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# Too Much Tech? Teaching English in a New Educational Environment

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## Abstract

*We as teachers are only too aware of the sudden and dramatic changes affecting society (and our work) in the present era. We have all adapted our techniques of instruction to the requirements of online teaching, and we have quickly learned to make use of (some of) the vast array of software and hardware available to us. At the same time, we find ourselves dealing with the significant social and political pressures exerted by a difficult international situation and an ever-changing media and social media environment. This paper attempts to take stock of what we have learned as teachers over the last few years, what new skills we have, and what genuinely useful devices we have at our disposal. But it aims to ask a series of further questions: what are the central points in language teaching? What are our core values as language teachers, and how can these inform our practice in the classroom? How does the present political and economic climate affect the role of teachers? What should language teachers really be doing in the second phase of the 21st century? The paper suggests possible answers to these questions, emphasising the particular importance of language teaching in developing, not only the capacity for communication and interaction, but also modes of thought. The modest solutions proposed aim to marry the socio-cultural and political needs of our students with cognitive aspects of language learning, suggesting a new approach to English language teaching and the process of learning. Ideas such as the learner as a social agent and the role(s) of the English language internationally are taken into consideration.*

**Keywords:** *Techniques; core values; social-cognitive learning*

## 1. Introduction

There is little doubt that we as teachers have adapted quickly and quite nimbly to the effects of the pandemic; maybe we have even surprised ourselves with our ‘grace under pressure’ in using ERE (emergency remote education), and attempting to squeeze the very most from new technological devices. But is adaptation enough? As we return to in-class teaching, we are faced with a hybrid environment, often with institutional pressure to continue with some distance learning, even while we work with a class, and a generalised feeling that teachers ‘should know’ how to get the best out of various learning apps, technical teaching aids and advanced software.

All this is occurring in highly changed circumstances: the war in Ukraine has transformed the political status quo in Europe (and even further afield) and significant questions as to truth, political extremism and climate security render the context of teaching much more complex than it was, even ten years ago. This brief paper is an attempt to reflect on what we have learned as teachers, on what new skills we need to make our own, and on what knowledge and abilities we should be aiming to develop in our students.

## 2. Did anything useful come from our pandemic experience?

As teachers we probably each have our own special favourites as regards devices and software applications we discovered during lockdown, some of which we still use in class. However, rather than simply compare notes as to which innovation we like best, there is a clear need to underpin our choices of technological supports and affordances with explicit philosophical and cognitive awareness. Clearly we should not be deceived by the ‘bells and whistles’ of modern technology, but instead always have an eye as to the effectiveness of each activity we decide to work on. It is not simply a good or entertaining class we want, but cognitively valid work, that encourages socially valid

behaviour. We should always be mindful of the tech choices we make, from a methodological point of view.

### 2.2 Lasting change from our experience

All teachers have been faced with a different array of solutions to distinct teaching situations, but we can group permanent changes to the immediate teaching context into two contrasting areas: firstly, the simple technological opportunities that have become readily available to us, or which we have discovered thanks to the Covid 19 emergency. We have more strings to our bow, and some of these have won a permanent place in our teaching armoury. Secondly, we might be treating our teaching materials differently: much more of our 'hard' text and information for use in class may be digital, and the classes themselves have a heightened online presence, giving public structure and record to lesson content, and preserving teaching material in easily accessed spaces for students (and other stakeholders) to refer to (e.g. Google Classroom enables teachers to deposit all teaching materials in a shared, easily accessible space which naturally becomes a chronological record of the course).
The effects of this are to enrich the possibilities of activities that can be done in class, and to add an asynchronous perspective to our work. It is not just homework that can be found online after class, but (potentially) a digital copy of everything touched on in class, with links, YouTube videos and the like. Even using the most familiar of technological supports, our basic teaching environment has been transformed.

