

EQUAL TECHNOLOGICAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract

The article reviews the problem and the need of equal technological opportunities for English language learners. The relevance of the research topic for effective use of technology for teaching and learning foreign language was substantiated based on the literature review. Teaching strategies and educational policies were analyzed and being studied.

Keywords: English language learners, ELLs, technology, teaching strategies, educational approaches and policies.

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Technology integration in the teaching and learning process should enhance the experiences of all students, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background. However, research indicates that the inequitable access and use of technology for English Language Learners (ELLs) is a significant educational problem. Additionally, this obstacle is compounded by the lack of instructional software expressly designed for ELLs [1]. This is inexcusable when research indicates that “technology-based instruction effectively leads to accomplishment” for language learners [2].

Unfortunately, inequitable access to technology has severe implications for ELLs’ technologically complex futures. According to Wetzel and Chisholm [3], inequitable access to technology ultimately restrains ELLs’ career opportunities, participation in society, and potential contributions to society. Specifically, Bohlin and Bohlin’s study (as cited in [3]), which compares ELLs with analogous majority students, found ELLs to have higher anxiety, diminished confidence, and fewer positive attitudes toward computers. Therefore, they are less likely to choose careers that require computer applications. Furthermore, diminished access to computers tempers ELLs’ cognitive, social, and language development. The reason being that technology assists learners in solving problems, communicating, obtaining information, and challenging their potential [1].

There are numerous reasons why ELLs fail to receive the full benefits technology has to offer. Specifically, under-qualified teachers, lack of administrative support, and poor instructional tools, are largely to blame [4, 5]. The majority of teachers are still not being formally trained in inclusive and

differentiated pedagogical practices to effectively utilize technology in their instruction [6]. “Pre-service teachers need varied and ample opportunities for hands-on experience with computers, observation of classroom implementation, practice implementing educational applications of computers, and reflective discussion of computer use” [3]. Without this type of pre-service training, teachers are likely to encounter “technophobia” and therefore are more likely to inadvertently deny ELLs equal access to technology.

In addition, school district policies often do not ensure that currently employed teachers have the support needed to learn and implement skills and inclusive instructional strategies associated with the use of technology as a learning tool. Not ensuring support includes denying release time for ongoing professional development, not guaranteeing manageable student/equipment ratios, and overcrowding classrooms creating overwhelming student/teacher ratios. ELL programs are frequently “allocated the last space available” and “tend to be poorly funded” in terms of monetary and equipment distribution. These types of discrimination consequently leave ELLs using technology for entertainment purposes instead of as instructional supports [5].

Moreover, Chisholm’s review of research literature finds that educational software is “typically developed for English proficient students” (as cited in [1]). This leads to poor instructional software that is not sequenced in a manner that is compatible with how ELLs become skilled in the English language. Poor software evaluation skills of teachers also extend the use of inappropriate software with ELLs. Evaluation skills encompass determining if software is culturally

appropriate for ELLs and its ability to accommodate diverse learning styles.

Various strategies can be implemented to minimize, or all together eliminate, the technological obstacles ELLs encounter in education. To start, teacher preparation institutes and education systems must cultivate teachers in the effective, innovative, and inclusive pedagogical practices of technology integration for teaching and learning. As previously mentioned, this requires providing them with hands-on experience with technology, classroom observations of effective technology-using teachers, practice implementing the educational application of a range of technological devices (not just using the computer as a drill-and-practice activity), and reflective discussion of technology use to substantiate its effectiveness.

Interactive and timely methods of technology integration to support cognitive, social, and language development in ELLs abound. The most effective of these approaches support the three-dimensional English learning process by integrating recitation of words, grammar learning, and learning practice [7]. For instance, the utilization of digital storytelling in ELL instruction has positive effects on language skills acquisition, including vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading, and writing [8, 9]. "The implementation of Digital storytelling applies all learning theories where students construct their knowledge through practice and experience by cooperating with their peer members to produce a social relevant piece of work" [9, p. 27]. Specifically, learners use of voice over narration allows them to practice correct pronunciation of vocabulary and appropriate intonation. The inclusion of visual representations in digital storytelling enhances ELLs' listening skills, resulting in improved ability to write what is heard and pronounce new vocabulary correctly. Students develop organizational, cooperative, and communicative skills through the story building process as well.

