

# Simplifying the technological enhancement of language learning

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*From books, boards and pens to video cameras, smart-phones and tablet computers, technology has always had an important role to play in any language learning environment. The integration of such technology into the language classroom is an issue faced on a daily basis by educators and learners and is an issue fraught with complexities. There is technological complexity involved with the selection and use of the best tool for the language curriculum and organisational complexity involved with how the tool is funded and supported in the wider context of the educational institution. This article outlines a way of trying to simplify the complexity by explaining how teachers can immediately start to technologically enhance their language classes, simply and effectively, with a 'teaching techbox'. A 'teaching techbox' is the name I give to my box of technological tools, including a mobile phone with camera, video camera, timer, bell, dice, and paper scraps, which I take to each class and use to enhance the language activities. As language education moves evermore into Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), with the increased use of standard mobile phones, smart-phones and tablet computers both inside and outside of the classroom, the 'teaching techbox' allows teachers to embrace the opportunities afforded by MALL while at the same time simplifying how technology is used in the class.*

## Introduction

Modern life is characterized by the blending of human communication with technological tools, and technologies such as mobile phones, video cameras, watches, timers, alarms and music players have come to

characterize modern daily life. Telephones and computers are the leading tools which have helped globalize the world through long distance communication and information exchange and new technologies based around the concept of mobile devices, such as video cameras and music players, have begun to have profound effects on society. According to Comas-Quinn, Mardomingo and Valentine (2009), the changes afforded by these new technologies have also begun to affect the fields of teaching and learning and are “set to have a profound effect on pedagogy” (p. 465) (for discussions of such various mobile technologies and their classroom applications see: Chinnery, 2006 and Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). However, a discussion of any technological tool which will be used in a classroom setting raises the question of how that tool will be successfully integrated into the teaching and learning. Chambers and Bax (2006) state, in a discussion of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), that only when CALL is integrated (or ‘normalised’) “will teachers and learners reap its full benefits” (p. 466). In relation to this integration, educational contexts are faced with many problematic issues such as: which tool to adopt for the school or individual class (e.g. a desktop, a laptop, a tablet computer, a voice recorder, a video camera etc), how best to combine the tool with the classroom pedagogical practices, how best to fund and support the technology, and how to avoid exaggerated expectations or fears of the technology’s role in the classroom (Warschauer & Meskill, 2000).

Within this atmosphere of complexity there is a need for simplification; there is a need for language teachers and learners to be able to immediately, cheaply and easily adopt technology for their class to enhance the learning process and to make the most of opportunities afforded by mobile assisted learning. This article outlines the use of a ‘teaching techbox’ for these purposes. The ‘teaching techbox’ is an idea I developed from wanting to enhance traditional classroom practices while avoiding some of the complexity outlined above. The teacher first personally selects technology tools which are readily available, affordable and usable for their classes and then puts them together in a portable box which can be taken to and from every lesson. The portability, usability and cost-effective nature of the ‘techbox’ allow it to become an integrated part of the classroom where the tools are an ever-present feature of the regular language learning practices. Rather than being the focus of the lessons, the tools are an enhancement to traditional pedagogically-sound classroom practices, which is an essential consideration in the application of technology in language learning (Chinnery, 2006, p. 9). The following sections will: 1) introduce the contents and features of my ‘teaching techbox’, 2) outline some activities which can be enhanced with each of the tools inside the box and 3) suggest that teachers should put together their own ‘teaching techbox’, with the technological tools important to them, for the purposes of enhancing their regular classroom activities.

### **The contents and features of my ‘teaching techbox’**

My ‘teaching techbox’ is a small portable box which contains 6 technologies that I consider essential for the classroom; a mobile phone with camera, a video camera, a timer, a bell, dice and paper scraps. The main theoretical consideration which lies at the heart of the box is the issue of the integration of technology and language learning and this section will discuss how the ‘teaching techbox’ is positioned to allow teachers to integrate technology in their classes in a simple and cost-effective way.

The ultimate aim of technology in the language classroom is to have it integrated or  
**252** ‘normalized’ whereby the technology becomes as invisible as books and pens (Bax, 2003,

p. 23). Teachers and learners will only be able to fully exploit the potential of classroom technologies, such as computers, when they become a tool that can be quickly, easily and effectively used to focus on enhancing pedagogical practices. However, even in 2010, many institutions are still working with 'wired' computers ('wired' in terms of mains power cords and Ethernet cables) and as long as we have to unpack laptops from a rack (or move to a desktop language lab), plug in power leads, connect up internet cables and wait for boot-up and log-in processes, they are always going to be a tool which remain on the periphery of language teaching and learning.

