Digital Toolbox for an EFL Teacher - Teaching Inclusively

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Abstract

The use of technology in educational environments introduces numerous benefits and opportunities for inclusion. The main aim of the presentation is to promote the inclusive use of digital tools in enhancing the process of teaching a foreign language. Inclusiveness refers to social, cultural, personal and gender differences and does not cover children with special educational needs (SEN).

The article provides snippets of an e-learning course on inclusive language teaching. The course has been designed for in-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers within the Erasmus+ project entitled TOOLS. The course aims to raise English teachers' awareness of how to engage students of different social, economic, digital and cultural backgrounds in learning a foreign language.

All the applications in the course materials section called Digital Toolbox have been successfully tested in school environments and will be presented in the practical context of an EFL classroom. The digital toolbox comprises apps supporting the development of all productive and receptive skills. Moreover, the applications for vocabulary and grammar presentation and practice are discussed.

Keywords: *inclusive education, technologically enhanced learning*

1. TOOLS

The Erasmus+ project entitled Technologically Enhanced Online Opportunities for Language Learning in Inclusive Education (TOOLS) has been created by a consortium of four universities (Opole University, Poland; VIC University, Spain; WWW Munster, Germany; University of Cyprus, Cyprus), one college (Kaye College, Israel) and two teacher training centres (Zentrum fur Schulpraktische Lehrerausbildung, Germany; Miejski Ośrodek Wspomagania Edukacji in Opole, Poland). The participating institutions come from five countries in and outside Europe, with Opole University being the project coordinator.

It is worth mentioning that the University in Opole has already been successfully involved in an inclusive project entitled http://dystefl2.uni.lodz.pl/ whose main aim was to reach the students excluded from the learning process due to their dyslexic problems.

In the TOOLs project, the issues identified as excluding factors were those that characterise children as diverse. Based on those needs, the TOOLS project parties have accepted a definition of inclusion. For this article, inclusive education comprises a learning environment where students of different social, economic and cultural backgrounds are actively involved in classroom activities without any gender inequality or judgemental approach. All this happens in a technologically rich environment led by inclusion-conscious and digerati teachers.

Since the idea behind the TOOLS project was to draw teachers' and educators' attention to the need for inclusive education in increasingly diversified environments, the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom seemed to be the most convenient place to start. As it is put forward in the project mission statement, implementing an inclusive teaching approach "forms a compelling platform for enhanced education and personal development for learners with different individual needs" [1].

EFL teachers face mixed-ability groups and must deal with students from various cultural and social backgrounds daily. These digital apps often come in handy as tools to promote inclusion. Thus, accepting EFL lessons as a starting point, the project partners decided to provide pre-and in-service

EFL teachers with strategies and resources to create a learning environment that meets all students' needs.

To fulfil the goal, the partners built a platform demonstrating the following project products:
- Blended-learning course on inclusive learning for pre-service EFL teachers;
- E-learning course on inclusive learning for in-service EFL teachers;
- Resource materials on inclusive learning (such as Digital Toolbox and materials on Accent Bias)

Additionally, the project outcomes have been promoted at national and international events, conferences, and publications on project resources and activities. Once the project activities are over (30 November 2022), the outcomes will be available online with open access.

The digital tools collected in the section entitled Digital Toolbox have been selected to help students develop their language skills and to support teachers in creating an inclusive environment. The chosen Web 2.0 tools are only good examples of specialised software, and the permissions to present them have been obtained. They are free to use, and registration is mainly not required.

One of the areas covered in Digital Toolbox is speaking in a foreign language, which seems to be the most difficult one to teach and learn. When we talk about speaking skills, we can observe that L2 speakers have problems being accurate, appropriate, and fluent [2]. They need to produce spoken language under time pressure in the presence of various audiences. They lack native speakers' strategies for gaining time to think and plan, such as using hesitation devices.

Several practical strategies for L2 students concerning speaking are offered by Harmer [3]. The first is to plan and rehearse what they will say beforehand by formulating ideas silently in their heads. Alternatively, the students can record what they want to say and then listen to and analyse a spoken sample. By practising speaking and recording, the students also memorise the structures, or chunks, of language. Using the recordings as preparation, they do not have to go again through formulating the concept and the language; instead, they can concentrate on other aspects of language. Furthermore, the classical, old-school strategy brought to the attention of educators is repetition. Repetition helps students to recall and retrieve lexical items. And the possibility of repeating the chunks of language by computer programs seems to be an effective solution for particular learners.

One difficulty in teaching students speaking skills is giving all in the class a chance to talk. There is never enough time to practice speaking in a classroom, so a valuable and practical task smoothly supported by technology is oral homework. Teachers can ask their students to record any utterance on any topic and share them—for example, short talks, picture descriptions or presentations of facts, news and opinions. Such a recording can be done individually, in pairs or in small groups.

