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Tweeting is for the birds – not for language learning

Alan Waters, *University of Lancaster*, UK

Nicky Hockly, *The Consultants-E*, Barcelona, Spain

Alan Waters

Research shows that electronic technologies can be helpful for promoting language learning. However, in my view, there should also be much greater awareness of how such technologies can result in anti-educational outcomes as well. For example, according to Carr (2010), research shows that multimedia presentations result in lower levels of comprehension because the distractions they involve inhibit coherent thinking. Another notorious problem is the way electronic technologies facilitate student plagiarism in academic writing.

Equally, the *absence* of electronic technologies can be associated with more effective learning. A secondary school in an East Asian country was recently found to have come out top in the national examination results. Because the area was so remote, nobody there had access to electronic technologies. As a result, by far the most interesting part of the students' daily lives was what they did in school, and this source of motivation, caused by lack of electronic technology, appears to have been the main cause of their success.

Even when research shows the potential effectiveness of electronic technologies, the human factor plays an important role in determining what happens in practice. Thus, Cutrim-Schmid 2005 showed that the 'Active-vote' component of electronic whiteboard systems (which elicits responses from students via multiple-choice questions) can facilitate aspects of language learning in a way that cannot otherwise be achieved. However, the head of a leading British international language teaching organisation told me he decided not to install this part of the system on the grounds that multiple-choice questions were part of American, not British, methodology!

The human factor can also be seen at play more broadly in terms of the widespread belief that electronic technologies can, of themselves, automatically and significantly transform the quality of any endeavour. But this is to risk repeating the mistakes of the audiolingual era, when the language laboratory was expected to revolutionise language learning. The kind of teaching approach which electronic technologies are associated with nowadays is different from then, but the habit of thinking is similar. In other words, the danger is once again of believing that via a technology we can greatly increase success in language learning.

Finally, overestimating the value of electronic technology in language teaching causes divisiveness. ELT does consist of those who are firmly within the electronic global village, but also of those who are equally firmly well outside it. In very many teaching situations the prospect of being able to make significant use of electronic technology is just a pipe-dream. The costs and logistics simply do not permit it. Yet, because of the 'hype' currently attached to this area of language teaching, the impression is easily given that not to be able to provide such a resource for learning is to offer students only a second class education. In reality, of course, as Scott Windeatt once put it to me: 'Any teacher who can be replaced by a computer deserves to be'!

Nicky Hockly

To claim that technology is irrelevant in the context of English language teaching is to deny reality. Technology is increasingly ubiquitous in the world around us, and if used in a principled manner, can support and enhance English language learning. However, there is a pervasive moral panic about the effects of technology in society, and on ourselves as human beings. One particular fear centres around how the Internet may be changing the structure of our brains. Neuroplasticity (the ability of the brain to change its own structure, and form new connections) is nothing new. Indeed, it is part of what makes us human. Whether neuroplasticity is 'good' or 'bad' is a moot point: it simply is. However, it has frequently been press-ganged into arguing against technology.

The framing of this debate (technology is irrelevant, and not for language learning) leads us into several holes, or fallacious ways of thinking, which I outline below.

1. Technology should lead to better language learning.

It won't. Bad teaching with technology is still bad teaching. The use of technology is always situated within a specific classroom context, and contextual factors will always be far more important than the technology tool used. There is evidence however, that the judicious use of ICT in teaching can increase motivation (Passey & Rogers 2004), and impact positively on learning outcomes, behaviour and school attendance.

2. Technology is a magic bullet.

It isn't. Depending on context and how it's used, technology can be effective or not, just like any other teaching tool.

3. Technology will replace teachers.

It won't. Much hype surrounded the introduction of robots into South Korean primary schools in late 2010, but these robots are connected in real-time to teachers in other countries. The real teacher does not disappear.

4. Technology always breaks.

It does sometimes. The point here is that teachers need basic troubleshooting skills – a basic digital/technical literacy - so as to become effective *users* of technology.

Unfortunately this is noticeably absent in initial and in service training.

5. There are no studies that 'prove' definitively that technology improves language learning.

There can't be. There is a massive range of uses of technology in teaching, from collaborative writing to computerised testing. Even CALL enthusiasts understand that there are research limitations in trying to compare very disparate contexts and tools.

6. Technology is irrelevant to language teaching.

It isn't. Teacher training tends to focus on content and pedagogy alone. What is needed is a focus on the intersections between content, pedagogy *and* technology. The TPACK model (Mishra & Koehler 2006) is a good place to start.

Conclusion

Sugata Mitra's Hole in the Wall experiment (2007) in India clearly shows that motivation will result in learning, even without a teacher. Technology can help with this, but technology used badly won't.

You can see the video of the debate online at:

<http://iatefl.britishcouncil.org/2011/sessions/2011-04-17/elt-journal-debate-tweeting-birds-not-language-learning>

References

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Further references from the debate can be found on Nicky's blog

<http://www.emoderationskills.com/?p=531>

Alan Waters: a.waters@lancaster.ac.uk

Nicky Hockly: nicky.hockly@theconsultants-e.com