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Teaching languages with apps

Összefoglalás: Nyelvtanítás applikációkkal

A tanulmány az internetes applikációk használatával történő nyelvtanítás új módszertani irányzatát mutatja be. A szerző számos kérdést vet fel, ösztönözve tanítási módszereink átgondolására, ugyanakkor kiemelve korunk tanulóinak azon képességét, hogy egy időben több feladatra is képesek figyelni. Az írás felhívja a figyelmet a digitális forradalom oktatásra gyakorolt hatásaira és azok megértésének fontosságára, pl. hogy mit jelent az oktatásban, különösen az idegennyelv-tanulásban az új technológia használata. Tisztáznunk kell, hogy a technológiát csak önmaga kedvéért használjuk-e a tanítás során, vagy pedagógiai megfontolások indokolják azt.

Kulcsszavak: nyelvoktatás, applikációk, IT, digitális forradalom

Rethinking our teaching?

What is the matter with learning and teaching languages in an old way? What is the matter with an ordinary school board and chalk, or with a classroom full of students sitting in front of the professor and learning basic or advanced language grammar by doing exercises in the traditional way, which should or could improve their communication and language skills in general?

Actually, nothing is wrong, except that we are not so much aware of the fact that the new generations of students have changed from the point of view of how they behave, think, do their homework, schoolwork, and (very important!) how they evaluate the job of a teacher and his or her lessons.

It doesn't matter if we are talking about the evaluation of a 7-year-old or a 14-year-old schoolboy or a student at university. All of them are evaluating us, teachers, in terms of our teaching style, our methods of teaching, clarity in explanation, and, of course, the content of our lessons.

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Many good teachers just forget about the fact that evaluation is an important part of their job and after each lesson they should ask themselves the following questions: *a)* Am I still satisfied with my job? *b)* Am I still satisfied with the content of my lessons? *c)* Are the students satisfied with my lessons? *d)* How were the students successful in gaining new knowledge? There are only four questions to ask that can change the quality of teaching and learning a language.

This new approach is necessary because we are talking about a new generation of students, the *digital-multitasking generation*, which is capable of handling different tasks at the same time. We can often see these students in our classroom, listening with one ear to the teacher, with another ear to the music on their mobile phone, surfing at the same time on the web on their laptops, and, of course, meanwhile writing their unfinished homework…

It is still not clear if multitasking is just a talent or a short-term phenomenon in students, caused by the digital-technological revolution. Only one fact is clear at the moment: we, teachers are in the middle of this "multitask-happening" and that we have to rethink our teaching methods because of the new generations who are able to handle even the most complicated tasks with an efficient approach by using new IT technologies (Laurillard 2002).

Understanding the digital revolution

It has to be understood that a huge amount of information is flowing as a river stream toward us, both teachers and students, each day, each hour, each minute and even each second, due to the use of new technologies (Collins–Halverson 2009). It is also true that we can store five times more information in our brains than the Encyclopedia Britannica. Nevertheless, as we all are overwhelmed with all kinds of information, a selection occurs in our brains and only the most significant information is memorized, depending mostly on the type of the information, whether it is visual, audio or textual.

It has also to be understood that the proportion between visual, audio and textual information acceptance and processing is changing constantly in the life of children, adolescents and students, which depends more or less on traditional teaching approaches. For example, we can talk about a decrease of the visual part and an increase of the audio and textual part of information received during the primary school, which is even more obvious in the secondary school and extremely obvious during the university studies, at least in countries which have

been strongly influenced by the new technology in the teaching process for the last two decades (CISCO 2008).

If we take into account all the features of our students, we can see that not all of them behave or function in the same way. Some of them are better at receiving and processing visual information, some at audio information and the third group of students can process textual information better. In the end, we can either admit it or not, we can conclude that visual information is far more attractive for the digital generation than audio or textual type of information, which has its roots also in students' habits of using all kinds of mobile technology like iPads, iPhones, tablets, laptops and mobile phones.

If we focus just on these facts, it must be clear that we, teachers have to change something in our way of teaching. We can insist on the old methods, but the new demands of the students and the fact that we are facing all the consequences of the digital revolution show us that it is necessary to go with the main stream of the digital revolution and to find out how to be innovative as a teacher, how to use all the new technology in order to rearrange and modify our lessons in a more attractive way. It does not mean that everything has to be changed. Some teaching methods and contents of the lessons are good but some of them are old-fashioned. It is up to the teacher to find out in his or her classroom the class atmosphere or dynamics, the specific requests of the new generation of students and, of course, to deal with the question of the implementation of new technology in the teaching process (Gee–Hayes 2011).

