platforms, materials, and methods cover all these terminologies.(Syathroh et al., 2021) The development of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has influenced the attitude of the learner positively in the learning process. (Morgan, 2008) Conventional English language teaching needs to address the demands of globalization, while the use of multimedia technology becomes extremely efficient and convenient. Because it disrupts the much used teacher-centered teaching model and enhances instructors' effectiveness in the classroom, it has become "essential to language practise." (Xiao-Pang et al., 2021)

4. Teaching the receptive skills in the digital era: listening and reading

It is argued that listening is a vital skill learners have to practise on their own as "people vary enormously in terms of how they develop second language listening skills and in a class you really cannot cater for your own particular needs as a listener". (Field, 2013) Effective listening implies recognising sounds, words or meaningful chunks of language depending on the context, relying on the analysis of language structures or semantic cues for decoding the meaning of the words. "Hence, developing learners' abilities to proceed with the interlocutor's information is the goal of teaching L2 listening" (Qiu & Xu, 2022).

The learners can better focus on their particular needs and personal style of listening by working individually, outside the class. The use of new technologies for developing listening skills and practices has gained a major role making the old audio recording unrealistic when so many alternative materials are available, offering opportunities for students to work on their own..

Educators have always sought a medium where students could learn without space or time restrictions. It appears that that the invention and development of new digital technologies and the Internet have opened the way for such a valued objective (Burston, 2013). With its enormous potential, the internet is a valuable source of language input comprising podcasts, video casts, audio blogs or iPods. The popularity of podcasts has increased immensely, making them easily accessible to use in language learning Podcasts can be used as a basis for doing comprehension exercises, as a means of generating conversation, or simply as a means of providing the students with diverse accents or listening materials. "It is a tool that enhances mastery of listening skills and students could be encouraged to use appropriate strategies. It also serves as a resource provide thus podcasts could be used to supplement classroom teaching by uploading audio files and encouraging students to listen to them" (Viswanathan, 2009). The authentic materials help students relate to the cultural issues, learning strategies and meta-information (as greetings, summaries, expressions, idioms). Any activity involving podcasts should be engaging for the student, representing sometimes an extension of other activities, offering increased opportunities for exposure to listening authentic materials that may not be accessible in non-English speaking contexts. (Gromick, 2008)

The internet allows access to vast amounts of audio and video material of all kinds. These files can be stored, edited and distributed with ease. Also, the use of digital audio and video files provides a more flexible way of learning as it allows the student to slow down the stream of language, to pause or repeat certain fragments. Furthermore, students are exposed to authentic language input that provides them with meaningful language used in context, real-world communication examples and cultural information that are bound to motivate and keep them on task.

"Reading is a fundamental skill that is viewed as the keystone for the progress of other language skills", (Azizi et al., 2022), requiring an intentional and collaborative process. Teaching reading, on the other hand, implies a lot of practice and the use of course books, as a primary source of material for reading in class, which, in many cases have a very limited role in providing

the necessary practice. Using the web as a resource may complement what the course book is missing. There are many advantages for using the internet as a reading resource. Firstly, it has endless materials for all topics and all levels, authentic and non-authentic. Secondly, materials can be accessed at any time and from any location. Furthermore, most sites are interactive giving students the opportunity to answer, to comment, correct mistakes or give feedback. It has been argued that "reading a computer screen has become a more realistic assignment. It is no longer a simple written page with information on it, the text has interactive links which allow the students to interact with other readers, the author or the publisher" (Teeler & Gray, 2000)

Efficient readers can understand, extract ideas, and infer meaning from what they read. (Sweet & Snow, 2003). Comprehension presupposes an intellectual process where besides decoding linguistic information, topic awareness and background knowledge is also required.

For developing communicative competences in reading learners must be involved in activities that resemble real-life reading tasks. There are almost unlimited computer assisted technologies that can be used in practising reading, from diaries, blogs, computer enhanced training programs, web-based activities to the infinite resources of the internet that can provide endless sources of authentic materials. An example of webpages that enable authentic material use is wiki, suitable both for reading and writing. Using wikis as a platform for posting reading materials is a perfect example of a secure learning environment that opens the way for developing different integrative skills. Unlike course books, the web gives students the opportunity to work asynchronously, at their own pace, in any location, being no longer censured by time, limited resources and other disturbing factors that may occur in class.

With so many resources to use it is up to the teacher to choose which tool is most suitable for the learners and which can contribute to language acquisition. Furthermore, the problem of availability and appropriacy level is one that needs careful consideration.

5. Developing productive skills in the digital age: speaking and writing

Having a good grasp of speaking skills is crucial for any learner of English because, to be a "speaker of the language" implies knowing that language. (Ur, 2012:117) The ultimate goal of any speaking activity is to give students the opportunity to talk fluently and accurately. Some of the factors that impede spoken communication are poor control of grammar and vocabulary, inhibition to perform in front of an audience, lack of interest or information on a given topic. Moreover, not all students have the opportunity to speak during an English class, or it is often the same students that take the initiative, leaving more inhibited or unsecure students without the chance of expressing themselves.

In everyday communication, spoken exchanges take place because there is some sort of information gap among participants. The purpose of a speaking activity during a language class is to imitate the real life situations, so students may perform a task based activity or get involved in activities that have a real audience. Teeler and Gray (2000:74) argue that the "web can provide a real impetus for discussing topics which the artificiality of the classroom setting sometimes curtails: for example, living on another planet, one's first memory, art". The topic of discussion becomes more tangible the moment the student can search authentic materials on the net and respond to it in a realistic manner.

