Supporting English Language learners through technology

Mourad Ben Slimane

Abstract:

TEYL has taken on a new dimension recently, as it has become an issue of paramount importance. Indeed, it has become integrated in many university curricula and discussed in several academic institutions and circles. It should be noted, in this regard, that new technology has played a significant role in facilitating TEYL, especially when English language learners benefit from the reinforcement of linguistic structures to express themselves through pictures, graphics, and from the use of new technology platforms. This paper is going to contextualize the use of technology in the digital era we are living in and then it is going to look at some aspects of its various uses among young learners and how it helps them cope with the changes and challenges of the 21st century.

Keywords: *New Technology, TEYL, digitization, language learning*

1. Introduction

TEYL has recently been considered a very interesting topic and a hotly debated issue, as English has become the dominant common language in the world. Indeed, many researchers and applied linguists have attempted to deal with it from different perspectives. In this article, I am going to talk about the appropriation of technology[1] for TEYL classes and the different outcomes they yield. It is to be noted that contemporary young children are considered part of the generation of digital natives, according to Fleer (2011). Because of the highly exponential development of technologies, they have deeply affected children's lives and ways of learning, especially over the last decade. Researchers have strongly emphasized a reconsideration of the impact of technology in young children's development as well as the development of learning theories that would respond to the needs of contemporary children, as Yelland (2011) claims.

According to Diyanti (2006), the skill of communicating in English in the global world today is regarded as one of the very much needed life skills. This phenomenon has brought about many changes in educational settings all over the world, as well as new challenges in teaching English to youngsters. This growing demand might be the ultimate reason for parents to send their young children to schools which provide English instruction. Indeed, the integration of TEYL in many countries is based on some rationales. Cameron (2001) highlights the advantages to starting young with foreign languages. She says that children who have an early start develop some considerable advantages in certain areas of language skills. Listening comprehension highly benefits from this early start, pronunciation follows suit.

[1] Ben Slimane (2008) presents a clear account about the development of new technology as well as its different platforms of utilization and revitalization

It is to be noted that younger children learn L2 grammar more slowly than older learners. Despite the fact that they start earlier with language learning, they make lower progress. Graddol (2006: 89) argues that one significant rationale for teaching languages to young learners is that they find it easier to learn languages than older students, although they are still in the process of developing both physically and intellectually, and need extreme care to be able to take responsibility for their own learning.

2. Technology development

We are living in an age of massive circulation of information, something which has been referred to as the digital age. As a matter of fact, there have been different waves of technological configurations. Some have not included the computer (e.g. audioconferencing or telelearning, radio, television or broadcast television, videotext or teletext, talking book, videoconferencing, videophone, photo-CD, satellite television, and interactive satellite television).

Cunningham (2006) clearly points out that by turning to the second wave of technology, one can say that it involved the computer in some way. It may have involved software or authoring packages, simulations or games, and wordprocessing or databases. The computer may have been integrated with other media, audio or video, to improve efficacy.

Over the last 15 years, however, there have been several developments, such as multilingual wordprocessing, synthetic speech and digitization, speech recognition, laser disc and interactive video, audiographics, the interactive book, bulletin boards and email, computer conferencing, desktop videoconferencing, and machine translation. Some of these had had short life spans, while others have been compatible with or have entered the next level: *interactive multimedia*. Some examples of this might be CD-ROM, electronic texts, CD-Interactive, touchscreen, multimedia authoring shells, laboratories, and DVD.

In the last decades, media, telecommunications and data-processing have merged into what is called *multimedia*. Media integrate all the different data, which can be viewed, listened to, transformed, recorded through the possibility of mixing media content. It is worth pointing out that the arrival of digital technology has transformed the media at every level, production, distribution and consumption—making it appear to many observers that minority languages have an opportunity that was denied to them in the days of spectrum scarcity and nationally organized media. Digitization is a revolution, according to Crystal (2005).

3. Overview of technological tools used in classrooms

Many countries acknowledge the important role of technology in children's lives and place an increasing stress on the development of technology-integrated programs that are appropriate for young children and aim at bridging the gap between young children's digital experiences at home and in school in the words of Mawson (2003). In this section, I am going to give an insight into the most recurrent forms of technology tools designed for little children. It should be underscored, however, that technology is constantly progressing; and it is quite delicate to give a precise description of all the tools used at this moment in time due to their deep features and developing dimensions.

3.1. Digital stories

According to Educause (2007), digital storytelling is the combination of narrative with digital content, including images, sounds, and video clips, to create a movie, especially with a strong emotional component.

