

Technology and EFL: Is the Future Tense?

By Nicky Hockly

Open any (digital) newspaper or listen to any TV news broadcast, and there will be some mention of the latest technologies doing amazing things. Talk of artificial intelligence (AI), robots, and automation taking over not just manufacturing jobs, but the professions (Susskind & Susskind, 2015), is becoming mainstream. Terms like innovation, revolution, and disruption are thrown around with wild abandon when talking about technology.

But what does rapid digital change mean for the future in ELT? Where is digital innovation taking us? Although it's difficult to predict the future – who

often perceived by educational institutions as a way of saving classroom space, teaching hours, and therefore money. It is also seen by educational technology vendors and publishers as a hugely lucrative market. There is a push within K-12 (primary and secondary schools) in the USA towards a so-called “flex” model of blended learning being integrated into the school day. In this approach, learners are rotated out of face-to-face classrooms into computer labs where they work individually on computers with educational software, getting to grips with key content and being overseen by paraprofessionals (non-specialist adults). Classroom time is then spent on more collaborative and problem-solving approaches with a qualified teacher.



could have predicted something like Facebook in the 1990s? – the seeds of that future are undoubtedly sown in the present. Looking at current cutting-edge digital developments can give us clues for at least the immediate future.

Below, I explore two key trends that have the potential to impact significantly on English language teaching. Whether they do or not will depend on just how ubiquitous and affordable these technologies become, and in the long term, how effective they are perceived to be in actually helping learners achieve their language goals.

Trend 1: Blended Learning

In the last few years, blended learning has moved from being a fringe concern to center stage. It seems that everybody is either doing it, or wants to do it. Including a combination of face-to-face and online delivery is

Despite there being scant evidence to date for the effectiveness of this sort of blended learning approach (Lafer, 2014), the twin drivers of technology and economics are likely to mean that we can see more software-led personalized-learning software appearing in mainstream schools in the coming years. Some even predict that 50% of all high school courses in the US will be delivered

online by 2019 (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008). If teachers are sharing their teaching hours with computer software overseen by (much cheaper) paraprofessionals, then we can expect teachers to have less work, although their role will also change to that of guide and facilitator, rather than content provider. So, for teachers, this scenario suggests some advantages (fewer teaching hours, a more facilitative teaching role) and some disadvantages (potentially less pay).

Trend 2: Machine Learning

Text-to-speech and speech-to-text translation apps drawing on machine learning with large databases of information are becoming increasingly mainstream. For example, Skype Translator is a free tool that enables people to make calls in their own language and to have their speech translated in real time into another language. One can easily imagine a German and a Chinese business person holding a meeting via Skype

Translator, with each speaking their own language and having their words instantly translated into the other's language and displayed as subtitles on the screen. Google is working on a similar product offering simultaneous translation via mobile devices and Bluetooth headsets. Although not yet 100% accurate, these sorts of programs are improving all the time, and not only bypass the need for a translator, but arguably for a teacher and the need to learn a language in the first place!

However, although these software solutions may be effective in situations of expediency (such as navigating one's way around a city in a foreign language or holding a business meeting), they are not the same as two humans interacting in the same language with all the nuances, subtext, and subtlety that this entails. But it does suggest that teachers of adults may need

However, the human contact provided by face-to-face (or online) classes with real people is irreplaceable, no matter how effective real-time machine translation may be. At the end of the day, we are social beings, and we thrive through social contact and communication – an English language “classroom,” whether virtual or real, synchronous or asynchronous, will continue to provide a space for that interaction no matter how futuristic our world may look.



“Teachers of adults may need to become more specialized, prioritizing areas such as intercultural communication and soft skills over ‘just-in-case’ general English language teaching”

to become more specialized, prioritizing areas such as intercultural communication and soft skills over “just-in-case” general English language teaching. It is also worth remembering that not all of the world is connected to the Internet, and mobile data can be prohibitively expensive – and without an Internet connection, these tools won't work.

What Does the Future Hold?

So where does this leave us? Although I don't predict the demise of the English language teacher (or at least not yet!), there is no doubt that the role of teacher is shifting, and will continue to shift, as newer digital technologies become more widely available. Learners now have a large range of options to choose from to learn a language online by themselves, and the teacher is no longer the sole source of linguistic information.

References

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