



Complex ICT Support in Language Learning Course

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Abstract

Blended learning and flipped classroom, digital natives and digital immigrants, 21st century skills and ICT for language learning, gamification and game-based learning — these are the terms that modern language teachers are faced with more and more often nowadays. However, ubiquitous and uncontrolled use of digital technologies for all types of exercises might not only be of no use in language learning and skills development, but even do it a disservice. The question of how not to get confused with the growing number of applications, programs, and e-learning platforms, and develop the very own balanced strategy for using information technologies in language learning is of great importance.

In this article, the authors have attempted to demonstrate results of introduction of some applications to the education process. This entails not only practical courses of language learning, but theoretical ones as well. The programs used ensure development of language skills: listening, reading and writing; they help concentrate on the content as well as the form, improve grammar, build and expand vocabulary, and better pronunciation in an interactive way, for example, comparing the way people from different regions speak. Thus, what is meant here is a complex support and provision of the education process with different programs and applications. This includes not only acquisition of language skills, but introducing the culture of the country where the foreign language in question is spoken to students in an interactive, interesting, and exciting way by using, for example, project method with support of ICT.

Keywords: ICT, listening, reading, writing, flipped classroom

1. Introduction

It has been more than ten years since Mark Prensky's article on "digital natives" was published. It's been referred to ever since by teachers, professors, and other specialists, to understand the changes in modern students' profile. "Our students today are all "native speakers" of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet," [1] says the author. There have been many opposite views on M. Prensky's ideas, but the definition given is still relevant and applicable to our present-day students. As to teachers, professors, and tutors, they remain "digital immigrants" in their students' eyes. Being not able to step out of our comfort zone with traditional methods, we invade their world, and in our attempt to speak the same "digital" language we suffer a defeat: "like all immigrants, some better than others – to adapt to their environment, they always retain, to some degree, their "accent," that is, their foot in the past" [1].

Which characteristics do we have to keep in mind when preparing exercises for students to use skills effectively and fulfil their potential? First of all, the need to get information in a quick and clear way. Tables, infographics, mindmaps, etc. are better perceived in comparison to the text. Second, modern students are keen on multitasking. Third, rewards and encouragements keep them motivated. Finally, they get started more enthusiastically if they are to use the Internet, web or mobile apps.

Noteworthy that in reaction to the altered student's profile some adequate and fully functional solutions to involve students' technical skills were introduced. Nevertheless, not all the classes dispose of such complex systems to organize blended learning, and the will of several teachers isn't enough to change the situation in the immediate future. Hence, we suggest one of possible solutions how to organize effectively "home part" of flipped classroom education by means of a few free apps and web sites.

2. New life of time-honored flashcards

Flashcards are one of classical methods to structure any amounts of information effectively in order to learn and revise it. No wonder flashcards got a new lease of life with the advent of smartphones. Traditionally flashcards were used to learn stand-alone words, less commonly phrases, different constructions, and collocations. Nowadays these are not the only way to use flashcards. Depending

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on the app, functionality may slightly differ. We prefer to use “Quizlet”, as it includes all those types of exercises students need to do at home to master the new knowledge. We use the app in monolingual classes, given that all the students have Internet access and smartphones or tablets. As our three-year experience shows, this kind of app has certain advantages:

- “Management” of folders (available to students and teachers) and courses (available to teachers);
- Clean interface that enables to create a module quickly (e.g. importing data from excel) and copy or export it;
- Possibility to print flashcards in different formats;
- Variety of exercises for students to learn new information, revise it, and check the progress;
- Possibility to add images and audio files;
- Spaced repetition system (realizing to a certain extent the Leitner system).

Using this kind of apps at home, students are able to master grammar, vocabulary, and some extralinguistic information like history, geography, economy, etc. In the age of globalization these skills are crucial to build sociocultural knowledge about the country where the foreign language in question is spoken.

2.1 Studying lexical units

There are several ways one can use the app to work with vocabulary:

- Foreign word – its translation. It’s a classical method to learn any type of vocabulary, i.e. abstract and concrete nouns, phrases, collocations, and set expressions;
- Foreign word – image. Students establish consequential, figurative connection between the word and its definition. Such flashcards can bring better results when we deal with visual learners. But there are some downsides, as it takes much time to create such a module and it’s not always possible to capture the notion in an image;
- Foreign word – its definition (usually applicable to intermediate or advanced learners). The main difficulty teachers face is to make definitions clear to the students, so that they don’t get confused with the words they don’t know. Despite certain complexity this type of flashcards can be of great use, as it was in our case when teaching theoretical courses (stylistics and theoretical grammar). Students get to know the terms in foreign language as well as the definitions, fixing in their memories the key information from the course;
- Several foreign words in one picture (as an option one can add a translation or a definition). This relatively new type of flashcards shows great results in teaching and learning words from one semantic field (e.g. “toiletry”, “computer”, “body parts”, etc.);
- Beginning of a fixed expression (as a term) – its ending (as a definition). This type of flashcards appeared in response to the need to study proverbs and sayings in a more interactive way.