Mobile Assisted Language Learning (**MALL**) offers the best current potential to integrate computers and language learning both in and out of the class because the devices, such as mobile phones, smart-phones and tablet computers, are small, portable, wireless and already feature heavily in many aspects of society. Kukulska-Hulme (2009) writes, "As mobile technology becomes increasingly pervasive, we can expect to see more examples of language learning being integrated with everyday surroundings" (p. 164). 'Unplugging' the technologies, in terms of utilizing the wireless nature of mobile devices, is an essential feature of making them truly mobile and pervasive and this will be the future of technology in the classroom if we want them to become an integral part of every lesson (Bax, 2003, p. 24). However, the reality of many teaching and learning contexts is that institutions cannot afford or sufficiently support the adoption of classroom sets of mobile devices such as iPod Touches and tablet computers. So compounded onto the problem of integrating technology into the classroom is the complexity of financial and tech-support issues.

In order to address the integration and financial issues outlined above, the 'teaching



Figure 1. Teaching techbox packed 253



Figure 1. Teaching techbox contents

techbox' is positioned as a simple, cost-effective and portable way to enhance my classroom activities. The main feature of the 'techbox' is that all the technologies are 'unplugged'; the mobile phone with camera is wireless 3G enabled, the video camera charges and transfers files through **USB**, the timer runs on batteries and the bell, paper scraps and dice are all basic technologies. The reason for the technologies being 'unplugged' is that this allows greater mobility and usability for both teachers and students which in turn help to integrate the technology into the classroom. The issue of technological complexity is avoided by having devices which are a familiar and regular part of daily life, like the mobile phone with camera (a standard personal device for many people), dice (used regularly in games) and the bell (used in hotels, alarms etc), and organisational complexity is avoided by having devices which are low-cost, familiar and need minimal or zero technology support, such as the timer, the bell and the dice. By being 'unplugged' the techbox is mobile, compact, easy to use and easy to integrate into the class and it can be used as a simple way of technologically enhancing the language classroom.

### Enhancing classroom activities with the 'teaching techbox'

In terms of **MALL**, the 'techbox' tools of the mobile phone with camera and the video camera offer the best potential of bringing the classroom activities in tune with a more mobile society, and allow both the students and teachers to make the most of the learning opportunities afforded by developments in mobile technologies. A recent survey conducted in my Freshman English university class in Japan revealed that all 29 students own mobile phones which they bring to class every day. (The finding that mobile ownership is virtually universal at the tertiary level of education in Japan is supported by similar studies by Dias,2002, and Thorton & Houser,2005). All of these 29 phones are internet-capable, 12 are smart-phones (all are iPhones by Apple) and 26 of the 29 have cameras (with both still-

and students provides the opportunity for some agency to be given to the students with how this technology is used in and out of class (Chinnery, 2006, p. 13). Below I will explain some practical examples of activities which can be used in and out of the classroom using the tools in my 'techbox', with a particular focus on activities that link with the current educational environment of mobility in language learning.

### *Using the mobile phone camera*

The mobile phone camera can be used for capturing and storing board-work before it is wiped and lost. A common activity in my classroom is a 'word collection' whereby I write up the theme of the class in the centre of the board and students come up at the start of the lesson to add their own word. A recent lesson had 'fear' as the central theme which generated words from the students such as 'exam', 'disease', 'roller coaster' and 'teacher'. I use this word collection as a way of generating an initial classroom discussion and then words can be referred to and added to it as the class progresses. I use the mobile phone camera to enhance the activity by capturing a picture of it and uploading to our class blog and our class Flickr site (Flickr is an online photo-sharing service which allows pictures to be uploaded to an account direct from an internet-capable phone by email or through the use of a smartphone app). This allows the 'word collection' to become mobile and to be viewed and downloaded by the students wherever they have internet access (mobile or desktop) and can be projected on the board and discussed in future classes for recall and review. I have also found that some students use their own mobile phones to take a picture of the 'word collection' at the end of the class, which bypasses any need for internet access.

