

## Incorporating Technology in Higher Level Language Courses

UDC: 378.147:81'243]:004  
Professional article

Accepted: 5<sup>th</sup> June 2012  
Confirmed: 20<sup>th</sup> October 2012

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**Summary:** *This paper examines the role and importance of using technology in higher education with the aim of improving the quality of teaching a foreign language. The Net Generation (Digital Native) of students has grown up with technology and therefore it is important to combine classical forms and methods of teaching a foreign language with language courses that take place in a virtual environment. Combining different methods and media in the traditional (F2F) or online environment offers teachers and students a variety of options that contribute to the possibility of choice and avoidance of monotony. It is essential to harmonize the traditional approach with the proper use of technology because it enables better and easier communication between teachers and students, encourages active cooperation, makes it easier to check and monitor the progress of students while they are encouraged in successful problem solving, searching, analyzing and interpreting information as well as decision making. Flexibility in time and space enables unrestricted access to knowledge and educational content helping students to become independent learners. In facing the challenges of modern technology, language teachers need the support of all who are engaged in an effective strategy for the improvement of quality and program outcomes in a higher education setting.*

**Keywords:** *blended teaching, Net Generation, technology, higher education.*

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## Uporaba tehnologije i njezina primjena u podučavanju stranog jezika na visokoškolskoj razini

UDC: 378.147:81'243]:004  
Stručni članak

Primljeno: 5. 6. 2012.  
Prihvaćeno: 20. 10. 2012.

**Sažetak:** *Ovaj rad razmatra značenje tehnologije u visokoškolskom obrazovanju te njezinu ulogu u podučavanju stranog jezika kako bi ono bilo kvalitetnije i uspješnije. Nove generacije studenata (net generacije) odrastale su uz tehnologiju i stoga je važno klasične oblike i metode u podučavanju stranog jezika kombinirati s nastavom koja se razvija u virtualnom okruženju. Kombiniranje različitih metoda rada i medija u tradicionalnom (F2F) ili online okruženju nudi nastavnicima i studentima raznolike mogućnosti i izbore te se tako isključuje jednoličnost u nastavi.*

*Veoma je važno uskladiti tradicionalan pristup s pravilnom uporabom tehnologije jer se na taj način omogućuje kvalitetnija i jednostavnija komunikacija između nastavnika i studenata te potiče njihova aktivnija suradnja. Istodobno je omogućena lakša provjera studenata i praćenje njihova napredovanja te se osposobljavaju za uspješno rješavanje problema, samostalno istraživanje, analiziranje i interpretiranje informacija. Vremenska i prostorna fleksibilnost omogućuje neograničenu dostupnost znanju i obrazovnim sadržajima. U suočavanju s izazovima moderne tehnologije nastavnici stranih jezika trebaju potporu stručnjaka koji se bave strategijom unaprjeđenja kvalitete procesa obrazovanja i njegova ishoda na visokoškolskoj razini.*

**Ključne riječi:** *mješovito podučavanje, net generacija, tehnologija, visokoškolsko obrazovanje.*

### 1. Introduction

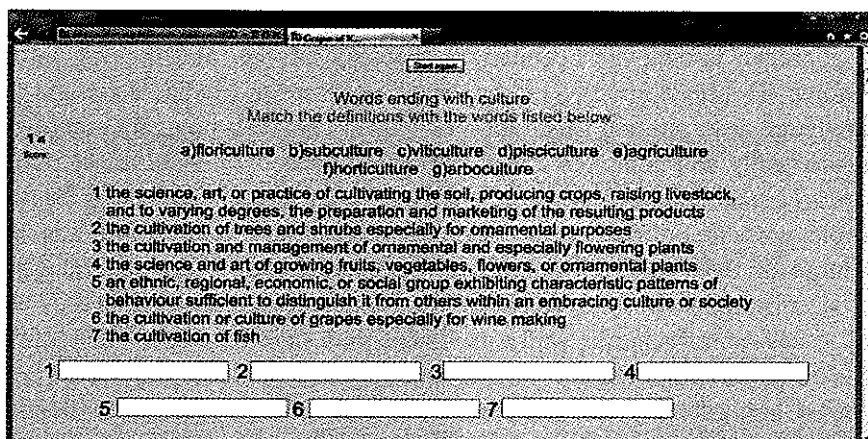
For a long time now, language teachers have been enthusiastic about using technology in teaching, not only to support their efforts, but also to help students learn independently, outside the classroom. They have turned their attention to a phenomenon named the New Learner, the Digital Native, the Net Generation or the Next Generation (Dziuban & Hartman, 2004, Oblinger, 2003). Defining

