

EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGIES FOR THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE – A BRIEF STUDY

Autor: Ștefan Ferent

While technology enhances any classroom to a certain extent, there are best practices for English learner technologies that make the difference between just using a technology for show and utilizing a technology to optimize learning. The best programs for English learners meaningfully engage the student at his or her own pace. The programs are inter-active, collaborative, content-based, context-rich, authentic, conversational, personalized, and multi-culturally relevant. They create a safe environment for the student to practice, have failures and successes, and learn how to master both oral and written English language.

Students learn at their own pace and respond differently to different presentation styles. Some learners do better with visual presentations, some do better with oral, and some do better with written. The non-English speaking student may be using any one of up to 400 different languages at home, reflecting the cultural diversity of our world. With all of this individual student variation, differentiation is critical. The teacher needs to take the time to assess each student and stand ready to modify and tailor content and presentation to suit that students particular needs.

The Internet is a key tool for accommodating all of the variations that confront the English language teacher. Engaging students with multi-media websites that stir the imagination enables the teacher to present information in unique ways, shapes and forms, as well as in different languages. One of the advantages of using computers and the Internet is that students can access the material and practice a lesson repeatedly, which allows for learning from mistakes through continual, non-judgmental feedback. In addition, the Internet and school-safe social networking websites enable students of different cultures and languages to connect.

Technology's Role in Creating an Engaging Language Learning Environment

English learners experience heightened stress and self-consciousness in an ordinary academic setting. Communication is such a closely held personal trait that the embarrassment associated with learning a new language in full view of other students can be a barrier to educational success.

Technology-based English learner programs can provide a less threatening environment for learning language, particularly at early stages when small failures may get in the way of progress. For example, when an English learner can practice pronunciation on their own with the aid of audio samples, the stress and anxiety associated with recitation in front of the class is entirely avoided. The early learner can gain confidence in private before being required to participate in open classroom settings.

Practicing language skills in a moderated, age-appropriate chat room is another safe environment where English learners can hone their written language skills without fear of personal embarrassment or failure.

Moving beyond chat rooms, it is now possible for students to enter entire virtual worlds for learning language. The Internet's virtual world provides the perfect opportunity for students to interact through avatars. Collaborating with others in this dynamic environment provides as close to an ideal communication scenario for practicing conversation as one can get.

Learning language as a knight in a castle is far more fun than translating or reading a passage about a castle. While the younger student might choose to play the knight, the older teen may choose a shopping mall or café. Whatever the virtual setting, the chance to practice using language is the key. These are high-touch, high-engagement environments. And for students who live in homes where English is not the spoken language, the virtual home may be the only home where English can be practiced and learned.

Keeping up in class depends upon being able to understand the words and concepts the teacher is using, and for the English learner, that can be a big problem. However, a student with a laptop or direct access to the Internet can immediately obtain prepared materials on the classroom topic — materials that are as accessible to the English learner as they are to those students proficient in

English. And these same materials can then be reviewed later at home with friends or family to help.

We are a mobile society. Fortunately, technology solutions permit us to deliver educational content even when we are on the move.

English learner materials can be delivered in a variety of settings and with different levels of connectedness. The technology-infused classroom, computer lab or learning center is the most traditional setting. English learner programs can be delivered entirely on-site using software-based, stand-alone products, or they can be delivered entirely through online, distance education solutions. Blended learning, part on-site and part distance-based, is becoming more common as teachers and schools try to leverage Internet connectivity while still maintaining the personal engagement of in-person, on-site teaching.

But the truth is that with today's technologies, the English learner can continue his or her studies equally well at home, at the gym, while driving (hands-free in the car, please!), or virtually anywhere you can carry a small computer or other mobile device and/or be connected to the Internet. We are no longer limited to the classroom. Educational opportunities are now truly available 24/7, irrespective of location.

As communication and computer technologies become smaller and more mobile, handheld mobile digital media devices are becoming the teaching tool of the moment. The ability to capture, download and listen to lesson segments, audio clips, and videos while being engaged in daily activities provides an additional opportunity outside the class-room to work on English skills. Podcasts are becoming a particularly useful teaching resource since students can replay segments as they hone their language skills.

With these tools, education is spreading far beyond classroom walls. The opportunity to project educational materials through the Internet and mobile communications devices has dramatically expanded our vision of education without boundaries.

In just the last five years, technology developments have provided remarkable opportunities for teachers with English learner students. The new communications and language technologies provide unprecedented possibilities for helping English language learners. But the pace at which new technologies are coming can also present challenges to teachers.

The challenge for the second language teachers of today is to understand the theories and principles of CALL keep current with and critically assess the latest and ever-changing technologies, and harness technology to provide the most effective learning environments.

The Internet is a self-referential technology and, after only a few hours with a good search engine, teachers can find hundreds of sources and scores of ideas for improving their own classrooms.

Technology not only provides this access to information and increased collaboration opportunities, but also enables the specialized learning described in this paper to assist English language learners in excelling in a 21st-century education environment.