TEACHING EFL TO THE DIGITAL-BORN GENERATION. CHALLENGES AND EXPECTATIONS

Cornelia-Patricia GRIGORAȘ, Daniel DEJICA
West University of Timișoara, Politehnica University Timișoara, Romania

Abstract: This paper is part of a wider research and targets the present demand for using technology in teaching English. The relevance of the study is justified not only by the pandemic and post-pandemic backgrounds regarding the use of technology in teaching EFL, but also by the needs and expectations of the new generation we teach. One of our main objectives is to come up with tangible digital solutions, which may complement existing teaching methods and facilitate the teaching and learning processes. Some of the advantages of using technology in EFL classes include, but are not limited to a better learning process, more interactive lessons, reduction of time spent by teachers preparing the lessons, improvement of the students' learning quality, decrease in dependence on the teacher, increase towards the positive attitude upon EFL and access to the information available on learning platforms.

Keywords: teaching EFL; communicative language teaching, communicative approach, digital-born generation, language and technology, Z-generation; digital platforms.

1. Introduction

After 1989, the year associated with the fall of communism in Romania, the 35 years that followed witnessed at least three major changes in relation to teaching and learning foreign languages in our country.

First, in Romania, like in many other countries of the Eastern-European block, English became “the first choice of foreign language, […] and it is that status that has given it the position of a global lingua franca” (Crystal & Potter, 2022). As such, the English language replaced Russian in most schools and universities and teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) became a topic of interest for many teachers and researchers in secondary and tertiary education.

Second, the grammar translation method, which in the second half of the 20th century was the predominant method used in teaching and learning a foreign language in most Eastern European Countries, was gradually replaced by more communicative approaches, and soon after, the communicative language teaching (CLT), also referred to as the communicative approach (CA), became the predominant method used for teaching and learning foreign languages (for an overview of CLT, see Nunan, 1991; Savignon, 1997; Richards, 2005; Dejica, Hansen, Sandrini & Para, 2016; Toma & Dejica, 2023).

Third, the emergence of new technologies and the forced digitalization imposed by the pandemic and post-pandemic periods impacted CLT, and teachers had to introduce digital tools and adapt their teaching methods to make learning more suitable for the digital-born generation. The introduction of digital technologies is seen as a natural step in the evolution of learning a foreign language: it is widely accepted that such tools and technologies enhance the process of teaching, increase the level of efficiency, and boost

BUPT

students' ability to "collect, represent, visualize, analyse, interpret, and communicate texts" (Philip and Garcia, 2013).

However, the use of new technologies in CLT is not always welcomed or possible due to a variety of reasons, including the reluctance of teachers to change, their inability to adapt their teaching methods or to upgrade their skills, in most cases due to their age, the limited access to training programs, the lack of adequate equipment, the diversity and/or unreliability of digital sources, etc. Of all, the reluctance to change is probably the biggest problem and may limit the potential and effectiveness of ELT classes. Shawcross (2004) claims that "the pedagogical and human implications of these new technologies should engage our attention and stimulate our critical sense, representing, as they do, both great potential and great challenges" (Shawcross, 2004). It is our belief that the introduction and use of digital methods in EFL classes is a necessity nowadays; the current article complements existing studies in the field and puts forward some recommendations aimed at facilitating EFL teaching and learning using digital methods.

2. The digital-born generation. Its needs and expectations

The new generation of students also called the Z generation or Millennials, includes all students born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s. Born in the digital era, the students of this generation are used to technology from an early age and perceive it as something natural in their personal growth and educational development. Hence, teachers who use traditional CLT methods in their English classes, might need to change their teaching style significantly (Sugiarti 2021).

To understand this generation, teachers should first accept that at a neuroscience level, Millennials think and understand everything differently, as most of their world is located in the virtual space. Once teachers acknowledge this as a fact and accept that students' craving for technology is something innate, to deprive them of using technology would be something futile, which would violate their birth right. As such, a more adequate and challenging approach would be to find a way in which students may use technology as a balance between the real and virtual worlds, and if possible, for productive purposes.

This idea is strengthened by Cornu (2011), who states that "Digital activity is like a mother tongue for them. [...] Growing up in such an environment, they think and process information in a different way than previous generations: their thinking patterns have changed, and Mark Prensky says it is likely that their brains have physically changed, too. They are "native speakers" of the digital language" (Cornu, 2011). Transforming such environments into learning environments, in which students may access and use audio-visual materials may have several advantages, including building stronger connections in their brains. As Jandhyala (2017) claims, "our short-term memory processes words and can only retain about seven bits of information. Whereas, images are directly processed by our long-term memory, where they get indelibly etched" (Jandhyala, 2017).

