

4 Learning English

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The learner of the future debate: Technology is getting easier and its rapid development is changing language education, making it possible to link the classroom to the real world beyond

How learning has escaped from the box

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Have you noticed how technologies that were once hidden away in intimidating computer rooms, guarded over by zealous technologists, have recently moved back into the classroom? And these are not the grey boxes of old; in fact they are being carried into class by learners and their teachers in pockets and handbags.

This development of technologies is changing the way that we use and value them. How many of us have bought something online recently, or used the internet to find a suitable text for teaching? How many of us send and receive emails from our students? If you don't have regular access to the internet, perhaps you have a mobile phone? Do you watch videos on DVD or use them with classes? Do you take digital pictures and use them as part of a lesson? Do you find these things difficult any more?

How about your learners? Are they texting under the table? Do they have a blog? Are they members of an online community? Maybe they are listening to their music on an MP3 player? Do they do online gaming? Maybe you also do some of these things.

Digital technology is increasingly becoming part of our everyday lives. It is moving into the background – something that we increasingly take for granted – and it is doing so because it has become so much easier to use. Because text, images, sound and video are stored digitally

they can be transferred from one piece of equipment to another easily: a digital photograph taken on a phone, transferred to a computer and incorporated into a word-processor document or web page, or video.

So what are the implications of these changes for language education and the roles of students and teachers in the process of learning? For many years we have wanted to find ways to involve students more deeply in their learning because engagement in a subject will help them to become effective learners. As teachers, we sought to motivate students, but we have always known that the most important motivation comes from the students themselves.

Various studies have described computers in the classroom as an important motivator for young students (who are usually the majority of language learners), but it has been hard to persuade learners of any age that what they were doing on their computers was somehow different to what they were doing in a regular classroom. In many cases the work that they found on their computers resembled the tasks and activities that they already struggled with in

their classrooms, and these activities had little connection to the real world.

The world wide web started to change this. Since the early 1990s the web has made available to anyone with access a wealth of digital resources. We started with mainly text and still images, but have rapidly added access to video and sound. We have also been able to create our own websites, but what is new is the ease with which learners and teachers can produce and access text, sound and video materials for themselves. They can also carry this material more easily on laptops, phones, hand-held computers and MP3 players.

The relationship between the teacher and the learner is also changing. In the past it was mostly the teacher who brought material to the classroom; now learners and teachers can bring it in on a portable device, and the teachers can help students to understand and respond to it more effectively. In this way teachers can help learners to make the link between the classroom and the real world, encouraging the transfer of school learning to the world and vice versa. This was possible in the past, but is now so much easier.

If a learner creates a blog (a personal diary on the web, or weblog), instead of that diary being hidden from view, it can be public. The student is likely to put more effort into making contributions meaningful and more accurate, particularly if they can be supported by their peers, or a teacher. The diary can invite

comments from others, which may promote further language. The interactions become authentic rather than produced simply for classroom activity. The blog can be about something that the learner is passionate about and is linked to a global community of other interested people.

Another form of online community is a Wiki, the most well known of which is Wikipedia. A Wiki is text that is produced and edited collaboratively online. Two groups of learners in different schools can start producing a text on a particular topic, such as global warming. They do independent research on the topic and as they discover more they add to the growing text. They are focusing on making a meaningful and accurate representation of the issues as well as thinking about the accuracy of the language.

The author of each addition or change is identifiable to everyone. This encourages like-minded learners to communicate with each other. This more clearly reflects the iterative writing process that is the bedrock of all real writing. It also promotes information literacy skills alongside language skills.

