1 A journey to the East?
Trials and tribulations of a personal journey with technology and languages

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1. How did you become interested in using technology in your professional life?

I started teaching languages in an Institution Wide Language Programme (IWLP) at the beginning of the 1990's. I had only ever used a word processor once; I had successfully used my parent's Minitel in France on a handful of operations. In my work, the use I make of technology for teaching, learning and leading programmes is always the by-product of a need or an idea for an intervention that has its roots elsewhere in the niggling gaps in my practice. In other words, technology is secondary to other considerations. The question of affordances is the only one that matters to me: it is not 'what can this tool do?', but 'what do I want to do, what can help me do it and help my students learn it?'

Back to the beginning: in those days, my university classrooms had no equipment other than a white or black-board to write on. Some more sophisticated classrooms were equipped with a retro-projector and I soon learnt how to make sure to book one of those. In the teachers' staff room, the photocopier was a hub of intense activity and conversations. To support our language teaching, we borrowed tape recorders, copies of the cassettes accompanying our dedicated textbooks, transparent slides for writing or photocopying purposes, fine permanent marker pens and thick whiteboard

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markers, all from a small technician's office located at the back of the Self Access Centre (SAC).

In sharp contrast with the teachers' staffroom, the SAC was full of technology: it had computers with sound cards, headphones and microphones, dedicated language learning software, CDs, DVDs and books. We were instructed to write a week-by-week self-study programme to accompany our taught courses. In the template that had been provided, the teachers had to designate the resources and activities that were to be used by students in the SAC. Some of the software available in the SAC contained authoring tools and in the first year, teachers had to use those to create multiple choice grammar exercises, gap-filling exercises to match the grammar points of their courses. These exercises were text based only and each input sentence or option choices were limited to a small number of typed characters.

Three images remain from those days. The first is that of colleagues and I stepping out of the Language Centre with great strain as we pushed the heavy wooden door to go to our classrooms dispersed on the university grounds, carrying our heavy daily attire of textbooks, cassettes, photocopies, cassette player, transparencies and pens. The second is the SAC we had to walk past would be full of diligent students in the first few weeks of teaching and then become gradually emptier as each day passed. The third is that of the blue screen of one of the Computer Assisted language Learning (CALL) programmes we had to use and the large flashing white cursor that would appear to let you input text. The sentiment that prevails when these images come back is one of powerlessness and frustration. Powerlessness, because there had been and would be no room for a long time for teachers to voice their thoughts or needs or what they perceived as their students' needs. The fact that students would gradually stop using the SAC or engaging with the self-study programme was not something that we could reflect upon or discuss –rather we were made to feel that this was our fault for not emphasising enough how important it was. Frustration, because some of us were keen to develop, craft, and design but had no say over the tools that we could use and no opportunity to appropriate others.

2. How has your use and knowledge of technology in language learning and teaching developed over time?

In the first few years of my career, I was repeatedly invited by my Director to contribute to the many CALL projects that the Language Centre was involved in. Inevitably, these would be projects that had been instigated by someone with technical knowledge and an ill-thought out notion of what would be good for language learners, and the teacher's role would be limited to providing the foreign language input. It was difficult to refuse and even more difficult to articulate reasons why one would not want to engage in this process. On the surface, this initial encounter with technology to enhance language teaching was a negative one. However, it is precisely in this apparent rejection of technology that lies the guiding principle of what has now become my core concern. Technology is neutral: what matters, is that it be driven by sound pedagogical concerns.

In many ways, my approach to technology in language teaching remains based on a *bricolage* ('Do it Yourself, DIY') approach –the tools may have changed but the methodology has not. Back then, I wanted to scaffold learning in class and used photocopied transparencies of the cartoons that came with the dialogues in the prescribed textbook in order to prepare students for listening and to ensure that they developed better listening skills that were not reliant on reading (with the textbook open) or on nothing at all (with the textbook closed). We would work from the images, play with the images, write over them with thought bubbles and produce relevant language and hypotheses around meaning before listening. I also used transparencies to write and project vocabulary on the board so that I would have a trace of the meanderings of my classes, one that I could re-use with exercises or compare with students notes. I call this *bricolage* because just as in DIY, it is about meeting a need promptly and being able to customise the end-product to very specific constraints. CALL was the bookcase you could buy already made from your local furniture store, but my walls were not even and I preferred to build my own shelving. Of course the tools do matter, but without knowing that the tools exist, one cannot envisage the solutions and sometimes one can remain blind to the problem.

