

The Influence of Technology on New Trends in Methodology of Teaching Foreign Languages

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Abstract

Reviewing the trends in foreign language education promises to be a rather complex matter. In order to keep the discussion to manageable proportions, this article has opted to examine three areas that are among the most discussed in the literature: the integration of technology, the role of affect, and the role of metacognition in language learning. Although the article devotes considerable attention to the literature on technology in foreign language education, technology is but one trend deserving of our attention. No review of current trends and issues can fail to address the place of technology in the current foreign language education curriculum. The article argues, however, that as we try to keep pace with new research and curricular innovations, adopting a stance of principled eclectism requires us to look at some other trends and issues likely to impact on classroom practice. While the article will look at technology, affect and metacognition as separate strands in enhancing student learning, it is their incorporation in an approach to language learning premised on learner autonomy that is ultimately advocated.

Keywords: technology, SLA, TFL, facilitator, computer-based learning, trend, learner autonomy.

1.0. Introduction

New trends and new foci in language teaching and learning can create a sense of unease among language educators, pulling them in many directions, as linguistic, cultural, technical, and educational considerations compete for time and space in their conceptual frameworks. It is a feeling shared by all those who are engaged in second language acquisition (SLA). Indeed, the burgeoning of knowledge in this discipline has made the field “virtually impossible to manage” (Brown, 2000: ix), as the profession tries to integrate findings from testing, bilingual education, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and intercultural communication — just to name a few of the sub-disciplines that enrich SLA. Another issue that arises when we focus on trends in the field is the question of whether it is all a matter of bandwagons, fads, and crusades: all promising, but not always delivering, greater efficacy in classroom-based learning. A clear consequence of this is that a fair degree of skepticism attends new claims for instructional effectiveness. Kumaravadivelu (1994) suggests however, that the profession’s resolve to move beyond the search for a panacea has led to a new dynamic which he labels the “post-method” condition, namely, the choice of principled eclecticism over any single method. Brown’s contention that, “our research miscarriages are fewer as we have collectively learned how to conceive the right questions” (2000: ix) also addresses the field’s concern with adopting more critical approaches to research and application in foreign language education.

2.0. Technology and the Five Skills

A focus on human values and human relations in the classroom was one of the trends in language teaching in the late 60s and early 70s. According to Stern (1983) this was in reaction against the mechanical and “cold” drill techniques of the audio-lingual era. Methodologies such as the Silent Way, Community Language Learning, and Suggestopedia were created in response to the need to manage students’ feelings and attend to the affective climate in the classroom. This focus on the affective side of language learning is once again becoming pronounced in current second language acquisition literature (Davidson & Tomic, 1994; Gaer & Ferenz, 1993; Garrett, 1991; Hoven, 1992; Irizarry, 1988). Arnold and Brown (1999) state that one of the “mega-trends” for learning in the 21st century is likely to be a focus on whole-brain learning, including the role played by affect. As the first extract cited above demonstrates, focusing on the cognitive dimension of learning and neglecting the affective side creates a certain imbalance, and this has repercussions on the entire learning experience. Underhill (1999) proposes a framework that is helpful in shedding light on the significance of these two extracts (Kinginger, 1998; Knapper, 1998; Lee, 1997; Marsh, 1997). He suggests that teachers can relate to their students in one of three ways: as lecturer, as teacher, or as facilitator. There is a hierarchical organization implied here, so that the higher levels — teacher and facilitator — include the skills and knowledge of the lower levels. Thus, the lecturer in Underhill’s framework is a teacher in any educational context who has knowledge of the topic taught but no special skill or interest in the techniques and methodology of teaching it.

Special attention to the use of computer-based technology in the process of teaching foreign languages (TFL) is paid by some researchers (Schwartz, 1995; Sutherland & Black, 1993; Thrush & Hardisty, 1990). At this level, the teacher has the skills of the lecturer, but possesses other skills also. The facilitator combines all the attributes of the lecturer and teacher, but adds an important dimension, the relationship she establishes with the students: As a facilitator my triple area of expertise consists of my knowledge of the subject matter, my skillful use of teaching methods, and my developing capacity to generate a psychological climate conducive to high quality learning. My enlarged equation connecting people and learning embraces the psychological learning atmosphere itself, which in turn contains all the work we do on language and all the learning techniques we use. Although many educators stress the importance of the teacher-learner relationship in language learning (Moskowitz 1999; Wright 1987), the role of affect in learning and the teacher’s responsibility for providing affective support is often considered to be less important than cognition and the teacher’s responsibility for providing cognitive scaffolding. But as the students’ accounts and the literature on affect show, a focus on cognition without an equal focus on affect is inadequate and could prove deleterious to learning.