today's students as New Learners suggests a fundamental difference in the way they approach knowledge acquisition, problem solving, and moving into the workforce (Dobbins, 2005). Their constant exposure to Media has taught them to challenge any tradition, institution or value. They can navigate complicated software easily and complete a task while simultaneously listen to the portable CD player, and talk on the mobile phone. They are characterised by using multiple, portable online devices – whether it is laptops, mobiles or iPads. More and more of them take class notes on personal digital assistants and get the desired information from blogs and wikis. Equipped with such skills they are in many cases more technologically proficient than their teachers. Their lifestyle and learning environment is changing and they like the ability to access course materials, anytime, anyplace, and are positive about the convenience, flexibility and accessibility of language course material on the Web. Keeping this in mind the language teachers realize why it is so important to incorporate technology into their courses.

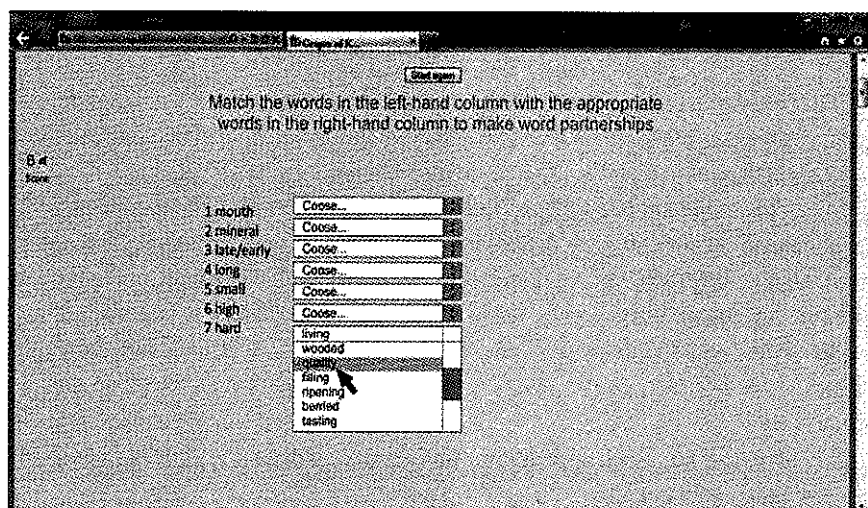
## **2. What opportunities does technology offer in language teaching?**

There are many opportunities that technology offers. Firstly, using technology is motivating. One example may be playing language-learning games. Students enjoy the task and at the same time derive learning benefits through recycling of language. Most students like multimedia exercises, as they can proceed at their own pace and make their own choices as to how to work through the materials. Secondly, the interactivity of language exercises can be beneficial. Web-based exercises are more interactive than paper-based exercises. The fact that they have to work on an interactive exercise adds variety to the class. Language is reviewed in a different way – perhaps doing mix-and-match exercise game with collocations.

Thirdly, the students appreciate the instant feedback which is provided with good interactive materials.



**Figure 1** – Language feedback exercise intended for students' vocabulary practice



**Figure 2** – Language feedback exercise intended for students' word partnership practice

They can make choices as to how many times to redo an exercise. One of the great benefits relates to the fact that the computer is used to enable communication between two groups (teacher and student) separated by time and distance. Thus, supporting a course with technology allows students and teacher more flexibility in place and time. The Digital Natives being a part of the Net Generation expect their language teachers to offer more opportunities to use technology in their courses.

In addition, the use of technology outside the language classroom makes students more autonomous and used to evaluating and selecting materials, planning out their own use of web-based materials in their own time.

The use of technology can be time saving for the teacher. Posting course materials online for learners to access can save the teacher the time and expense of photo copying. If a teacher prepares and saves a lesson on an interactive whiteboard, it can be recycled with the next group of students. Also, the use of technology can be current. An example can be using a listening activity with today's news from the BBC's website.



Figure 3 – BBC website intended for students' listening activities

Clearly, there are many benefits to be derived from integrating technology into teaching and learning. There are many factors which influence the extent to which teachers use technology in their courses.