3. CLT and technology

Once EFL teachers understand and accept these changes, it will probably be easier for them to readjust their teaching methods and digitalize the teaching process, in line with students' expectations and needs for technology in the learning process: "We cannot just apply the education of yesterday to the pupils of tomorrow. Students have changed

BUPT

radically and, accordingly, we must find new ways to teach that are appropriate for the new generation" (Cornu, 2011).

Probably the easiest way to introduce technology in EFL classes is to use existing online platforms. From our teaching experience, we believe that platforms such as *Cambridge One Plus*, *Kahoot!*, *Epic - Kids' Books & Reading*, *BOOKR Class*, *Vooks,* or *Twinkl* are good examples that may facilitate teaching and stimulate learning in a very effective way. Some of the advantages of their use are presented in this section.

Cambridge One Plus can be easily accessed from any browser or it can be downloaded under the name of Cambridge One Desktop App. The platform addresses both kids and teenagers and contains interactive lessons. Probably the main point to be mentioned is that students are motivated to learn English by using technology and playing games. Another reason is that teachers can use the platform to enrol their students and can have access to all of their work. Let us take as an example the Super Minds coursebooks: a pack consists of the digital course book with interactive activities, the workbook, games, flashcards, the teacher's book with lesson plans, and some other activities.

The advantages of using this platform are several. Students have access to the coursebook, workbook, interactive games that recap the unit, and if they happen to skip a class, they have all the materials on the platform. The interactive materials make learning more effective and the games which are available on the platform are designed to resemble some of the most popular games through students. Also, in the digital books, students may take notes or highlight relevant aspects. Additionally, there is a test generator that provides proper tests from the related unit, and it shows the results of the students to the teacher, which is a great convenience, as it reduces the time spent by the teacher to create appropriate tests and correct them. Last but not least, there is a Teacher Resources section that contains more materials to be used in class. Using this platform with our students, we noticed that they show greater and faster progress because they take learning English as a game due to the variety of available games, songs, videos, and modern graphics.

Kahoot! is a platform that can be used to reinforce learning, to assess students' progress and to help students understand a lesson in a fun and competitive way. Some of the strategies used here to stimulate and motivate students include the possibility to play individually or in teams, to have the freedom of choosing a nickname, to receive points for correctness and promptness as they have a time limit, to receive the correct answers to questions, etc.

Kahoot! also has several advantages that facilitate and encourage its use. For instance, it may be downloaded as an app and students can access it anywhere and anytime from their devices. Teachers can see the progress and the results of their students, which saves valuable time. While assessing, the teacher may also see the questions that were problematic for the students and the mistakes they made. There are several ways in which a test on Kahoot may be done. Teachers can simply search for a subject and tests will be displayed from the existing database. Teachers can also create their own tests by writing the questions, setting a time limit, choosing a template, adding YouTube videos or pictures for each question, choosing the form of answers, like for a quiz, pole, puzzle, open or true/false answers, etc. Last but not least, teachers can download the reports and send a copy to parents. This type of assessment can reduce the level of anxiety or pressure felt by some students when taking a test and gives instant results with answers explained. By using Kahoot in class, we could remark that students

BUPT

are no longer reluctant to take tests. On the contrary, they are looking forward to taking the test and competing with their colleagues. It has also helped us as we always have a general overview of the level of our students and we considerably reduce the time spent by correcting the tests and giving the results.

Epic - Kids' Books & Reading and *BOOKR Class* are two platforms which may be used to develop reading skills. According to their website, *Epic - Kids' Books* contains over 40,000 books, audiobooks and learning videos, selected by a team of experts from top publishers. By using this platform, teachers may have access to students' progress, students may develop their listening skills as well, as the platform reads the story out loud while the students have the text in front of them, or their vocabulary skills. By clicking on a word, students can see the definition in English or even translate it if the browser allows the translation process. At the end of the book, there is usually a quiz to check the comprehension of the text. The teacher can see the results of the quiz and the time the student spent reading the book. Moreover, the parents can also see their results if they are connected to the class.

The variety of available themes is another strong point of this platform, as students may enrich their knowledge of the world by accessing topics related to English Language, Science and Art, Social Emotional Learning, Social Studies, or other popular foreign languages. The platform is free for teachers and students can log in using the teacher's code class for free from 7 am to 3 pm. This time limit is because the platform was mainly intended for class use. If students are not able to access the platform within this period, parents may purchase an account that can be used by four students. The accounts may be accessed on a variety of devices, including computers, tablets or phones. Additional content on the platform includes videos, audiobooks, and printable materials. Working with this platform, we could see how fast students make progress at lexical, listening and understanding levels.

