Technology and Our Choices

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Vignette

While in the 2020/2021 school year, many of us were unexpectedly and unpreparedly thrown into the deep end of online teaching. Just like many other educators in Japan, this was my first experience with the online education environment. After a year of attempting to handle this new situation, I found myself wanting to know how others felt about this. Due to this unique situation, I decided to reach out and ask fellow educators in Japan what technology they used and their rationale or reason for choosing these. Therefore, I sent out a questionnaire in February of 2021 asking other educators what websites and programs they use in class and why. Fortunately, twenty-two educators from different educational levels shared their experiences and thoughts regarding such technology.

Being involved in Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) for many years, I understand the importance of a needs analysis. It is even considered the first step of creating a TBLT curriculum. A needs analysis is a crucial tool to building a syllabus that is often overlooked (Long, 1985). In this way, the questionnaire takes on a form of a needs analysis looking at one factor of a classroom, the educator. The rationales for technology use showed a familiar sight taking the form of the three essential sections of a needs analysis: the institution, the educator, and the student (West, 1994). By looking at these educators' rationales, we can shed some light on what we should consider before adopting some of the technologies and services into our classrooms.

Objectives
- To raise awareness of our own technology-mediated course designs
- To understand ways of thinking about educators', institutions', and learners' needs in implementing online and in-class learning technologies

Practical Implications
The Institution

The most common responses were the learning management systems (LMS), where educators can communicate with students, set assignments, and share information and materials. Most of the LMS systems were required by the institution. Many responses were not related to the educator's preference for such systems, but one response included some negative wording, "forced to by admin". On the other hand, some educators liked the LMS they were given. Some even say that they "got used to it", "I'm good at utilizing it," or even there is an "ease of use".

The Educator

Language instructors tend to base their use of technology on two main factors. These responses could be related to the LMS or other programs or websites with pedagogical value in the course. The first factor is the ease of use of the application. Often the reason for the adoption of these technologies is due to the ease of use for the instructor, and other times it is the ease of use and access for the learner. The second factor is more personal for the educator. Educators often use the technologies that they are most familiar with, that are easy to organize, or that help to ease the workload, such as "self-grading" online quizzes.

The Learner

The final rationale is related to the perceived needs of the learners. Many of these examples were pedagogically based applications that promoted learning environments and resources for the learners. These come in the form of applications to "practice output" and "allo[w] for collaboration," and they are maybe "fun for students." These applications or websites are often related to speaking, collaboration, listening, and even reading.

When making choices in technology use in language classes, we must look further than our preferences. While our choices concerning our ease of access are appropriate, educators should not stop their rationale there. We must choose the

the technology that can lead learners to proficiency outside of the language classrooms. Learners see merit in technology in their education, but very few language-specific websites, programs, and technology may be useful outside their language learning environment. Therefore, educators and institutions should prioritize technology popular outside of an educational context and adapt these to work in language learning, and to promote language learning technologies that have use-cases outside of the institution.

By taking the ideas of the needs analysis triangle taken from earlier writings on ESP course needs (West, 1994), educators and institutions should focus more on all three aspects of the language classroom and meet in the middle as much as possible. Doing so for language task choices and technology-related choices could lead to more learner benefit. However, looking at the examples prior, we must not look at the three points of the needs analysis triangle as separate but holistically connected.

Reflective Conclusion

Many of the comments made by participant educators in the survey focused on one or two of these points of the needs analysis triangle. Often educators are not given the best tools by their institutions to provide answers to their own or their learners' needs; however, we must find ways to connect these needs. These connections may take the form of using the LMS for integrating other tools that learners and educators find more useful, or maybe it could be to separate these and use the LMS for feedback only. However, what educators must avoid is to use tools that only make our jobs easier without considering the usefulness of these tools for the learner.

It is worth avoiding applications that the students will likely not use again outside of the language courses. Instead, educators and institutions should consider ones that have a high chance of continued use for both language-related and non-language-related tasks. I implore you all to take up your own needs analysis to see what the learners think will be helpful to their language learning and beyond.

References

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Author bio

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Link to Presentation on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3VZGO3mezs

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