2.2 Studying grammatical units

As soon as there was some payoff with studying vocabulary we customized digital flashcards for learning grammatical units and mastering grammatical constructions. Here are some examples of use:

- Grammatical form referring to a grammatical category of tense, gender, or number. One can create a module to study, for example, past participle forms of irregular verbs in English “to do – done”. As opposed to the traditional system of learning all the conjugated forms on one card one after another as the persons go (i.e. I go, you go, he/she/it goes, etc.), this model allows students to master all the forms on a standalone basis. This means students will need less time to remember the form they need.
- Grammatical form – its translation. For example, “estuve – I (yesterday) was/went”. As one can see from the example, it can be of great use to add some information that will give students extra knowledge about the form and, thus, help them to readily choose this very form among many others;
- Mastering grammatical constructions to “automatization”. Information on flashcards depends on a class’ profile. Predominantly we use these pairs: a) students are to put in a preposition (e.g. “terminar ... trabajar — de”) or to repeat the construction with the missing preposition (“terminar ... trabajar — terminar de trabajar”); b) students are to choose the right form of a verb to put in a construction (e.g. (“seguir ... — hacienda”, “seguir ... — seguir hacienda”).
- Minitests to systematize tenses. Flashcards can be monolingual (e.g. «fuiste — Pretérito Indefinido / éramos — Pretérito Imperfecto / seremos — Futuro Imperfecto») or bilingual (e.g. «dormí — he slept (yesterday) / dormiremos — we will sleep / han dormido — they have slept (today)»).



2.3 Phonetic support

Phonetic commentaries added to the flashcards might enrich the experience of studying grammatical and lexical units.

Depending on the class' profile and module, phonetic support might be provided variously. Good diction as well as natural accent is a must.

Here are some varieties of phonetic support:

1. Use built-in function to record the pronunciation for each set of words;
2. Record audio any other way and send it to the students. This method seems to us the most productive when it comes to the content. One can record all the words (terms) one after another, record them in pairs (term – definition), or add the term one more time (term – definition – term);
3. Record several variations of pronunciation with the help of native speakers from different regions. This will let students better their listening skills and get to know different accents;
4. Explain to students how to use pronunciation dictionaries available online (e.g. Forvo). The possible downside is that students have to be really motivated and conscious about learning pronunciation, as there is no immediate control over them. If a student makes a mistake in pronunciation and doesn't check whether he/she is right, he/she'll memorize the wrong pronunciation. An undeniable advantage of such dictionaries is that one can find native speakers there.

2.4 Method of use

We've chosen the following method of use:

1. (Recommended, but not obligatory) Students have a look at the module, looking through the list of words or using the "Flashcards" mode in the application. If the flashcards are made based on the information from the textbook, text or article from the lesson, students might highlight the words they are to study in the module in order to have quick access to the examples of use;
2. (From now on obligatory) Students match the words in pairs using the "Match" mode. Despite the built-in timer it's advisable to students to take their time first few trainings and say out loud all the pairs they make. It's usually recommended to use this mode 15–20 times (if the module has 40–60 pairs);
3. "Write" or "Learn" modes. These are the most productive modes, as they take into account the spelling and have feature of spaced repetition, which means that a student will face more often the words he/she has difficulty to remember.

Quizlet team insist that the app isn't made for giving students grades, but still a teacher can evaluate the progress students made. Teachers will receive statistics (which words are the most difficult to the students) when working with their own modules, not ready-to-use ones.

3. Conclusions

Trial and error method as well as feedback from our students let us come to following conclusions. Creating flashcards, one should remember:

- Ideal number of words in a module is about 40-60 words. However, if all the words are new to the students, it's better to limit the number to 30-50;
- Follow the same method of use with all the modules;
- Remind students to look for a glossary they need in the app;
- Initially, students have to be motivated to use the app, so that it falls into a habit;
- Recommend marking all the difficult words.

References

- [1] Prensky, M. "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants", MCB University Press, On the Horizon, Vol. 9 No. 5, 2001, pp. 1–6.