### 3. What is blended learning?

Blended learning refers to a language course which combines a face-to-face (F2F) classroom component with an appropriate use of technology. The term technology covers a wide range of recent technologies, such as CD-ROMs, interactive whiteboards, and the Internet. It also covers the use of computers as a means of communication, such as chat and email, and a number of environments which help teachers to enrich their courses, such as blogs, wikis and VLEs (virtual learning environments). Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary defines

“blend” as “to fix or mingle together; esp. to mingle, combine or associate so that the separate things mixed, or the line of demarcation, cannot be distinguished” (Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary, 1913). Some educators define blended learning approaches as finding a harmonious balance between online access to knowledge and face-to-face human interaction (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003) or the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

The term blended learning has been used in the business world for a long time. There, it refers to a situation where an employee can continue working full time and simultaneously take a training course. A Web-based platform can be used for such a training course. An increased number of companies are attracted by the potential of blended learning and see it as a way of saving costs.

Blended learning in terms of language teaching is most commonly applied to a course where all learners meet with the teacher in a face-to-face (F2F) class, but in which the course includes parallel self-study components such as access to web-based materials or CD-ROM. The use of the above-mentioned elements may be optional. Students can be set pre-lesson tasks or homework tasks between the F2F classes.

Blended learning is not a new phenomenon in ELT. For many language teachers it is nothing new (Claypole, 2003). It has also been criticized in the cases when it was run without a principled approach with little or no relation between the taught and the online components of a course.

Therefore, it is very important to carefully choose online materials and integrate them into the courses. Successful integration of technology in language learning is influenced by a number of important factors. These include attitudes, level, the volume and type of teacher organized training, teachers’ and their learners’ access to the resources and cost. Keeping in mind the teachers’ enthusiasm and positive attitudes towards technology, there are several guiding principles that would help them realize the full potential of blended learning.

#### **4. How to balance traditional approaches and technology?**

When planning a course, it is important to determine the extent to which technology will be used. In order to find balance in the use of traditional approaches and technology, the following principles may help.

##### ***4.1 Teaching in a principled way***

The fact is that whenever a new technology appears, there is something which is called the ‘wow’ effect. However, teachers should not be fascinated

by the novelty. They should always focus on the learners' needs and carefully consider whether the technology will improve teaching and learning keeping in mind that teaching is driven by the pedagogy and supported by the technology.

#### 4.2 Using technology to complement and improve F2F teaching

Technology should be considered as a way of complementing and enhancing classroom activities. Students may complete several tasks, such as playing a game which recycles language in a fun context.

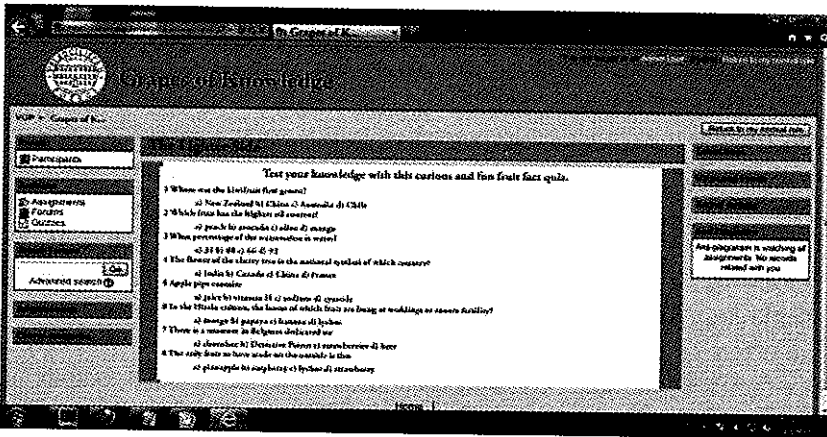


Figure 4 – Interactive exercise to support a coursebook unit

Here integration is a key concept. If there is a close correlation between the content of the lesson and the online materials, students will use the online materials more enthusiastically.