Teaching languages with apps

It seems that for some language teachers the old-fashioned methods of teaching languages like "chalk and talk" and an informal and flexible talk with students are still the best methodologies. They claim that in recent decades many different methodologies have been used as well as many different devices, techniques and technologies and there is still no evidence that they have led to any improvements. This is a questionable attitude because to prove or deny the improvement in students' language level due to the use of technology means that information should be gathered about this for some decades from different countries (Beach–O'Brien 2014).

All teachers should be allowed the freedom to teach in the style that suits them best and to judge their methodologies of teaching on the basis of the results

and achievements of their students. Thinking about implementing apps as a new methodology in teaching languages does not mean throwing out the old methodologies in order to bring in the new ones. It means that we, teachers, are aware of the fact that teaching a foreign language in a classroom allows us to do something that the students cannot do by themselves, at least not so effectively. It means also that we, teachers are aware of the degree of a student's motivation and of their confidence in learning a language in the classroom, which can be significantly improved simply by using good apps for teaching languages.

Technology has become a great ally of teachers around the world. Using tablets, computers, iPods and apps helps teachers to organize their paperwork more efficiently and to break the students' learning routines, which makes them excited because of the opportunity to try something new. Using apps in teaching languages means a new and fresh approach to learning and a smart way of how to target the students' language levels effectively. Using apps makes everyone in the classroom participate in different language activities taking into account also the special needs of the students, which is a great experience for both sides, the teacher and the students, too (Williams 2014).

Apps are becoming more and more popular in teaching languages but not all of them are useful (Salaberry 2001; Williams 2014). The decision about using a certain app depends on several factors such as the age of students, the specific requirements of parents, teachers and students, on how easy it is to use them, whether there are native speakers involved in audio examples, how interactive the apps are, etc.

As it is very tempting to search and try every single app in the App Store or Google Play, which means to lose valuable time just to download them and to try them out, some of the apps are discussed below.

- *Edmodo*: Edmodo is an extension of the classroom, which allows sharing documents with students and sending polls, quizzes and assignments to them. Students can complete and submit their documents via the app and keep a record of their progress.
- *Be Seated*: Be Seated allows the teacher to create in only a few minutes a classroom, place of the tables with seats and a list of students. The names of the students can be attached to the tables. There is "no hands up" answering: the students can answer questions by being chosen with just one click on the table.

- *Show Me*: Show Me is functioning as a whiteboard where the teacher can draw, add text and include shapes (as it is with using a magic board). It allows you to record a video of whatever is drawn on the computer and to include the teacher's voice as a narrator. It is a great app for explaining grammar like verb conjugations or adjective agreement. Videos can be shared with students.
- *Socrative*: Socrative allows the teacher to create quizzes and tests for students with instant feedback for them. The app has also a tracking tool to review the students' progress. Socrative has a teachers' and a separate students' version which does not require creating a login.

- *Voice Record:* Voice Record is a basic app but a really great tool for learning languages. It allows the teacher to record students while doing oral exercises or exams and to email the entire track or certain parts to them.

Of course, there are other useful apps like *Gus on the go, Byki, Busuu, Duolingo, Keewords, Memolingo, Vocards, etc.*

Conclusion: The driving force behind is always pedagogy

According to Rao (2012) there are over 20,000 educational apps available for download, either on App Store or Google Play, which makes it difficult for teachers to choose the most effective app to meet their educational needs. The majority of language teachers are unfortunately still struggling to find clear criteria about the evaluation of apps, because of instructional lack of the new technology and digital tools during their studies. New educational approaches, however, require teachers nowadays to understand how these apps work, what they require from users, what their functions are and which apps can meet their instructional needs best.

The consideration whether "to use or not to use" apps in teaching and learning languages is not the main problem of a teacher. The problem is to understand *the main purpose of an app,* which is clearly pointed out in the study from Salaberry (2001):

> "A healthy dose of skepticism about the pedagogical effectiveness of many current technological tools appears to be well justified if one considers the perhaps overly enthusiastic reaction to previous technological break-throughs."

Indeed, technology, if used wrongly, can damage learning or be even a distraction according to some scholars. Actually, the problem is not in technology but in teachers, who have to learn *how* to use the new technology, keeping in mind that *the driving force behind is always pedagogy*.

Just using technology for its own sake does not add any value to teaching or learning. It is an improvement only if it goes hand-in-hand with a change in the teaching methodology. Apps in teaching languages are the "accelerator", but the pedagogy is the driver, which is the "mantra" of teachers nowadays. Pedagogy ensures that educators prioritize content, strategies and students in their work, and apps recreate the content, strategies and even students' work in a new manner.

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