To be proficient in speaking one has to master the correct language form and structure and feel comfortable in producing language items. The communicative model stresses that the teacher has to help the students acquire the speaking skill by providing authentic practice that prepares students for real – life communication situation.

The development of various audio recording tools that can transform sound in audio file and then transmit it via the web has revolutionized the way this skill is viewed. Nowadays, anybody can post any sort of audio file on the internet and can download or simply listen to

countless files on any topic of their choice. It is only natural that teaching takes advantage of this tool.

Communicating via computers may include conferencing, video chat, audio blogs and podcasts. The use of podcasts for example makes it easier to practise speaking, as students can record themselves speak either by making a monologue or a dialogue. These tools make it easier not only to store the files, but also to evaluate the performance. Oral production can be recorded through a recording device or a mobile phone. The technology involved is easy and very accessible.

Creating their own podcasts that will be available to a potential audience gives students the motivation needed to create something meaningful. Teachers can offer more learning opportunities by assigning students different topics to create podcasts. The creation of podcasts implies doing research on the topic, interacting with other peers and generating an end product which they would have to record in audio format and eventually post it on a platform or present it in class. This approach will teach students not only the content of the topic but also how to deliver it, how to make their talk interesting, to respect the stages of the presentation and basically take charge of their own learning.

In the last decades, YouTube has become a rich and relevant platform for social media users with numerous videos which can enhance the English teaching and learning process. Its content can be used by EFL students and teachers to develop language skills especially speaking and listening comprehension, being an invaluable instructional tool (Nasution, 2019). This platform may have a significant contribution to developing speaking skills and enhance student language proficiency (Syafiq et al., 2021). Studies show how many problematic issues such as "inhibitions of speaking, debating, and exchanging opinions diminish shortly after experimenting with the YouTube materials […] fostering better pronunciation, more careful use of vocabulary, with reasonable fluency & coherence. (Hadeel et al., 2021)

The huge potential impact of web technology on the way teaching and learning occurs in the 21st century is not restricted to simply publish on the web work that students do with pen and paper, but rather the perception on learning itself that takes places afterwards, through the connections made with others, extending the meaning of what has been posted or published. Educators need to "fully understand the open connections, open conversations, open content, and open learning that come as a part of a community of learners who are invested in their own passions". Learning means especially the social connections that students are now making on the Web, the ability to share and contribute ideas and work, the new expectation of collaboration, and the ability to truly extend the walls of our classrooms. (Richardson, 2009)

Writing is a skill that has undergone major changes in the last decades with the emergence communication technologies, as students have now access and opportunities to interact with a wide range of sources in online informal spaces to practice writing skills beyond the classroom. (Jurkovič, 2019) Academic writing performed with the formal intent of developing an essay, an article or a letter is being replaced by a more realistic type of writing used in informal communications. Skills which were mainly used for academic purposes need now be reconsidered.

Modern technologies, which are so familiar to students, have changed the role of writing from a mainly functional purpose to a more communicative one. Student initiated language learning brings about language acquisition, happens also outside the classroom and it is used for communication and entertainment (Trinder, 2017). The existence of so many social media networks like Facebook, Twitter, blogs, wikis, online chat, emails or texting have brought into question the role of writing and the necessity for practising more informal means of communication. These interactive types of writing practices (Sauro & Smith, 2010), are less intimidating, seen as authentic interactions with more proficient or competent language users allowing students to practice writing and receive immediate feedback or advice on their performance. (Naghdipour, 2022) The above-mentioned social networks are filled with messages,

diaries, comments made in an informal language with the mere purpose of social interaction. If used for their social properties, these tools can have a real pedagogical value, aiding students in becoming autonomous learners. Students can leave personal messages, transmit ideas, leave comments or express creativity, in a word, collaborate and interact with others.

Moreover, not only the purpose for writing has changed, but also the environment. The internet provides several tools for improving writing skills, namely blogs, wikis or social networks. The difference between writing on paper and web writing resides in the potential audience that the internet offers. "Here we can see a significant shift compared to traditional media because collaboration with an audience is not bound to the classroom anymore. By means of weblogs, the classroom can be extended to dimensions previously not possible"(Raith, 2009). The existence of a real audience can motivate students in the writing process as they are now faced with an interacting medium that will edit, comment and assess performance, demanding new literacies which require that "writing is embedded in an interactive dialogue between the writer and the audience". (Raith, 2009)

Teaching and learning writing skills in this new environment call for new approaches to teaching that will enable these literacies. Learners can develop writing skills by participating in activities like blogging or collaborating on a wiki.

Writing also implies a mastery of typing, drafting and editing on a computer program. Word processors have become an important tool in education as both teachers and students make use of it, both for teaching materials or writing papers. Although the use of blogs and social networks may be more appealing to learners as they encourage self-expression and are more flexible in terms of paragraphing and drafting, the responsibilities of the teacher are much greater. However, teachers' experience with using technology for teaching purposes is related to their expertise and motivation. One has to remember that these tools are used to enhance English knowledge and use and not to entertain. Also, the use of technology has definitely broadened the writing skill as the internet allows for the combination of written text with images, audio or visual formats, turning a simple written file into a multimedia text.

Conclusions

Providing high-quality instruction with technology has become more important than ever before. Dramatic changes in teaching methodologies are occurring today as digital technologies have emerged. Besides providing an interactive experience during the learning and teaching process, technology also gives access to an unlimited amount of current information and data from a variety of sources consolidating learners' language skills. Furthermore, teaching with technology aids learners in developing thinking skills, promotes learners' autonomy and increases learners' willingness to learn a foreign language effectively.

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