

Home > Schools > Primary > Technology's role in learning a language



Technology's role in learning a language

Technology can be a wonderful tool to enrich language teaching, says Gemma Clare



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The UK curriculum states that; 'A high-quality languages education should foster pupils' curiosity and deepen their understanding of the world.' One way to ensure that Modern Foreign Language (MFL) teaching ignites interest and gives depth to children's understanding of different cultures is to utilise technology in MFL lessons.

There are so many ways to do this; here are some ideas to try in your classroom:

Access to native speakers

Exposure to native speakers is undoubtedly beneficial to learning a language, at any age. Technology opens up a world of meaningful opportunities to listen, respond and talk to speakers of a foreign language.

Blogging with an international school is one way to safely exchange videos, news and emails with children from another culture. Skype or Zoom give children an exciting opportunity to communicate live with children from another place in the world. If managed well, children will also have the opportunity to receive a first-hand account of what life is like in another country, broadening their understanding and giving context to their learning.

Applications

There are a multitude of apps invented to enhance MFL teaching and learning. Alongside practical tools such as pronunciation dictionaries and translators, there are also wonderful interactive apps available which can teach a language from the ground up.

My personal favourite interactive language apps are Duolingo and Babbel. These are fun, attractive and motivating interactive learning platforms. Both apps offer a version specific to schools, available on desktop and for tablets or mobile devices. They both use microphones to check for correct pronunciation, appeal to a range of learning styles by using photographs and audio and use reward systems that are naturally stimulating for children. The assessment is instant and allows children and teachers to easily identify any gaps in learning.

Also worth a mention is the Google Translate app whose most recent update allows instant translation of text when you hover a camera over it – this automatic augmented reality amazes both children and adults! An equally fun-but-useful tool is a text to speech animated avatar, such as Oddcast's characters, which can help children practise correct pronunciation.

Audio recording

The use of tablet voice-recording apps and podcasts are invaluable tools in a MFL classroom. Recording orally is a fantastic way for children to practise their pronunciation and listen to themselves speaking a

foreign language. This is also a great technique for assessing children who struggle to write, by allowing them a different option to showcase their speaking and listening skills. Creating an audio recording is simple to achieve and effective in captivating children's interest.

There are also a variety of podcasts available which are created for the purpose of teaching a language alongside podcasts about different topics spoken in foreign languages, which older children could benefit from. Listening to and creating podcasts gives another level of depth to language learning and particularly engages pupils who learn through their auditory sense.

Internet resources

The Internet is a treasure trove for MFL resources. I often stumble upon great songs, videos, games and lesson plans online. BBC's primary languages site is a great place to start, YouTube gives access to a variety of video resources and thousands of teacher resources can be found on TES or CILT cymru amongst many other easy-to-access websites.

Many teachers, who collectively hold years of experience, share fantastic resources, videos, planning and schemes of work online. Twitter is a popular place for language teachers to network and share best practices, coming together to create a wealth of ideas. The Internet has facilitated this collaborative sharing of work from all over the world, which truly enhances MFL teaching.

This list is not exhaustive, technology is constantly expanding and there are many other ways to utilise it which I have not detailed above. Teaching should always be balanced, encompassing a range of techniques and not exclusively relying on technology to teach a language; however technology can be a wonderful tool to enrich language teaching and effectively enthuse and motivate children in this subject.

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