Study Group 2: Challenges and Limitations of Technology

Countries represented: Canada, Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Spain, Slovakia, Turkey, USA

What do we understand as technology?

Technology is any type of equipment or machine that is used by the teacher and the students in order to deliver or supplement language teaching, i.e. overhead projectors, data projectors, TV, VCR/DVDs, tape recorders or audio laboratories, computers, etc.

What kind of technology do we use?

Most of the countries represented mentioned having computers either in the classroom for use by the teacher during the lessons, in teachers' workrooms, in language labs, multimedia classrooms or self-access centers. Some have access to either the internet or intranet, but some in not all situations. Only two country representatives mentioned also having audio labs with video and DVD as well as satellite or closed circuit TV access and the more simple type of technology like overhead and data projectors.

What kinds of problems have been encountered?

The primary problems are centered on the obsolescence of hardware and software, the networking of equipment, the direct or indirect access to the internet, and the technological knowledge of teachers. One of the biggest limitations is the cost of acquisition of hardware, software, the maintenance and upgrade of the equipment, and the purchase and loading of additional software. There are also problems of compatibility of platforms (i.e. different versions of Windows) and difficulties with access since they may cover large territorial extensions or need of fast access through other means other than standard phone lines such as broadband or DSL. Finally, some of the countries have the technology but there is no plan on how or when to use it and for what language skills.

How important is learner autonomy? How can we develop learner autonomy? How can the teacher evaluate this?

We tend to get locked in to the idea that the teachers control learning, but they really only control the syllabus and the forms of delivery and practice of the different topics. They should be aware of what is available that the students can use to control their learning. Autonomy can be encouraged by the teacher in the classroom and the teacher has to train the students to learn on their own, but technology is not always necessary. The role of the teachers when it comes to technology should be as facilitator who provides the student with guidance on what kind of programs, software or website to use to practice a particular area that they may have problems with.

Challenges and Limitations in the use of Internet in the Classroom

- Students do not do their assigned language work when taken to the computer language labs. Students should be given specific tasks with suggested web addresses that they can consult to do their work. The tasks need to be closely defined in order to control and limit plagiarism.

- Internet materials like newsprint for lower level students are too difficult for the students.

- Close monitoring of which students access the internet and when should be done. This monitoring should be done by either monitoring the terminals or by providing the students with some kind of access code or log in.

- Limitations and problems with voice recognition software limits the use of computers or the internet to practice speaking so only listening, reading, and writing. Rosetta Stone was the software recommended as one of the best in the market for speech recognition.

Challenges and Limitations in the use of Distance Learning

- A large infrastructure is necessary.

- A distance learning system is costly to purchase and manage.

- It works at lower levels and for refresher and maintenance courses for higher ability level students.

- It requires a lot of self-discipline on the part of the student. In present times it has lead to a high drop-out rate. There usually aren't any penalties if the student drops out before completing the course.

- Things such as whether the course will be synchronous or asynchronous and whether it will be direct have to be taken into considerations.

- Voice over internet protocol is still being developed so it will probably be available in the future for speaking purposes.

Conclusions

Although it was determined that the term technology applied to any kind of equipment that can be used to deliver or supplement instruction, the main focus was placed on the use of computers and the internet.

This study group arrived to the following conclusions when referring to the use of technology in language education:

- Technology, especially computer systems are costly.

- Both teachers and students need to be trained in the use of technology in the appropriate context and for the appropriate course and skills levels.

- Some suggested search engines where teachers can check for plagiarism are: Google, Altavista, Teoma, Yahoo, etc.