

TECHNOLOGY AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract:

The use of any form of technology should be approached with caution in the sense that the use of any particular kind of technology (or any teaching resources for that matter) should have clear and relevant value for the development of language learning systems and, consequently, should rest on strong theoretical principles.

Key words: approach, caution, particular kind, relevant value, language learning systems, theoretical principles, language-learning environment, communicative stakes, social actions

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Traditional classroom contexts provide communicative environments where the primary resources are learners' negotiations with teachers or other learners. These negotiations are characterized by the limited proficiency of the learners as well as the teachers' simplification of the learners. In turn, these often results in distortion of the language itself. People simply do not get a chance to interact with real, i.e. native-like language in its real, i.e. real native-like context.

Methods. It is arguable from the above that a shift is needed toward a more flexible environment where classroom meetings are not the sole focus of learning but are part of a number of group-based and self-based working modes generated by the different roles which they purport to fulfill. Such an environment would require extended access to communicative resources, i.e. authentic materials, even in the earliest stages of learning, together with opportunities for exploring them in responsive, interactive ways.

Under these conditions, the teacher's task, among others, will become that of providing sympathetic assistance and support rather than that of being the organizer of all activity. Such approaches will also necessarily de-emphasis both the notion of lessons in the classroom and that of language learning as a code. Rather, more emphasis would be placed on "facilitating access to rich cultural information and finding ways of catering for students' motivations and needs, both of which are often unpredicted and indeed, unpredictable".

Considerations of this kind have led to the development of flexible, student-driven language learning approaches where students are essentially in control of what they wish to do and of how they intend to go about achieving their objectives. Examples of such approaches include macro simulations and the development of complex discourses.

For students to achieve their goals in this context, they need to be provided with:

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- a) access to relevant authentic material;
- b) systems for accessing these materials in pedagogically ways; this is where technology can assist.
- c) technology is able to provide access to authentic text and is able to facilitate access to these texts by students.

Three examples of computer-based language learning systems will be described briefly below. They are currently in development at James Cook University. While it is true that these particular systems are computer-based, it is not intended to imply that computing is the only kind of technology relevant to language learning. There are other forms of technology and, in particular, video and international satellite technologies, which are of inestimable value and which are becoming increasingly available.

Awareness, autonomy and achievement are developed partially as a result of learners interacting with materials but also, and importantly, as a result of interaction with teachers who need to ensure that appropriate skills and attitudes are acquired by the learners. The teachers' role is therefore crucial although it may no longer correspond with that traditionally ascribed to teachers.

We can describe multimedia listening comprehension development system. This is a multimedia browser designed to develop listening comprehension skills through a self-study approach based on the exploration of authentic audio and/or video text leading to the development of an awareness of the critical features of authentic text. Audio or video file is recorded in digital form onto a computer's hard disk or on a CD-ROM. Students are provided with a written transcript of the passage where each letter in every word has been replaced with an asterisk. In order to achieve this system provides a series of inbuilt facilities which enable the learners to:

- a) listen to the recording in its entirety;
- b) listen to a selection of words from any arbitrary point in the recording to any other arbitrary point, hence the notion of browsing. It is a little like turning over the pages of a book or newspaper, discovering what is on this page or that one, skipping ahead or reviewing previously-examined material;
- c) listen to any specific word in isolation;
- d) guess and verify individual words;
- e) obtain information about individual words;
- f) guess and verify "chunks" of language in the text (the underlined portions on the screen.
- g) obtain information about "chunks" of language in the text;
- h) practice saying selected portions of the text (including comparison of their voice with the original recording) ;
- i) develop awareness of rhythm and intonation structures of authentic text through forward build-up and backward build-up exercises.

All of these functions are under the learners' control. They choose the material which they wish to study (e.g. an interview, a news broadcast, a game show) and they then choose those aspects of that material on which they wish to focus (e.g. words, chunks, the entire text, intonation patterns, pronunciation). Essentially, they are catering to their own needs, motivations or preferences in ways which would simply be impossible in a regimented/text-controlled environment.

Conclusion. A feature of this program is that it contains an authoring system which reduces considerably the burden of lesson-writing, thus allowing

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teachers in the field to develop their own materials with relative ease. There is little doubt that technology will make increasingly large contributions to language teaching just as it is currently making to every other aspect of our lives.

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