INNOVATION IN EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING IN 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Innovation evolves all the time and it has tremendously changed English Language Teaching (ELT) particularly alongside advances in technology. This seemingly obvious fact, however, is not necessarily evident to everybody in our profession. This article documents innovations for language teachers based on empirical practices. Among major innovations addressed in this article include digital platforms, online corpora, mobile learning, online authentic materials, communicating with people online, online CPD and the global staffroom.

I remember as a Deputy Director of PERMATApintar National Gifted Centre in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia giving a welcome speech to teachers at the start of the new academic year in 2011. The centre has invested heavily in computers and classroom with specially adapted furniture for the 21st Century Learning. I was talking about the role of technology in the future of language learning and made my point by closing with the following remark: 'PERMATApintar needs teachers who are confident with technology' and at that time quite a wake-up call for a number of teachers in the room.

Times have changed, teachers have changed too. As in Malaysia, the first changes began in the classroom itself where new technologies such as overhead projectors, laptop computers and wireless internet have opened up the classroom to the outside world. Teachers who once used a textbook, a tape recorder and a blackboard are now adept at using PowerPoint to present grammar, playing podcasts to practise listening skills, pulling texts off the World Wide Web to introduce reading skills to mention some. Perhaps the most important of all, the teachers empowering students by giving them access to a wide range of web-based tools that allow them to publish work and engage with live audiences in real contexts. In fact, the digital revolution in learning now has made the classroom not a place of study anymore. Furthermore, learning English through mobile devices and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) has gained popularity and credibility as a tool of learning language.

In this part of the 21st century the range of technologies available for use in language learning and teaching has become very diverse and the ways that they are being used in classrooms have become central to language practice. Digital technologies as what Bax has referred to as 'normalised' (2003, 2011) in daily life in many parts of the world, although not amongst all people as there are digital divisions everywhere (Warschauer, 2003). However, digital tools have long been a feature of the world of education (Bates, 2005), and particularly language education (Salaberry, 2001). These digital tools are recognized in the field of computer assisted language learning (CALL).

Technology is also having an impact on the development of pedagogy where the use of technology has enabled teachers to re-think what they are doing. Flipped classroom for example sees input being learned or read at home and in the classroom the input is being discussed and explored further. Another methodology that is central to the world of technology and language learning is that of blended learning (Motteram and Sharma, 2009). Blended classroom could be enhanced by a technology to cover areas of the curriculum that is not covered in the classroom.

Digital platforms

When we discuss innovation, we often immediately think of the internet and what we can now do online. Facebook and especially Edmodo could be used as online environment for teachers and students to connect. The list of digital platforms is extensive and growing all the time.

Online corpora

The use of corpora where large text collections used for studying linguistic structures, frequencies, etc. – used to be the privilege of lexicographers. But with most corpora now

available online, teachers now have access to information about the way language is used in authentic texts and speech. Teachers can ask students ask the difference between 'advice' and 'advise'. Students also can simply search the words on Google, which uses the internet as its corpus to find out if more people say 'sleepwalked' or 'sleptwalk' (for example).

Mobile learning and BYOD (bring your own device)

The development of mobile technology and smart phones have enabled many of us to access the internet and a huge variety of apps on the go. Learners benefit too, from apps like WhatsApp and Telegram to learn language and communicate with the peers as well as teachers.

Online authentic materials

One of the biggest benefits of the internet for language learners is the sudden widespread availability of authentic resources. This enables teachers to use authentic materials when teaching. We can now access the daily news, watch videos on YouTube… the possibilities are endless. However, with so much content available to us, choosing the right online materials is crucial for efficient and effective learning.

Communicating with people online

The ability to communicate online with people outside the classroom via Skype and similar tools has enabled students to meet and interact with others in English. In monolingual classes (i.e., most English classrooms in Malaysia and Indonesia), this could give much-needed motivation to students who otherwise might not have the opportunity to interact with anyone in English.

Online CPD (continuous professional development) and the global staffroom

The advent of the internet and the growth of social media have certainly allowed teachers of English from all over the world to form online communities that act like a huge global staffroom. Twitter and ELT blogging, for example, have opened up a network of people who can offer advice, support and ideas. Participants who are generous with their time, ideas, and contacts find they receive much in return.

In a nutshell, over the last couple of decades, learning has gradually been moving from a teacher-centred top-down approach to a student-centred, bottom-up one. The trend has accelerated rapidly in recent years with the growing quantity and quality of information on the internet. In many respects, this has changed the teacher's role from that of knowledge-transmitter to consultant, guide, coach, and/or facilitator. Students are now steering their own learning

To enable our students to become better communicators, we should perhaps go beyond grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, and look at helping them communicate effectively in international settings. Not only that, we should also focus on teaching soft skills and critical thinking skills. We should help students develop critical thinking skills that could support them not just in their English learning but in the learning of other subjects and life skills. Perhaps it is this ability to think and Kin our context for our students. After all, as people used to say, 'It's never the tool, but the user that makes the difference.'

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