> Sophisticated digital stories can be interactive movies that include highly produced audio and visual effects, but a set of slides with corresponding narration or music constitutes a basic digital story. Digital stories can be instructional, persuasive, historical, or reflective. The resources available to incorporate into a

> digital story are virtually limitless, giving the storyteller enormous creative latitude. (Educause 2007:1)

Moreover, some learning theorists think that storytelling can be effectively applied to nearly any subject for the purpose of pedagogy. Formulating a narrative and articulating it aptly urges the storyteller to think painstakingly about the topic and take the audience's wishes into account.

3.2. Games

Oblinger (2006) points out that the word "game" conjures up a mental image of playing cards or a game like *Jeopardy*. These types of games are viewed as "casual games," which are brief (from five minutes to two hours) and simplistic. Oblinger further describes the games by saying that

> [t]oday's games are complex, take up to 100 hours, require collaboration with others, and involve developing values, insights, and new knowledge. They are immersive virtual worlds that are augmented by a more complex external environment that involves communities of practice, the buying and selling of game items, blogs, and developer communities. In many ways, games have become complex learning systems. (2006:1)

Although definitions are variable, digital games provide visual information to many players, accept input from the players, and use several programmed rules. Today's game rules are programmed into the code, unlike traditional games whose rules are described in an instruction manual. Ultimately, the sensory interface and story add a highly emotional dimension to the games.

3.3. Interactive teaching: Whiteboards (IWB)

According to Wood and Ashfield (2008), the interactive whiteboard consists of a computer, a data projector, and an electronic screen. The IWB was

originally designed for office settings, and has not been implemented in schools only recently. In educational settings, it was first used in higher education, and primary schools started using it over the late decades, according to Higgins et al. (2007). One of the reasons this technological tool began to be used in educational settings is because it was viewed as a way to integrate many multimedia resources, such as written text, sound, pictures, software packages, video clips, CD-ROMs, images and websites, into classroom setting, as Ekhaml (2002) claims.

To enhance student engagement, Bryant and Hunton (2000) claim that the IWB provides a synchronous transmission mode, allowing two-way interaction between the student and the teacher. The board is large and touch-sensitive, according to Smith, Higgings, Wall, and Miller (2005), students can thus write on the board using their hands and markers to demonstrate their understanding, as Solvie (2007) maintains. Gage (2002) asserts that this can be very helpful when teaching mathematics, as it enables the user to draw straight lines, circles, triangles, and squares. Hani Morgan (2010: 4) points out that many countries,

> such as the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and Canada, are enthusiastic about the whiteboard's potential in enhancing teaching and learning; consequently, they are spending millions to buy this technology for their school systems.

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

The questionnaire was delivered to 34 male and female university students whose average age is between 20 and 34. As regards their geographical distributions, they basically come from Kairouan, S. Bouzid, Bizerte, Mahdia,

Sfax, and Kelibia—something which can be taken as a great factor to talk about the diversity of views and attitudes concerning the huge role of new technology in TEYL, as the participants are almost from different regions of the country.

4.2. Procedure

The participants were asked to give their opinions on a set of issues relating to the role of technology used by teachers in classrooms. These questions ranged from the frequency of technology use, through the tools themselves that are used, to the skills reinforced and benefits provided by the tools.

4.3. Discussion and results

A first look at the results given by the 31 students who have answered "yes" to the question of technology use shows that the tools are definitely being used—something which can be translated into 85, 29%. With regard to the frequency of the tools, the answers are very different, as there were 15 students who said once a week, 11 students who said once a month, while the other 9 students did not say anything about the frequency use. These answers make up respectively 14, 70%, 32, 35% and 26, 47%. As regards the importance of the tools, 29 students have pointed out that they are highly important for teachers, while 3 students have pointed out that they are not so. The percentages are thus respectively 85, 29% and 8, 82%.

Having a remarkable percentage that reflects the importance of the tools used gives a clear signal that these tools are indeed appreciated and held in high esteem among the students. In the last part of the questionnaire, I have devoted a section, in which students could formulate their attitudes about the benefits of technology, and from which I have tried to select a representative response. Indeed, one student has mentioned that "*it encourages the learners to love the subject, it enhances some skills such as (listening, pronunciation, and*

vocabulary), facilitates access to information, and brings the world to the classroom."