Podcasting may be employed in a similar manner to assist ELLs in acquiring speaking and listening skills. They are especially useful for teaching listening comprehension through authentic and contextual tasks such as "vocabulary revision, listening exercises, interviews with native speakers, key point summaries of a lecture or group of lectures, sharing announcements, describing homework assignment assessment, giving feedback, guidelines, reducing the effects of isolation and promoting inclusivity, developing students' study skills through collaborative learning, providing guidance on student practical work, etc." (Garvalho et al., as cited in [10, p. 177]). Through personal recording of podcasts, students are also able to repeatedly rehearse their speaking to improve oral performance. They are able to self assess the accuracy, context, and fluency of their dialogue and revise it accordingly, resulting in improved listening skills and expanded vocabulary [11].

The use of movies is another effective learning tool for the development of language competencies. As with the previously discussed technology enhanced

strategies, movies help learners improve pronunciation skills with the added benefit of increasing cultural awareness. They do this through an authentic representation of the language and culture being learned [12, 13].

Gilakjani [14, p. 1212] suggests the following strategies to guide the implementation of these and other technologies to customize and individualize the learning process for ELLs:

1. Provide challenging and novel problem statements.
2. Use examples that require analysis and synthesis.
3. Require application of information and concepts.
4. Encourage questions and discussion.
5. Assign collaborative group projects.
6. Combine visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic techniques.
7. Assign open-ended activities encouraging creativity.
8. Encourage use of technology and alternative multimedia.

By considering these teaching strategies, the characteristics of specific technology tools may be capitalized on to promote student learning.

Educational policy makers must also make inclusive education a priority and do their part to ensure equitable technological access to all learners. Lewis and Doorlag [15] site the following ten principles that are imperative in establishing an effective technology program for all students:

1. The curriculum should drive the type of technology that is going to be used.
2. While technology can be motivating and fun, make sure it is used as a teaching tool.
3. Technology can be used to reinforce previously taught skills by providing students with immediate feedback.
4. Match the technology to the goals of instruction and the levels of the students.
5. Select technologies that allow modifications so that individual needs of students can be met.
6. Use assessment data provided by technology programs to monitor student progress.
7. Use technology as a tool for teaching new concepts.
8. The experiences provided by certain technologies in the classroom can broaden the learning experiences of students.
9. Teach students how to use technology to support learning and use it to increase the level of independence for the student.
10. Be certain the teacher knows how to use the technology to its fullest capacity.

With these principles in mind, technology will drive the curriculum and all students, including ELLs, will benefit.

Finally, the right technology tools must be acquired to meet the needs of all learners; which requires that teachers be trained in their evaluation. Bishop [16] identifies numerous criteria for choosing the best digital tools to use with ELLs. The main

criteria include examining the resource's accuracy, correctness of content, and approach. It should not be limited by regionalism or dialect, should provide help in the learners' native languages, and be culturally sensitive. Alluri [13] adds that visual images must offer sufficient and appropriate support to the verbal message being conveyed.

Planning for technology use obviously involves considering many factors. Addressing matters explicit to certain subgroups, such as those of ELLs, is only one small part. However, unless ELLs are instructed by technology literate teachers who are supported by policy makers and provided the proper training and instructional tools, not all students are being provided equal opportunities to learn. That is a crime — literally [17]!

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РАВНЫЕ ТЕХНОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ ВОЗМОЖНОСТИ ДЛЯ ИЗУЧАЮЩИХ АНГЛИЙСКИЙ ЯЗЫК

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Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются проблема и необходимость предоставления равных технологических возможностей для изучающих английский язык. На основе анализа соответствующей литературы обосновывается актуальность темы данного исследования для эффективного использования технологий в преподавании и изучении иностранного языка. Анализируются стратегии обучения и политика в области образования.

Ключевые слова: изучающие английский язык, технология, стратегии обучения, подходы к обучению, политика в области образования.

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