3. How has contact with colleagues impacted on the way you use technology in language learning and teaching?

I was lucky in that my (reluctant) involvement in several CALL projects also earned me the opportunity to receive support from my university to attend workshops, seminars and conferences related to CALL. The first events of this kind that I attended were intimidating and, it seemed, driven by technology experts rather than ordinary language teachers. There were moments of inspiration though, such as a training session at the University of Hull, then home to the Tell consortium. There I received training in how to use an authoring package called *TransIt TIGER* (sadly no longer available but see Fayard, 1999). Although it was designed to support the teaching of translation, something which was not then part of my teaching area, this programme enabled tutors to upload a text, create hyperlinks to include definitions or translations and propose two or three different translations for students to compare. A vast improvement from the automated blank filling grammar exercises I had been accustomed to developing, this allowed for discourse level work to take place, and most importantly for work that did not result exclusively in a computer generating the right answer; there was space for critical thinking, for contrasting and comparing, for something which could be explored before a class and then extended into class activities. I promptly started using this software for other purposes, creating my own annotated texts with hyperlinks, working for the first time with distributive learning tools.

A few years later, the Internet having become more ubiquitous and available in a growing number of classrooms, I took a course in web–design on *Dreamweaver* and started developing my courses online. There was no virtual learning environment or learning management system in place (partly because our technicians were painstakingly trying to develop a languages specific one) and I started shaping my own teaching in a distributive way, empowering myself and my students to break the classroom walls, free our learning from time and place constraints and make better use of face-to-face sessions for oral interaction.

4. How do you use technology in your professional practice now?

The e-learning landscape has changed tremendously and for the better: communities of language teachers across the world collaborate, share and co-develop what has now become a much more accessible and pedagogically-grounded field of enquiry and practice. The processes and approaches through which I teach online or distribute teaching with digital tools have not changed much. My primary concern has remained one grounded in practice, reflection, identification of tools and evaluation of their affordances, design and testing. My practice however has shifted, as my career progressed to management and leadership roles, and my core interest now is in enabling others (language teachers and learners) to empower themselves to develop their use of technology for teaching and learning. This new direction has happened in the lifespan of the Centre for Languages Linguistics and Areas Studies (LLAS) and most particularly its annual e-Learning Symposium, which has been a constant source of learning, inspiration and support. A highly stimulating and engaging event, the symposium is an excellent opportunity to discover new tools and new approaches and to be reminded of the outstanding level of dynamism of the language teaching communities in terms of e-learning. For many who attend, communication and collaboration continues in between each symposium and weaves the threads of a dedicated community of practice.

One cannot underestimate the crucial role that can be played by such communities of practice in supporting language teachers to develop a personally meaningful and discipline relevant use of technology to support their teaching. Too often and for too many of us, the work we do in relation to technology is unseen, undervalued, ill-remunerated or accounted for, poorly supported and can be driven by external constraints rather than individual professional practice. When we receive training, this is often a dry show and tell which at best leaves us with a precarious sense of 'know how' and at worst generates high levels of anxiety and feelings of ineptitude. Rather than empowering teachers, it contributes to the de-professionalisation of the sector that has been noted in numerous instances and generates resistance and fear in relation to shifts in practice that are not

only beneficial to enhancing the quality and achievements of our work, but are increasingly a must-do in the sector. From a management and leadership point-of-view, if one wants to do more than tick a box of compliance in a senior strategy document, e-learning is about change management and this is what most of my professional practice now involves.

5. How does your knowledge and experience in social media and web 2.0 technologies impact on your professional and teaching life?

The shift from pure classroom based teaching to the new distributed learning approaches that are recommended through most universities' teaching and learning agendas are a delicate affair which inevitably involve a radical and profound shift in one's position as teacher most notoriously coined by Alison King (1993) as a move from "sage on the stage" to "guide on the side" (p. 30). In other words, the empowerment that comes along with adopting technology to enhance teaching and learning necessitates a shift in authority through which the teacher relinquishes power to the learner.