5. Conclusion

The article has shown the big importance of using technology in academic circles, basically classroom settings. Without any doubt, this has revealed a great deal of insights as regards both language learning and language teaching. It has also resorted to a categorization of technology language tools and highlighted their particular specificities and inherent features. These are namely digital stories, games, and interactive whiteboards. At the heart of this, I have tried to consolidate the inventory of language tools by referring to a recent study carried out with my third year students of English at the Faculty of Kairouan—something which has yielded a multitude of linguistic, cultural, and technological insights.

Indeed, the analysis of the questionnaire has shown a great deal of perspectives as regards the role of new technology in TEYL. First of all, it has demonstrated that the tools are used with a fairly variable degree among teachers. Last but not least, on the basis of some attitudes formulated by the students, new technology is a multi-dimensional pattern and can do a variety of tasks in the sense it makes language learning and teaching simplistic, practical, as well as attractive.

What is actually remarkable about these technological tools is that they are highly sophisticated and appealing to many people—something which makes linguistic research still going on and improving in this direction. But where the new technology is taking us is something, which we are still waiting to see and investigate in the coming years or decades.

6. References

Ben Slimane, Mourad (2008). Appropriating New Technology for Minority Language Revitalization: the Welsh Case.

Bryant, S. M., & Hunton, J. E. (2000). The use of technology in the delivery of instruction: Implications for accounting educators and education researchers. *Issues in Accounting Education*, 15 (1): 129-162.

Crystal, David (2005). *Towards a philosophy of language diversity.* [http://www.Crystal reference.com/DC_articles/Langdeath4. pdf, 09 February 2006]

Cunningham, Dennis (2006). Globalisation, Language and Technology. Some Recommendations. In *Language Diversity in the Pacific*, Denis Cunningham, David Ingram, and Kenneth Sumbuk (eds), 196-211. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Cameron, L. (2001). Teaching language to young learners. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Diyanti, Yuniar (2006). *Teaching Listening and Speaking to Young Learners*. [http://staff.uny. ac .id/ sites/default/files/pengabdian/b-yuniar-diyanti-spd-mhum/teaching-list-speak-yl.pdf, 24 January 2016]

Educause (2007). *7 Things You Should Know about Digital Storytelling*. [https://net.educause .edu /ir/library/pdf/ELI7021.pdf, 24 April 2016]

Ekhaml, L. (2002). The power of interactive whiteboards. *School Library Media Activities Monthly,* 18 (8): 35-38.

Fleer, M. (2011). Technologically constructed childhoods: Moving beyond a reproductive to a productive and critical view of curriculum development. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 36(1): 16-24.

Gage, J. (2002). So what is an electronic whiteboard? Should you want one? *Micromath,* 18(2): 5-7.

Graddol, D. (2006). English Next. Plymouth: The English Company (UK) Ltd.

Higgins, S., Beauchamp, G., and Miller, D. (2007). Reviewing the literature on interactive whiteboards. *Learning, Media and Technology,* 32(3): 213-225.

Oblinger, Diana (2006). Simulations, Games, and Learning. [https://net.educause.edu /ir/library/pdf/ELI3004.pdf, 24 April 2016]

Mawson, B. (2003). Smoothing the path: Technology education and school transition. *Research in Science Education*, 33(4): 503- 514.

Morgan, Hani (2010). *Teaching with the Interactive Whiteboard: An Engaging Way To Provide Instruction*. [http://hanimorgan.com/TEACHINGWITHTHEINTERACTIVE WHITE BOARD.pdf, 24 January 2016]

Smith, H. J., Higgins, S., Wall, K., and Miller, J. (2005). Interactive whiteboards: Boon or bandwagon? A critical review of the literature. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 21*.

Solvie, P. A. (2007). Leaping out of our skins: Postmodern considerations in use of an electronic whiteboard to foster critical engagement in early literacy lessons. *Educational Philosophy and Theory,* 39 (7): 737-754.

Yelland, N. (2011). Reconceptualising play and learning in the lives of young children. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 36 (2): 4-12.

Wood, R., & Ashfield, J. (2008). The use of the whiteboard for creative teaching and learning in literacy and mathematics: A case study. *British Journal of Educational Technology,* 39 (1): 84-96.

Appendix 1

Questionnaire about the role of technology in TEYL

Gender: **Male** **Female**

Age:

Location:

1) Do teachers use technology to teach young learners? Yes No No idea

2) How many times do they use it? Once a week Once a month No idea

3) What are the tools used?

4) What are the skills reinforced? Speaking Writing Reading Listening

5) Are the tools? Educating informative entertaining

6) Is it important for teachers? Yes No No idea

7) What are the benefits of technology according to you?