One of the most fundamental pedagogical changes brought by **MALL** is a move away from traditional classroom-based teacher-directed instruction (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). Learning is now happening both inside and outside of the classroom with the students having an ever increasing part to play in creating content. The mobile phone camera can be used in this way by encouraging students to capture the language around them and either simply bringing their phone in to share pictures with their group or uploading the picture to a blog and/or photo-sharing website for everyone to view and comment on. Over the course of a year with my Freshman English class in Japan they have used their own mobile phone cameras to capture signs written in English (such as shop names and warning notices), to photograph a scene of a movie they were watching with subtitles they didn't understand, and to take pictures of interesting cultural events such as *taiko* (drum) festivals. The resulting classroom focus on language and cultural discussions, done as whole class or group work warm-up activities, are therefore based on student-generated topics which can help to engage and motivate learners in the process of learning (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008, p. 272).

### *The video camera*

The video camera can be used in a similar way to the mobile phone camera; for capturing classroom activities for later analysis, review and discussion. I have used my video camera to record presentations, role-plays, talent shows, board-work with explanations and to make short student-led movies and classroom instructional videos. Modern camcorders, such as the Flip, iPod Touch and iPhone video cameras, have a basic operating user-interface and

allow simple transferral of videos from camera to computer (usually wirelessly or through **USB**).

The most successful activity in my classroom using a video camera has been a '10-minute teaching' segment whereby one student takes over the first 10 minutes of a class and teaches about a subject of their choosing. I record the segment on my video camera, give the digital file to the student (by transfer to a **USB**) and ask the student to analyse their teaching by filling out a rubric which focuses on areas such as confidence, interaction and body language. The student then follows up this activity by posting a comment on our class blog reviewing their teaching, suggesting improvements and inviting further questions from the class on their topic. This activity, through the use of the video camera and a permanent digital file, allows students to self-analyse their use of English which can be done outside, as homework, promoting the extension of learning beyond the walls of the classroom.

With the increase of student-owned smartphones which often house High Definition (**HD**) video cameras, (the survey referred to above also showed that at the start of the Freshman English course this year 3 students had smartphones and this has increased to 12 over a period of 8 months), there is great potential for allowing students to create content both in and out of the class. Students can be given whole class or smaller group projects where they plan, film, edit and produce a short video on a particular topic. They could make dramas, documentaries, panel debates and news shows where they use footage taken on their own video cameras to collaboratively plan and edit a short movie which could then be uploaded to online video-sharing sites such as Youtube (with the appropriate privacy settings) or burned onto **DVDs**. The movies can then be viewed and discussed in class. Even without a smartphone, most standard phones have a certain amount of video capability which allows an element of control in this language learning activity to be given over to the students.

### *The timer, bell, dice and paper scraps*

The timer can be used for enhancing the organization of classroom activities. For example, in the essay writing process it can be used to countdown and alert the students to tell them to move onto the next stage, such as moving from planning the essay to writing the introduction. This can help raise awareness of how to most effectively divide time when planning and writing an essay which is an excellent skill for students to take into writing exams. Additionally, the use of the timer frees up the teacher from keeping track of each section on their watch and allows the progression from one stage to the next without verbal interruptions.

The bell, although being a very basic piece of technology, can have an extremely powerful presence in the classroom for use in getting the attention of the class, signalling the start and end of activities, drawing attention to winners and losers in games and being used as a prop in role-plays.

The dice can be used to randomly assign roles in an activity such as discussions and debates and allow the random selection of topics for class activities such as presentations and role-plays. The use of the dice makes such activities a little more student-controlled and a little less teacher-directed.

Having a supply of paper scraps on hand throughout the lesson is a very basic idea but one that is often forgotten by teachers when preparing for classes. Having a stack of **256** paper ready in the box can be very useful for things such as inviting suggestions from

the students on what activities they would like to do more/less of in class, anonymously voting on the best presentation/project and quickly and creatively grouping students (by handing each student a word and asking them to find and join with classmates who have words that fit with theirs).

### Putting together your own 'teaching techbox'

The most attractive feature of using a 'teaching techbox' is that it can be adapted to the specific needs of the teacher, students and classroom settings. Taking mobility, cost, usability and effectiveness into consideration, the teacher can select the tools which best meet their needs for their classes. The tools which I have in my box are ones which I consider to be useful in most classes I teach and, with the mobile phone camera and video camera, ones which can encourage learning beyond the classroom. I nearly always have the need for a camera, a timer, scraps of paper and dice, and certain activities throughout the week can be easily enhanced with a video camera and a bell. I suggest that teachers who are interested in simply and immediately enhancing their classes with technology consider boxing together the tools which they would always like to have in the classroom and making their own 'teaching techbox' an integral part of their classroom practices.

### Further information

More information on each tool in my 'teaching techbox' and more examples of activities can be found at [www.teachingtechbox.wordpress.com](http://www.teachingtechbox.wordpress.com)

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