Lambert and McCombs (1998, 18) maintain that “the nature of the classroom environment, particularly the degree to which it is nurturing or not, can also have significant impacts on student learning.” When learners are asked to do new things, to behave in new ways in the classroom, in other words, when an instructional innovation is being introduced, as will be the case in a technology-enhanced context (Bachman, 1990; Bee-Lay & Yee Ping, 1991; Hammond & Gardner, 1992; Healy Beauvois, 1992), there is undoubtedly going to be an even greater need for managing the affective climate and its impact on student learning. Yet, Katz (1996) contends that it is not uncommon that discussions on educational innovations focus on the innovations and on the benefits of these innovations and pay little attention to how the innovations will be implemented in the existing context. She suggests that the failure to examine teacher-student interaction and how it is influenced by educational innovations is a serious lacuna in language education research.

How will teachers and students interact in an environment where technology supports learning? What will be the learners’ affective needs in those contexts and how will teachers support those needs? Underhill’s conceptualization of a facilitator (Voller 1997) is very relevant to the kind of role that teachers will have to play in such contexts. Teachers will need to have knowledge of the subject matter, teaching skills, and a capacity to generate a psychological climate conducive to high quality learning (Underhill 1999). This kind of support which is so critical for learners’ well-being will be even more relevant in an environment premised on more interaction between learners and machines and less between learners and teachers. A comparison can be drawn here between the responsibility of the teacher in a technology-enhanced environment, (supposing less teacher-learner interaction) and working parents who are encouraged to give their children “quality” time. Ehrman (1998), in fact, draws on the concept of holding (Ehrman 1998, 99) a term used in child psychiatry, which “represents the least level of support required for healthy development. The holder, whether caretaker of an infant or teacher of adults, must be reliable, provide soothing for infants and attention to self-esteem for adults.” Although the concept of affect in language learning is more complex than simply promoting a good affective climate in the classroom, examining teacher-learner interaction is a good starting point to re-examining the role of affective factors in language learning. Technology will give learners what Voller (1997) calls “situational autonomy”. But, it is this author’s contention that learners who are used to working under teacher direction will not automatically become learners who are able and willing to assume responsibility for their own learning and ready therefore to embrace technology as one way of achieving high levels of autonomy. A certain amount of teacher scaffolding to provide both cognitive and affective support will be critical to the successful integration of technology in the curriculum.

3.0. Metacognition

The third area which this paper sees as important in enhancing the quality of student learning in foreign language education is the broad area of metacognition. Two areas of metacognition — metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive

strategies have been extensively discussed in the literature on language learning in recent times. Brown sees an important role for teachers in enhancing metacognition. This is reflected in his call for “explicit encouragement and support for reflection upon learning processes” (Brown 1994, 147). A better understanding of the concept of metacognitive knowledge, i.e. knowledge about learning, emerges from the work of Flavell (1979); Victori (1999); Victori and Lockhart (1995); and Wenden (1999). Learner beliefs, a subset of their metacognitive knowledge, has been a prominent theme in work done by Cotterall (1999) and Horwitz (1988), to cite just two educators who have been looking at the theoretical and practical implications of the beliefs that language learners hold. Carter (1999), Kern (1995), and Yang (1992) have also used the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), an instrument developed by Horwitz (1988), to look at students’ beliefs in a variety of contexts ranging from Taiwan to Trinidad and Tobago. Many commentators believe that raising learners’ metacognitive awareness, by helping learners gain insight into what learning involves and insight into their own learning style is a pre-condition to the teaching of metacognitive strategies. Broady (1996), for example, contends that by helping raise learners’ metacognitive awareness, teachers can help them learn how to use different learning resources and environments. Holec (1981), too, lays great store by a gradual reconditioning process that enables learners to re-examine their assumptions about language learning, and their role as learners, before engaging in any kind of strategy training in the classroom. Learners’ traditional understanding of teacher and learner roles and responsibility in L2 learning often undermines teachers’ efforts to make them better managers of their learning, as the following extract humorously illustrates: *“I had to correct (!) my composition today. I think that headache should be for the teacher!”* (Student journal reflection, October 2022). Many learners are ambivalent about what they consider to be pointless ventures into learner self-management: *“Today in class I had to correct my own errors on an assignment that I did. I am a bit undecided about this exercise. I think it is a good idea because it could be used as a gauge to see how much grammar you know; but then I thought it pointless because if I know what my errors were, I would not have written them in the first place...Honestly, I did not learn anything new from this exercise except that I must check over my work more carefully because I made some very stupid mistakes. I’ll blame that on nerves”.* (Student journal reflection, October 2022).

