

Language Learning With Technology

Ideas for integrating technology in the classroom

GRAHAM STANLEY

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REVIEWED BY KYLE SMITH

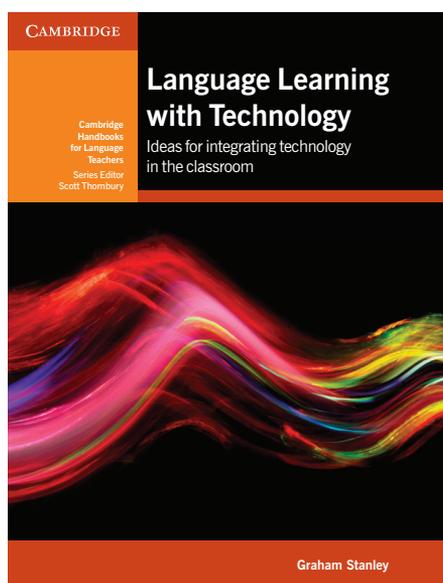
2013 promises to be a watershed year for technology in ELT. In Australia, there are signs that teachers throughout the sector are exploring the diverse ways that technology can support pedagogy with ever-increasing enthusiasm. Interest in professional development opportunities in this area is running high and participation in online communities of practice is growing rapidly. Developments which originated in K-12 and Higher Education several years ago – such as the ‘flipped’ classroom and MOOCs – are starting to have a significant impact also. Internationally, publishers are beginning to release electronic versions of popular coursebooks for access on mobile devices.

In such a context, the recent publication of Graham Stanley’s *Language Learning With Technology* is very timely. It has been written for both new and experienced language teachers, with varying levels of confidence with technology, and contains more than 130 practical classroom activities integrating a wide range of tools: blogs, wikis, mobile devices, audio, video, concordancers and corpora, games, word clouds, Virtual Learning Environments, social media, augmented reality, QR codes, podcasts, webquests, infographics, and so on (N.B., all of these tools are accessible on the Internet for free or come bundled with most desktop PCs or mobile devices; however, a data projector, Interactive Whiteboard or large monitor/TV screen will be required for many of the activities to work as the author has envisaged). The activities are targeted primarily at adult learners of General English, but the author feels that many of them could easily be used with or adapted for other learner cohorts. The extent to which these cohorts are effectively targeted is discussed further below.

Stanley’s introduction provides a useful summary of the pedagogical benefits of

integrating technology as well as common misconceptions and pitfalls. In it, he repeatedly emphasises the need to put pedagogy first and to only use technology when it genuinely adds value to the learning process. He suggests that technology is of greatest pedagogical value when it ‘empowers learners to transcend the traditional concept of the classroom . . . especially through being actively involved together *outside* the classroom’ (p. 2, emphasis added). Referring to the work of Maddux (2005), he also warns that prioritising the technology can lead to ‘Everest syndrome’: the temptation to ‘use a specific technology just “because it’s there”’ (p. 3). To minimise the risk of his readers falling into this trap, Stanley has organised the activities according to macro-skills and learning outcomes: Building a learning community, Vocabulary, Grammar, Listening, Reading, Writing, Speaking, Pronunciation, Project work, and Assessment and evaluation.

For many readers of *Language Learning With Technology*, this will be its greatest strength. It provides an easy way to match a tool with a particular learning outcome and get a number of practical ideas for classroom use. Teachers will also find the appendix containing technical notes and suggestions of software/websites relevant to each chapter a valuable resource: it contains a wealth of suggested tools for performing a broad range of tasks. There is also a website to accompany the book – <http://www.languagelearningtechnology.com/> – which is intended to provide updates and extensions.



However, several months after publication, there remains only minimal content on the website and this reflects a more general tendency of *Language Learning With Technology* to fall short of the three aims outlined in the introduction. Firstly, a number of activities suffer from ‘Everest syndrome’. For example, ‘Real-world grammar’ asks students to search an online store for ‘real-world examples’ of grammar in book and film titles and then ‘extend the title if they need to and add their own ideas’ (p. 72). The instructions suggest ‘*they went*’ as a possible search string, which led me to an obscure 1986 film called *They Went That-A-Way & That-A-Way*. It is difficult to see how this ‘empowers learners to transcend ELT traditions’ and brings to mind the kind of convoluted and inauthentic ‘communicative’ activities often found in the backs of teachers’ books.

Secondly, the book does not cater particularly well to readers on either end of the technophile-technophobe spectrum. Activities like the one mentioned above may seem superficial to those with years of practice. At the same time, there is a tendency to gloss over potentially tricky details; statements like ‘start by setting up an account with a microblogging service, such as Twitter, and linking to each other’ (p. 30) or ‘they are now going to design an online guide’ (p. 112) are not followed up with any further explanations as to how this can be done.

Similarly, two major issues which can present challenges for even the most experienced practitioner when integrating technology – privacy and safety – are addressed somewhat perfunctorily. Stanley does acknowledge the importance of privacy as an issue, by suggesting that teachers ‘negotiate guidelines’ and by recommending safe alternatives to Facebook and Twitter. He does not, however, offer any further support as to what sort of guidelines might be appropriate or how they could be negotiated with learners. Online safety has one activity devoted to it but it is essentially a small-group discussion with a list of three websites targeted at teenagers and young learners for teachers to explore further if they feel it necessary.

Finally, despite Stanley’s assertions in the introduction, many activities – including the discussion of online safety – appear to be better suited to young learners and teenagers than adult EFL/ESL learners. This is most clearly exemplified in the chapter on writing, which has a heavy emphasis on writing narratives, arguably a genre of little personal relevance to many adult learners. In one of the activities, recipe writing is proposed as a more appropriate alternative for a group of adults, but this seems just as unlikely to facilitate the kind of ‘transcendence’ envisioned in the book’s introduction.

Despite these criticisms, *Language Learning With Technology* does contain a number of activities which creatively integrate technology and pedagogy and undoubtedly improve on task types used by teachers for decades. It will provide a sufficient starting point for teachers keen to become more tech-savvy, especially when working with teenagers and young learners.

Kyle Smith has worked as a teacher and academic manager in the ELICOS industry since 2001. He is particularly interested in exploring applications of technology in ELT and teacher development. He has lived in the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia and Europe.

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