BOOKR Class is another reading platform designed mainly for A0 to B1 language levels. It includes interactive narrations, interactions, modern animations, sound effects, quizzes, and games related to the story read. The games make the comprehension process funnier, easier, and more interactive. The stories are selected from famous stories around the world and cover a wide variety of topics, such as sports, history, science, geography, culture, or literature. Also, there are follow-on sections with flashcards, covering spelling, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, reading, or listening. Teachers can also see the time spent by students reading a book, the number of books read, and the results of the games. Teachers benefit from full lesson plans that can reduce considerably the time spent designing a lesson. In contrast to the previously presented platform, we noticed that *BOOKR Class* works even better for students who do not like reading or cannot concentrate. Due to the fact that the books are highly interactive, they stimulate the reading experience and reduce the risks of being dull.

Vooks is another platform that combines books with videos. Here, books are brought to life through video clips. This streaming library aims to help the Z generation enjoy famous stories by watching them. Teachers have access to lesson plans and other interactive materials, which make teaching and learning appealing and efficient. One of the advantages of this platform is its high level of accessibility, as hundreds of books, videos, and resources can be easily accessed from everywhere at any time. Both students and teachers do not have to carry all the books or the materials with them, only one device that is always in hand, the mobile phone. Moreover, printable worksheets can be used by teachers after watching a story. Usually, these materials combine

BUPT

different skills, like reading, listening, writing or speaking, and may also be used to check text understanding. What makes *Vooks* appealing is that teachers may access it for free for one year. From our experience, this platform brings stories to life, making them more digestible for a generation used to watching instead of reading. In many cases, we could see that it initiates the appetite for reading stories and that it makes more use of students' imagination as they can create their own movie by visualizing the story while reading.

Last but not least, Twinkl is a great source for ESL teaching as it consists of a wide variety of online games, worksheets, PowerPoint presentations, eBooks, exam materials, and many more. It covers many topics like grammar, phonetics, vocabulary, speaking, writing, social development, history, biology, geography, maths, culture or literature. Schools can have access for free and teachers can use the curriculum given on the platform. The curriculum levels are made up of 12 lessons available on Google Slides or PowerPoint. Each lesson has some extra practice material which can be done by the students at home, online, or offline. This platform enables students to learn in a relaxing way as it has many games and interactive materials. By using Twinkl, we experienced more interactive lessons, and we could see that our students were more engaged and interested in the lesson, and more captivated by its content.

4. Conclusions and suggestions for teachers and researchers

Overall, based on our experience, we may say that CLT combined with the use of technology in EFL classes offers a more enjoyable teaching and learning experience, with better results than those obtained when using CLT with traditional materials. The use of these platforms has also helped us formulate a series of recommendations and conclusions that complement the ones from existing studies in the field (Kemp & David 1985, Prensky 2001, Gee 2003, West & Vosloo 2013). We see these recommendations as advantages offered by the use of technology in EFL classes, but at the same time we recommend their validation, or revalidation – given the rapid technological change – on scientific grounds, in new research projects. As such, we believe that the following conclusions and recommendations may be helpful for teachers and may offer some food for thought for researchers, as well.

We can conclude without a doubt that the use of technology makes classes more interactive and diversified. We noticed that students experience new and mixed feelings, based on a combination of playing and studying activities, which makes learning a more enjoyable experience, with better and faster results. In addition, students have the possibility to take control of the learning process. The access to digital materials (with its advantages, including but not limited to portability, progress reports, self-assessment, knowledge consolidation at any time, and many more) empowers them and makes them less dependent on teachers. Overall, students' learning quality is improved.

We may also conclude that teachers spend less time preparing for their classes. Digital materials may be selected from a variety of templates or may be created from scratch, saved and easily reused or adapted anytime. Less time needed for preparing the lessons may translate into more time for assessing students or identifying their needs. Generally speaking, the teaching process is more efficient.

Probably our most important recommendation is that teachers should be aware of the importance of life-long learning and continuous education programs, take part in training and regularly upgrade their digital skills. To avoid using technology in the teaching process might be a sign that the teacher is technologically challenged and/or

BUPT

not up to the learning rights and expectations of digital-born students, might affect the image of the teacher, and ultimately might have serious implications as to the expected outcomes of a class. On the contrary, a digitally literate teacher will know to find the best digital solutions for their class, to assess digital resources correctly, and ultimately, to find the perfect balance between the use of traditional and digital resources.

We also recommend integrating technology wisely and efficiently in EFL classes (and after all, in all classes) so as to captivate students' attention and boost teaching and learning. The Z generation sees technology as a birth right, and as such, teachers who do not adapt their teaching methods and stick to traditional methods will make students feel deprived of this right and as a consequence, they will try to compensate and use technology in a concealed way, which will divert them from the class. Teachers should accept that most of their students have been exposed to technology from an early age and should find the best way in which students may use it productively in their classes.