Thus, teachers try to stay in tune with their students’ level of understanding by watching for subtle clues (e.g. facial expressions) and by stopping at appropriate times to ask questions in order to ascertain students’ weak spots. In other words, teachers are very often much more active in the learning process than are students. While this may result in very effective teaching strategies, these teaching behaviors do not necessarily help students gain independence by developing effective comprehension-monitoring strategies of their own. Successful students, however, learn to adopt active strategies for themselves, incorporating monitoring behaviors into their repertoire of learning skills. Less successful students apparently do not, continuing to rely on teachers for this function. This is, perhaps, why students encounter difficulty in college, where most instructors do not have the time or desire to serve this purpose for students who, by this time, are presumed to be independent learners. Independent learners are most probably those who have acquired not only a capacity to assume responsibility for their own learning, but who actively engage in practicing what they know. Similarly, Wenden’s (1999, 529) statement that “theoretical writings about self-instruction and self-direction in language learning have identified planning, monitoring and evaluating as the skills that constitute self-directed language learning” underscores the link between the use of metacognitive strategies and self-directed learning.

Teaching learners to assume more responsibility for their learning must imply helping learners learn how to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning. Learners who do not know how to deploy metacognitive strategies risk remaining dependent on their teachers to manage their learning, even in the face of the situational autonomy brought about by technology. However, if teachers wish to help learners achieve linguistic and learning autonomy, i.e. autonomy as communicators and autonomy as learners, they need to help learners learn how to perform some of their (teachers’) traditional functions. In teaching learners’ strategies to oversee and manage their learning, teachers act as facilitators of learning, becoming less “sage on the stage” and more “guide on the side” (Warschauer 1997, 478).

4.0. Learner Autonomy

As important as each of these trends might be individually, it is their integration into an approach to language learning premised on making learners more autonomous that is likely to have a far greater impact on enhancing student learning in the classroom. Learner autonomy has been described by Little (1991) as the buzzword in language learning in the 1990s and it seems set to become a mega-trend in learning in the 21st century. According to the literature on learner autonomy, autonomous learners are those who are prepared to assume responsibility for self-directing their learning (Boud 1988; Holec 1981; Holec and Huttunen 1997; Little 1991).

What emerges clearly in the growing body of research into learner autonomy is that autonomy, especially in its initial stages, is very dependent on teacher support. Teachers who adopt a critical approach to technology; who seek to promote a positive affective climate and who enhance metacognition in their students are engaged in practices which promote the qualitative involvement of students in learning. Classrooms which encourage high quality learning and student involvement are more likely to be classrooms in which autonomy flourishes, than are classrooms where teachers retain total control of the process and motivation of learning.

Final responsibility for actualizing learner autonomy, however, rests with the learner. Although it is readily admitted that instructional practices that promote greater learner self-direction can foster the development of the capacity for autonomy, ultimately, it is the learner herself who must decide whether she will engage in practices that reflect her capacity for autonomy. In other words, however critical teacher support might be to the development of autonomy, the most influential person in autonomy remains the learner. A learner who is prepared to use the resources of the new technologies, manage her affect, and summon up her metacognitive knowledge and strategies will very likely act in an autonomous way.

5.0. Conclusion

This article has examined three current issues in language teaching and research: the integration of technology, the role of affect, and the role of metacognition from the point of view of their influence on the methodology of teaching foreign languages in general. The article posited that these were three key areas that could influence the way that teachers teach and students learn foreign languages in classrooms in the present decade. While the context referred to in this article was the context of higher education, the lessons to be learnt are no less relevant to the teaching and learning of foreign languages in adolescents or adult learners. Similarly, while the examples cited referred to English language learning/teaching, most, if not all of what was written, applies equally to German, the foreign language taught in many non-linguistic institutions.

The article argued that technology, the first area discussed, must be premised on educational goals, and called for a critical approach, a principled approach, indeed, to the adoption and integration of technology. Creating the right affective climate for classroom-based acquisition and helping students understand and exploit metacognition in language learning were identified as other important research and teaching issues.

Considerable empirical evidence has been adduced to show the benefits of placing greater focus on any one of these three areas in an instructional program. This article contends, however, that instead of keeping technology, affect, and metacognition as divergent strands, the classroom practitioner can add value to her teaching and her students' learning by weaving these strands into a coherent approach that promotes learner autonomy.

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