**Using technology to harness language learning: challenges and benefits**

*Teacher Camelia Gheorghita*

*The Foreign Language Learning Center of the Naval Academy - Romania*​

My presentation looks at our target learners nowadays, highlights the appropriate use of technology in language learning, gives you an insight into the choice of online courses within our learning centers and brings forward some of the challenges and the essential factors that can turn online language learning into an efficient training option for our students.

**How can we make an online course so that it meets all or most of all of our students’ needs** just like an in-person language learning course?

**First, we look at our target learners.**

Our target learners are both digital natives and digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001). At the same time, they are military adults who carry out various missions within a time frame and are experts in their field. They are used to having things under control and ready to get things done. So, we need to meet their specific learning needs.

**Then, we look at technology and what it can do for language learning.**

Teachers need to understand how to use technology effectively, understand learning theories behind the practice and know how to select the right technology for the learning outcomes they seek. *Teachers need a digital pedagogy or andragogy with adult learners* (Knowls, 1989). Rather than just focusing on how technologies can be integrated into existing practices, digital pedagogy looks more at how such technologies can be used to significantly improve and even transform these practices.

An example of digital pedagogy that transforms the teacher’s role is the **flipped classroom**. This approach enables the presentation and practice stages described to be covered by learners before coming to class, for example, via an online video presentation and some online automated grammar activities. Time in the classroom can then be spent with learners participating in speaking activities that encourage the use of the target language. Here, the flipped approach has changed the role of the teacher from expert to facilitator, and the use of technology by learners before the lesson has enabled the transition.

The online courses we now have available for our students have an asynchronous component, that is, the digital content of the course is set available for students to study individually at their own pace, and a synchronous component where students have the opportunity to interact with their teacher and their peers in virtual classrooms. Thus, just like with the flipped class approach, there is a shift in the teacher’s role from expert to facilitator, and class time is allotted to interaction, students being provided with opportunities to practise and produce language acquisitions.

All our online courses were designed to meet the requirements of an efficient online course and abide by the pedagogical principles of integrating technology into teaching and learning. The main components of our online courses are:

* **content** – relevant, appropriate, informative, easy to access
* **practice** – exercises, oral and written assignments
* **feedback** –instant and teacher-guided
* **self-evaluation** – validity, increased motivation
* **virtual classes** – synchronous interactions with peers and the teacher
* **tutoring area** - remedial and motivational activities

**BENEFITS of ONLINE COURSES**

There are **numerous benefits** of online courses.

**From a pedagogical approach**, we can point out:

* authenticity
* critical thinking skills
* personalization
* validity
* speaking skill development
* addressing individual learning needs

**From a learner’s perspective**, nobody can deny the advantages related to:

* time and space flexibility
* self-paced learning
* enhanced time management skills
* reduced costs
* comfortable learning environment

**CHALLENGES of ONLINE COURSES**

**From the learners’ perspective -** It is true that students may face:

* Lack of tech facilities
* Technical issues
* Too many distractions
* Health issues
* Lack of motivation

**From the teachers’ perspective –** tech savvy teachers are pivotal for the success of language learning course. They need to be confident in using the available online tools and use them to support the learning process and the students in their studies.

**From the courseware perspective -** While in a physical class setup, attention may lie on extensive thorough course materials, with online digital courses we need to stand by the KIS (keep it simple) rule. The digital course page has to be clear, easy to follow so long exercises should be broken into shorter ones so as to enable the students to quickly address their mistakes.

**How do we assess if our courses are efficient?** We ask the students. At the end of each online course, students are invited to express their opinions about the course in a survey. Their course satisfaction is fairly high and according to the survey findings interaction within the virtual classes and the teacher support play an essential role.

Although at first sight, online language courses may be perceived as less effective than face-to-face courses, we can conclude that well-designed online courses can enhance learner satisfaction, and that students particularly appreciate those features which contribute to personalized learning. Behind every computer, there is a teacher. Technology fosters prodigious benefits in language learning but it is up to us, teachers, to be aware of its challenges and find solutions to overcome them.

“**Technology will not replace great teachers but technology in the hands of great teachers can be transformational.**” (by George Couros)

***Resources***

1. Hockly, N., (2022) 50 Essentials for Using Learning Technologies, CUP.
2. Prensky, M. (2001, October). Digital natives, digital immigrants. On the Horizon. Vol. 9, No. 5: NCB University Press. [Online] From http://www.marcprensky.com/ writing/.
3. Tapscott, D. (2009). Grown Up Digital. New York: McGraw Hill.
4. <https://www.oup.com.au/media/documents/higher-education/he-samples-pages/he-teacher-ed-landing-page-sample-chapters/HOWELL_9780195578430_SC.pdf> What is a digital pedagogy and why do we need one?
5. http://www.marcprensky.com/ While Prensky is not an educator, you could describe him as a social commentator. His articles are noteworthy, as he coined the terms ‘digital native’ and ‘digital immigrant’, so it’s worthwhile having a look at his ideas.
6. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/6-keys-designing-engaging-elearning-content-nik-peachey>
7. *(PDF) Profiling and Supporting Adult Learners*. Available from: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/296333097_Profiling_and_Supporting_Adult_Learners> [accessed Sep 27 2023].