We recommend two main directions of research, one related to the importance, relevance and results of using technology in EFL classes versus the use of traditional teaching methods, and the second one related to the role of the EFL teacher in the digital age. Obtained on scientific grounds and using interdisciplinary approaches which combine linguistic, sociological and educational research methods, the answers to the following research questions would be extremely helpful in clarifying existing debates and eliminating any speculations on these topics:

1. Is the information and knowledge acquired using technology in EFL classes stored in the long-term or short-term memory? Do audio-visual and interactive materials build stronger connections in students' brains? Should both printed and digital materials be used in EFL classes? Should teachers still use traditional materials or should teaching and learning be entirely digitalised? If the use of technology is seen as an addiction, should teachers avoid using it entirely in their classes and stick only to the use of traditional materials? What are the skills and competencies which can be better and faster built using CLT with or without technology, or with a combination of both? These and similar research questions can be used as a starting point for a contrastive study on using CLT with technology versus using CLT with traditional teaching and learning tools.
2. If online platforms offer full-learning solutions and if technology is combined with artificial intelligence in the learning process, (1) will students rely more on virtual assistants or on teachers?, (2) what will the teachers' role be (if any) in this scenario?, (3) will the degree of confidence on teachers' competences be affected if/when compared with the teaching experience offered by AI?, (4) will some teachers still be role models for their students or will their image be affected by their knowledge limitation when compared to AI-empowered digital assistants?, etc.

The immediate advantages of integrating technology in the CLT method in EFL classes include, but are not limited to a better learning process, more interactive lessons, reduction of time spent by teachers preparing the lessons, improvement of the students' learning quality, decrease in dependence on the teacher, increase towards the positive attitude upon EFL and access to the information available on learning platforms. However, researchers should validate these advantages, confirm that they produce positive results in the long run, and investigate any possible threats or disadvantages that might be generated by the improper use of technology in teaching and learning EFL.

BUPT

References

1. Cornu, B. 2011. *Digital natives: How do they learn? How to teach them*? UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education. Kedrova, 7-8. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000216681.locale=en
2. Crystal, D. & S. Potter. 2022. *English language.* Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/English-language
3. Dejica, D. & G. Hansen, P. Sandrini, I. Para (eds.) 2016. *Language in the Digital Era. Challenges and Perspectives.* Warsaw/Berlin: DeGruyter.
4. Gee, J.P., 2003. What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy. Comput. Entertain. 20. https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/950566.950595
5. Jandhyala, D. 2017. *Visual Learning: 6 Reasons Why Visuals Are The Most Powerful Aspect Of eLearning. eLearning Industry*. https://elearningindustry.com/visual-learning-6-reasons-visuals-powerful-aspect- elearning
6. Kemp, J. E., & Dayton, D. K. 1985. *Planning and Producing Instructional Media*. New York, USA: Harper & Row, Limited. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Tono Suwartono/publication/343425654_Digital_Teaching_Tools_in_21st_Century_EFL_Classroom_Are_Our_Teachers_Ready/links/5f2957f6a6fdcccc43a8c52c/Digital-Teaching-Tools-in-21st-Century-EFL-Classroom-Are-Our-Teachers-Ready.pdf
7. Nunan, D. 1991. "Communicative Tasks and the Language Curriculum". *TESOL Quarterly*. 25 (2): 279–295.
8. Philip, T., & A. Garcia. 2013. “The Importance of Still Teaching the IGeneration: New Technologies and the Centrality of Pedagogy”, in Harvard Educational Review, pp. 300-319.https://www.academia.edu/8692062/The_Importance_of_Still_Teaching_the_iGeneration_New_Technologies_and_the_Centrality_of_Pedagogy
9. Prensky, M. 2001. “Digital natives, digital immigrants. Part 1”. On The Horizon, 9(5), 1- 6
10. Richards, J. C. *Communicative language teaching today*. SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, 2005.
11. Savignon, S. J. 1997. *Communicative competence: theory and classroom practice: texts and contexts in second language learning*. McGraw-Hill.
12. Shawcross, P. 2004. *Technology in Language Teaching.* Proceedings of the First ICAO Aviation Language Symposium, 2004. Hillside Press.
13. Sugiarti, D. 2021. “Teaching English to Generation Z: Challenges and Opportunities”. *TEXTURA*, 6(1), pp.85-89. https://journal.piksi.ac.id/index.php/TEXTURA/article/view/283
14. Toma, A. & D. Dejica. 2023. “Mental Translation and Its Contribution to Communicative Language Teaching and Learning”, in *Professional Communication and Translation Studies,* 16/2023, Timisoara: Editura Politehnica.
15. West, M. & S. Vosloo, 2013. *Policy guidelines for mobile learning*. Paris: UNESCO. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002196/219641E.pdf

Webography

1. BOOKR Class, https://bookrclass.com/
2. Cambridge One Plus, https://www.cambridgeone.org/home
3. Epic, https://www.getepic.com/
4. Kahoot, https://kahoot.com/
5. Twinkl, https://www.twinkl.ro/
6. Vooks, https://www.vooks.com/

BUPT