TECHNOLOGY IN ELT TO IMPROVE LEARNERS' COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Abstract: *The topic of technology has become very popular in ELT, especially with the transition to online education in the COVID pandemic times. There are a multitude of benefits of using technology for students (and teachers). However, teachers often believe that they are not tech-savvy and avoid using technology. This article will prepare educators to implement various tools to raise their self-confidence in terms of technology use. The article includes the latest research on the topic of technology in teaching languages, and offers practical applications and authentic tasks to raise teachers' tech awareness and readiness. Enhancing teachers' technological skills can help design curriculum and lesson plans more efficiently. By doing so, teachers can keep students engaged and motivated through digitally generated activities. The article will offer ideas for a fun schema activating task, a theoretical discussion, and practical applications of the suggested digital tools. The key takeaway from this article is that teachers have many options and the authors will provide a list of frequently used digital resources in language teaching.*

Keywords: *technology use, digitalization, interactive tools, Jamboard, online tools, resources*

Both teaching and learning have undergone dramatic changes in the last few years. For centuries, language learning was done in a physical classroom, where the methodology could vary from teacher-centered to student-centered, or either focusing on accuracy or fluency. Today, teachers face a lot more complex issues than choosing a method. They have to decide what kind of technological tools they need to use, how to use them in order to facilitate learning, and spend a lot of hours learning about these tools. According to Alakrash & Razak (2020), teachers are expected to create a new learning environment and "produce excellent students in the future as work demands are increasingly challenging."

There is no doubt that our students are not only ready to utilize technology in their learning but also find it convenient, beneficial and motivating. In a study conducted in Malaysia, Watson & Watson (2007) found that 95% of the students used the Internet at home. This requires the teacher to "offer students some digital minimum from the beginning of the process of foreign language learning" [5, p.76-88]. Thus, in order to help students become proficient users of the language, we have to carefully organize the use of technology in our classes. Bećirović et al. (2021) found that teachers have a crucial role in foreign language learning through technology, as a key factor in supporting the students. According to Beavers (2009), teachers are responsible for creating an environment where students will

thrive. In order for teachers to achieve all of these goals, they have to constantly improve, learn, and develop.

When it comes to professional development for teachers, there are so many options to choose from, and a multitude of technology tools to learn about. During our practical experience in training teachers, we have realized that what teachers need help with the most is making the instruction interactive. According to Petko et al. (2018), "educational technology integration is dependent on individual teachers' readiness." Therefore, one of the key goals of professional development is to "encourage teachers to facilitate the learning activities" [2]. Teachers can only do so by learning and experimenting with various interactive technology tools, and choosing the one(s) that are appropriate for their environment. Matveeva et al. (2022) list some great CALL resources, such as www.quizlet.com, www.memrise.com, www.duolingo.com, and a few others. Besides these websites, we have found a few others to be very beneficial in the learning process. Some of the most frequently used digital tools for language learning are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequently used interactive digital tools in EFL/ESL contexts

Type of tool	Link
Games	www.kahoot.com www.quizlet.com www.baamboozle.com www.blooket.com www.gimkit.com www.quizizz.com
Questionnaires	www.surveymonkey.com www.google.com/forms
Learning Management Systems (LMS)	www.canvas.infrastructure.com www.google.com/classroom
Video learning/editing	www.edpuzzle.com www.inshot.com www.islcollective.com www.nearpod.com
Digital boards	www.google.com/jamboard www.figma.com/figjam www.padlet.com

Discussing the technological tools which are intensively utilized in our classes, we would divide them into two categories according to their specific communication mode. The interpretive communication mode includes listening and reading; the expressive communication mode incorporates speaking, writing, and other forms of representing one's thoughts and ideas [11, p.28].

Conducting research on frequency of technology usage and types of tools being utilized among our EFL colleagues in Russia, we found the results as follows. EFL teachers actively utilize different technology tools in their classes; however, the frequency of usage of tools for developing learners' listening skills is considered to be a leader among others, since 6 out of 12 teachers answered that they use such tools more frequently than for other skills. This data was followed by tools for increasing the writing skills of the students demonstrating the second highest result in our survey (5 out of 12). The

final data of the survey demonstrated that EFL teachers in Russia draw their attention to the development of both the interpretive and the expressive communication modes using various technology instruments to expand their students' knowledge. The least used instruments are considered to be those which are utilized to level-up the students' reading, speaking and grammar comprehension skills, 3 and 4 out of 12 teachers answered that they use technology tools to expand their learners' speaking and grammar comprehension skills, respectively.

Since teachers need to collaborate in order to learn from each other, we designed a collaborative warm-up task. Our initial warm-up activity is aimed to recall the attendees' schemata on using technology in their classes. Activate board games are designed including technology tools which are available in Russia and widely utilized both in and out of the classrooms. This activity helps to share ideas and learn from each other, which encourages the participants to take an active role in their learning. Participants talk about the importance of using such Gaming tools like Quizlet, Gimkit; White board tools like Padlet, Jamboard; tools for communication like Flipgrid, Seesaw, Zoom, Google Classroom; and, Grammarly like tools, such as WordTune, Trinka.ai and many others.

This part is followed by the main activity of the workshop on the digital tool called Jamboard. At this point, participants join the Telegram group, created beforehand specifically for the conference, where they will find the link to the Jamboard, and working in groups, they create MM (Mind-Maps) on various topics related to technology [9, p.159-162]. For instance, one group will work with the pros of using technology in the classroom, pointing to the specific tools and their features, while another group will discuss the cons of the technology usage in the lessons.

It must be mentioned that the usage of technology instruments in our lessons gives more learner autonomy to our students. First, by using technology, they will be able to access the lesson materials 24/7. Moreover, it provides them flexible time management. This way they are able to lower their language barries faster. Second, open-ended activities and the engaging interface of the apps invite students to be creative in their language use [7, p.32-35].

To conclude, using technology tools in our lessons is one of the ways to motivate our students and help them dive deeply into learning the target language. However, one should keep in mind that as everything in life, digitalization must be balanced as well.

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