My approach to scaffolding such a shift has been profoundly 'metalinguistic' in model as I have sought to develop practice through the establishment of a localised community of practice by making use of the very tools that I seek to empower my colleagues to explore and use. By creating internal virtual platforms for staff development and particularly for technology enhanced teaching, I have sought to offer colleagues an opportunity to develop a first person experience of what it can mean to learn online as well as face-to-face. In turn, staff development sessions have been set up on a distributive basis, where teachers have been able to scaffold their learning before a face-to-face session, during the session and beyond the session. Another important aspect of the way in which I try to approach my practice in terms of programme leadership, is that I try to maintain the focus on enabling –something which takes time and requires others to contribute– but I am also sharply aware of the necessity to address a number of disruptive constraints. First of all, working in an IWLP, I have to abide by

university standards and guidelines –these are extremely variable, more or less constricting and more or less helpful. Some universities provide extensive support and structure to operate within; others are a little more vague. The years I spent at London Metropolitan University were extremely productive in developing leadership in technology enhanced learning and teaching. The Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT) has a vibrant e-learning section (Hamby, Pettiward, Lister, & Fregona, n.d.) led by lecturers who act as blended learning facilitators. There is both a cascade model of training and policy which works in a dialogical way: the blended learning facilitators receive dedicated training, it is matured into pedagogical practice, shared and further reflected upon to develop an openly constructed strategy at university level. This, in turn, supplied a useful template for learning, evolving and decision-making that could be reproduced and further enhanced at micro level. The university I work with now is a young institution, which is yet to effectively set up its e-learning support beyond the mere basics of technical training. Whether practice is dictated or negotiated makes an enormous difference on teaching staff and on the way in which they are able to approach adoption and development around technology.

Another area, which in my view remains problematic in all institutions, is the value that the institution is prepared to attach to e-learning in real terms. In other words, how much of our time do these institutions think we should reasonably devote to developing our practice in relation to technology? How can teachers, leaders, institutions be accountable for this time? Many universities brandish online-courses as a solution to economical challenges and an area where they can compete at lower costs –many also believe that teaching staff can be trained with two-hour demonstrations here and there. In reality, whether we seek to use digital tools to distribute learning across a wider range of platforms (face-to-face, independent and collaborative online) or to fully deploy our teaching expertise onto online realms, the time required to successfully engage with technology is enormous and goes well beyond the need for occasional training. Developing an online teaching presence (without which it is doubtful that learners will do more than lurk) does not merely require the creation and uploading of digitised materials, but also necessitates the considerations for instructional and navigational design, managing and monitoring of learner activity, ability (and

time) to select the tool with the best affordances for the right task; the model of one hour's time to prepare each hour of teaching obviously bears no relation to what truly goes on here. Moreover, it would also be equally important for institutions to reflect and guide their staff better in relation to the invasiveness of technology: if learning on-the-go, anywhere, anytime may be desirable, does this mean that working on-the-go, anywhere, anytime should become the rule too? Technology can also infringe upon public and personal spaces: educators also need support to better understand the risks they may be running as they deploy their teaching through various social networking platforms (and in turn students need guidance on this too). The issue of time and recognition is an enormous problem and clearly one that threatens the development of practice beyond a few mavericks who are prepared to invest personally. The question of risk is one which needs to be addressed too if we want to progress from digital deviance to professionalism.

The last step on my journey takes me to China, working behind the great firewall with slow broadband connections, and beginning to understand very different constraints in relation to e-learning: the sharp difference here, between public and private (mostly anonymous or in elected closed circles) uses of technology, the correlated and multiple online identities that develop in such a context along with the differing genre of digital literacies and narratives but also the sheer complexities around establishing group work among students on or offline. Most of my preferred tools, metaphorically and practically do not work here, or, at best, not reliably. Having on occasions felt stripped of my tools, I am also developing a clear sense that much of the theory behind both e-learning and language teaching are intractably Western in assumptions. Neither seems to fully account for the needs of Chinese learners who probably need a different kind of scaffolding in order to develop a safe online cognitive presence as much as they require another panoply of tasks to engage in productive meaningful language activities in a classroom. The next step on this journey will be to work collaboratively with students and colleagues to investigate how their digital literacies and learning styles can be harnessed to design suitable learning pathways and navigational architectures for our module Moodle pages, work which I hope to share with colleagues at the forthcoming LLAS e-learning symposium.

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