Podcasting has added a sound dimension to the interactive and portable nature of digital media. Learners and teachers can download a sound editor from the web (Audacity is the one that most sites recommend) and can record sound files either on to one of the many portable digital recording devices that are

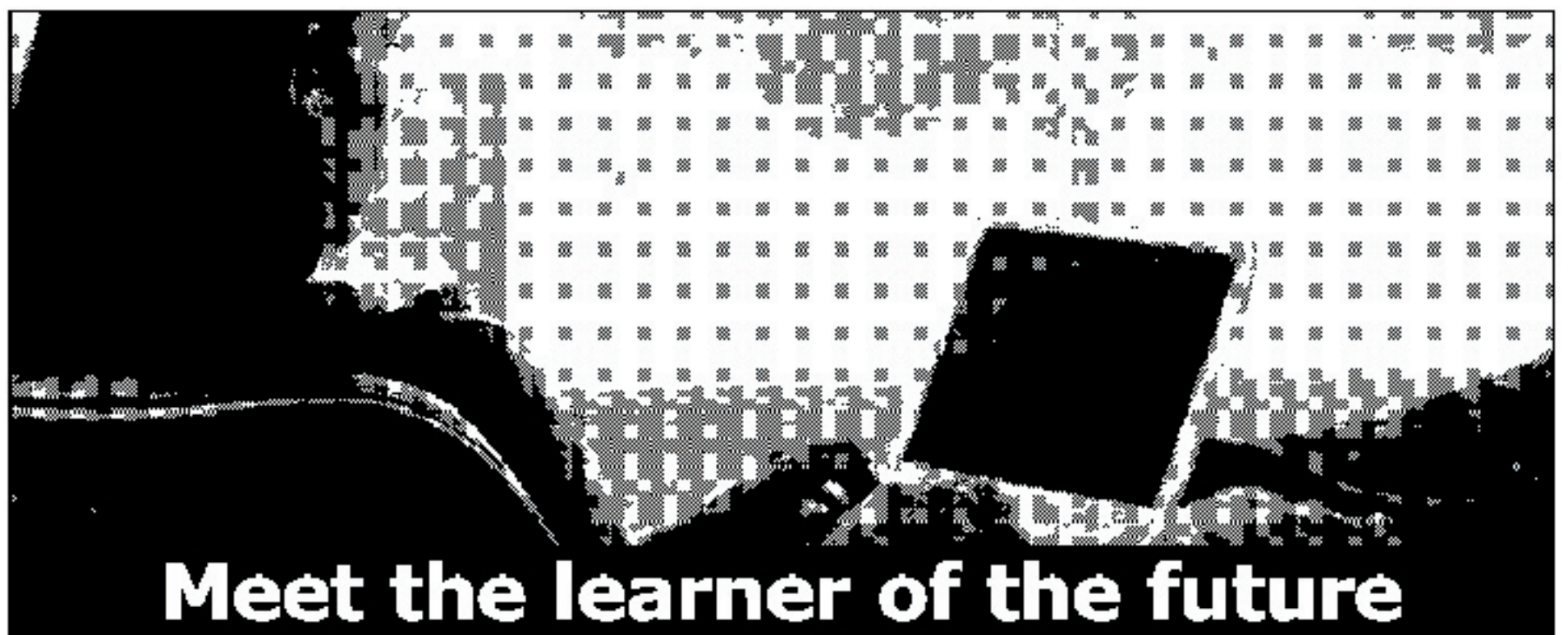
cheap and easy to obtain, or directly on to their computer. Files can be edited and mixed with other digital elements and then placed on the web or a computer for others to listen to.

The next possibility is the production of digital video. Capture and editing of video files can be undertaken on any up-to-date laptop. These films can be transferred on to CDs or DVDs and played locally, or uploaded to a server for broadcast.

The role of technology is changing. For a long time it was the preserve of the committed enthusiast prepared to master complex operating systems. Now it is on our streets and in our homes. With the development of mobile technologies, with wired cities, permanent connections and global reach, both learners and teachers can interact with technologies in ways that make them interesting and relevant and that promote a greater interest in language. Students are being encouraged to take a more active role in their own learning and to cross the boundaries between the classroom and the real world that will transform their language learning experiences.

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Guardian Weekly and OneStopEnglish are staging a debate on technology and language learning, "Meet the Learner of the Future", at the 2006 IATEFL conference on April 11. For information go to www.onestopenglish.com



Meet the learner of the future

The Guardian Weekly/onestopenglish debate
about the role of technology in English language teaching

IATEFL Annual Conference 2006, Harrogate

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