### 2.3 Awareness of the significance of changes

Whether changes in classroom activities or teacher behaviour are the result of the inventiveness of teachers and learners, or are due to institutional demands, matters little in terms of the efficacy of the actual lessons or courses that are taking place. What is fundamental is the cognitive work that is going on. When we employ an app in a segment of a lesson, or expect it to be used to complete an assignment, we should always be mindful of the cognitive activity that is involved. Knowledge of the cognitive processes in learning has increased significantly over the last twenty years [1] and so there is little excuse for not bearing this in mind with every tech solution we decide to use. We have new channels of communication available to us, but these channels should be used in a way that is consistent with the message and consonant with the types of interaction we are intending to practise. Using *Kahoot* [2] in class, for example, can be fun and involve students actively, but there is always the need to think about the *language content* of the game or quiz employed and what the learning outcome really will be. Most apps carry the risk of offering little new or complex language and so require substantial contextualisation and exploitation to be truly effective in class (rather than being merely entertainment or light relief).
The most significant change language teachers need to recognise and deal with is the advent of new channels and means of communicating, still using language but in innovative or slightly unfamiliar ways. Traditionally, teaching (and indeed linguistics) divided language into the binary contrast of writing and speaking. This dichotomy, never truly satisfactory, is wholly inadequate now. From emails that are written, but in a spoken, colloquial style to tweets that often carry embedded videos and always have a non-verbal aspect to their message, our students are faced with highly multi-modal interaction, and this should be reflected in our choice of activities, and in the way we teach students to interact, linguistically and non-verbally. If we are tempted to use a blog, tweet or even the rather old-fashioned Facebook post in class, we have to approach these from a multi-modal point of view [3], helping our students deal with digital communication with more finesse, and in a more informed manner.
Indeed, the ability to communicate skilfully and with the right pragmatic effect is a 21st century life skill, and one that is largely left untaught in schools: witness the sometimes disastrous effects of blog posts or Instagram stories on young people [4]. If we are to expect our students to become social agents [5] then our teaching must be socially aware, and with deep, professional understanding of how digital communication works. We have the electronic tools readily available, the ice has been broken by the emergency we have endured, but we still need to perfect the ends of post pandemic teaching.

## 3. Underlying Questions

The advent of new technological affordances actually poses age-old questions. We might have many new tools, but the skills required are little changed. Decisions about what devices to use in lessons, and to what purpose, actually hinge on our core values as teachers. Language teaching involves not only instruction in grammar and vocabulary, or developing the traditional four skills; it is also intimately bound up with questions of identity, our roles in society, how to communicate well and, ultimately, how

to live together. These issues will always inform our teaching, if we are not married to an exclusive method that promises only to impart mechanical ability in learners. If there is a feeling that colourful, stimulating novelty in a language class has little real lasting effect on students, it is because the choice of that new device does not fit directly and explicitly with the central points of our idea of language education. In other words, first we should choose and understand our task, then we can select the best tool for the job.

Language teaching is the most *social* of all educational activities: it is easy to reflect on the social significance of gaining new ways to talk to new people from different parts of the globe. But it is also an opportunity to address some social ills, perhaps most of all, *fake news*. Critical thinking can be nurtured during language lessons, which, of necessity, focus on understanding. We can develop this further by emphasising pragmatics and showing students *how* people communicate. As an example, analysing video clips from well-known TV series culled from YouTube offers an easy way to combine the vast offer of digital technology with highly meaningful and useful language learning. Close, guided observation of intonation, gesture and non-verbals will enhance students' understanding of their own language as well as the target, and will go towards aiding their development as citizens. The same procedure can be done with a series of tweets: pointing out the modes of communication, the layout and framing, and pragmatic effects.

The last fundamental question facing us as language teachers regards the world political situation. Language teaching is, by definition, an activity that looks outwards, it has an international attitude at its core. This gives English the advantage of curiosity and a certain glamour when we work with students, as well as enjoying the claim that our subject is essentially *useful*. But the present crisis (the war in Ukraine, the effects of the pandemic and the threat of climate catastrophe), represents a danger that we will see a collapse of the global: assumptions as to the purpose of learning English may be very different in ten or twenty years' time, and we should be ready to adapt to this.

## 4. Conclusions

Having entered the second phase of the 21st century, we need to answer these questions if we are to teach languages effectively and to the benefit of society. Here we can offer a few modest suggestions as to what our tasks should be.

There is no question of having 'too much tech': if it is there, we have to accept and exploit it. In doing so, we realize that language teaching has an especially important role in education: it deals explicitly with communication, and this is the great question of our era (how can we share information, ideas, and roles and socialize peacefully on digital media?). Using the devices and software at our disposal we should engage learners in cognitively challenging but supportive ways, and do this with awareness of the social messages that are hidden but ever-present in exchanges on social media platforms (e.g. ways to present oneself, engage in discussion with others, feel membership etc.). Lastly, we must encourage our learners to become, not merely speakers of English (or whatever language), but to become *skilled users* of language, able to navigate a hyper-complex world with confidence and deftness.

## References

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