Several excellent sites on the Internet can be found to prepare a task based on recording speech. ESL Discussions -- https://esldiscussions.com/ -- offers the topics and ready-made questions to record students' interactions. If teachers prefer to rely on their students' discussion choices, they may want to brainstorm them digitally – collecting thoughts and presenting them to other students. This way, teachers can increase students' motivation and engagement and inspire them to participate. Answer Garden is a free educational tool available to do so at https://answergarden.ch/.

To create recordings, any recording device can be used; however, a handy app for this purpose is called Vocaroo – https://vocaroo.com/. It is enough to visit a website, click a recording button, and record a speech for up to 3 minutes. Then, students can preview, or rather pre-hear, their recording and save it if they are satisfied or try again.

An excellent idea for oral homework, worth trying, especially before any oral exams, is providing students with a PowerPoint presentation with a topic, an image, and some typical questions. As they answer the questions prepared by the teacher or do any task required during the exam, they can record themselves directly on the presentation slide. Moreover, as more modalities of language chunks are provided, the words are learnt more efficiently [4] [5].

Some students will always avoid talking both in their native and foreign languages. They feel shy about speaking in public, afraid of making mistakes, saying something inappropriate, and losing face. 'Gaining confidence assuming another personality is associated with Suggestopedia, a method of learning languages developed in the 1970s. In Suggestopedia, students took on different names and identities to remove the stress from producing language since it was another self-making error. The pictures of the avatars acted like masks and allowed the students to express sides of the personality which are often hidden' [6]. Thus, the idea of audio-only recordings or letting the students hide behind an avatar could be even more effective and stress-free.

Thus, one way to ensure everyone speaks is to ask students to create an avatar and add a voice recording. It can be done by simply linking the recorded voice to a picture and publishing the set on the class blog or website. Numerous free websites can be used to create an avatar, e.g. https://avatarmaker.com/. Moreover, the avatar can be made based on a student's photo. It can move and speak with a recorded voice or be supported by text-to-speech software, such as https://l-www.voki.com/. A teacher or students can use video recording devices or apps; however, it is associated with complicated issues of users sharing intimate images and may not be allowed by some institutions.

The vast exposure to a foreign language is crucial for every learner who wants to master it. Apart from the spoken English delivered by a teacher, a wide variety of recorded/video materials accompanying every English coursebook can be applied. Moreover, abundant audio and visual materials online can satisfy learning needs at every level of language proficiency. There are some salient reasons for implementing them in the language classroom:

- the visual context supporting conveying the message and the non-verbal aspects of communicative competence, especially in a cross-cultural context
- activating a subconscious learning mechanism, allowing the students to get information about grammar structures, vocabulary, pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, pitch, and stress,
- availability of listening experiences for students to choose from, which promotes independent learning,
- the exposure to native speakers, authentic speech with various accents, the importance of which is discussed in an Accent Bias Section.

The sites that provide plenty of supplementary materials, accompanied by the context description, transcripts, and related exercises, are Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab (http://www.esl-lab.com) and English Listening Lesson Library Online (http://www.elllo.org).

English Listening Lesson Library Online (http://www.esl-lab.com) is divided into listening activities/lessons according to the difficulty level: easy, intermediate, and complex. However, listening activities can be found in Academic Listening, Basic English Quizzes, English Culture Videos, ESL Vocabulary Quizzes, Live Broadcasts, etc. Moreover, each listening activity (lesson) is constructed to follow the classic methodological prescription for listening material. First, the activities are described: level, topic, type (conversation), speakers, and length. This is followed by a pre-listening exercise, a listening exercise with the recording, an interactive comprehension quiz, post-listening training, additional suggestions for further online investigation and finally, a listening script. Everything is organised neatly and in an easy-to-grasp way.

English Listening Lesson Library Online (http://www.elllo.org) is divided into interviews/talks with seven difficulty levels and hosts grammar talks, one-minute English and more. The activity includes the video file, which makes listening more attractive, allowing students to rely on the visual context and non-verbal signs. The exciting feature of the interviews is that the interlocutors communicating in English often come from various parts of the world, highlighted by a small national flag. Additionally, you can find a script and a comprehension quiz below. Listening materials in both repositories are preceded by the list of topics, making searching for needed audio/video files quick and efficient.
Furthermore, a site where we can find very authentic listening on a broad range of subjects is TED Talks https://www.ted.com/talks. Apart from being a collection of lectures, the website has invaluable features that can help find and use spoken text in teaching listening. The talks are engrossing, with a list of topics provided at the beginning that touch upon the most current issues which might help engage students. Educators can choose the lecture's length, ranging from very short (5-6 minutes) to

relatively long (20-25 minutes). There is a practical option for turning on/off subtitles in English and many other languages. The most popular talks are translated into more than 60 languages. More advanced students can participate in the voluntary activity of providing translations. Following the talk's transcript is possible on the site as well.

To summarise, the widely available digital tools such as educational and generic programs, software and applications can be successfully used to support the development of foreign language skills. They can also help teachers of a foreign language create an inclusive learning environment where students learn at their own pace, focus on their most important intellectual and emotional needs and finally reach success in their lives.

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