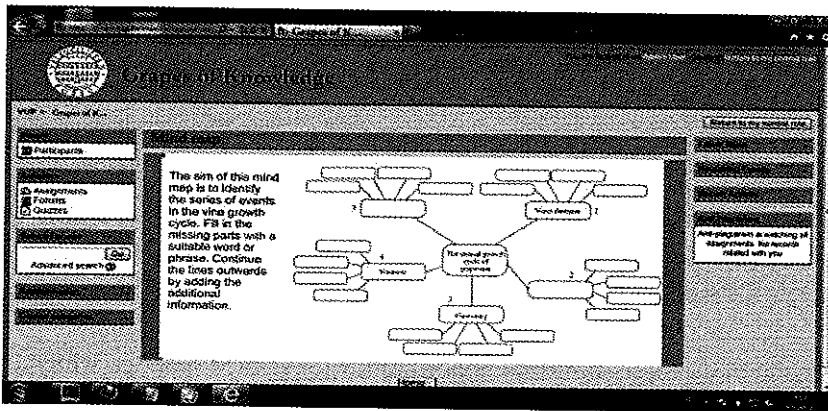


Figure 5 – Interactive exercise to support a coursebook unit

### 4.3 Separating the role of the teacher and the role of technology

Teachers should not be afraid that they will be replaced by the computer because the teacher and technology play different roles. It is important to distinguish the respective roles of each. Clearly, there are many areas of overlap, but it is important not to see the teacher and technology as interchangeable and to clearly distinguish what each can do that the other cannot.

The role of teachers is to do a number of things which require human interaction. Firstly, teachers perform a needs analysis by testing the students. Testing can be supported by technology (an adaptive test on CD-ROM, needs-analysis software to help placement, an Excel spreadsheet), but not replaced by it. Needs analysis gives valuable information that helps the teacher to create the learning syllabus. A computer, again, may play a role in this (office software), but decisions such as the choice of conversation topics are in the remit of the teacher. The teacher writes the lesson plan and delivers the class, interprets the materials, moderates the sessions and reacts to student utterances. The teacher is there to deal with predictable and unpredictable elements of language and to develop student's ability to react to the unexpected in the process of language learning.

Technology performs some tasks better than the teacher. It is available 24/7 and offers endless exposure to the target language. Students can control the exposure they receive. They can play an audio clip as many times as they like, or redo an exercise until they are satisfied with their results.

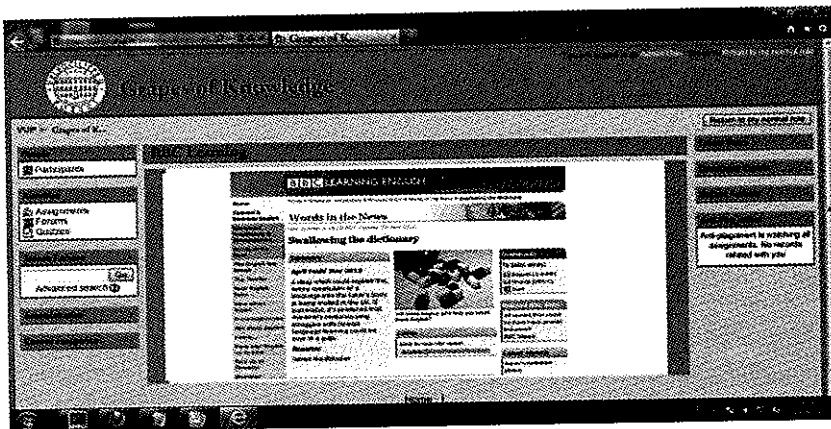


Figure 6 – Section of BBC Learning English website that contains listening activities

Technology offers limitless opportunities for guided practice which can be done either in the classroom or at home. With the help of computers students gain practice in using language in guided situations.



#### 4.4 "It's not so much the program, more what you do with it" (Jones, 1986)

Despite the fact that this observation was made a long time ago, in technological terms it still holds true. A CD-ROM can be used in three different ways. A learner buys an English course on a CD-ROM and follows the course at his home. This way of learning does not address the complex issues involved in learning a language keeping in mind that speaking a language has a social dimension – we communicate with others.

A CD-ROM can complement a taught course when the student in the self-study period or at home consolidates his knowledge by completing the exercises set by the teacher.

A CD-ROM can be used in class as a part of presentation with the aim to promote communication between the learners.

Nowadays, the coursebook has become just one component in a suite of material, which may include both CD-ROM and online exercises. Publishing companies have recently offered a tremendous variety of paper-based and electronic support material.

The teacher's role is to select the best mix of materials for a course. If a teacher wants to meet the learners' needs, exactly an option may be to create his own materials.

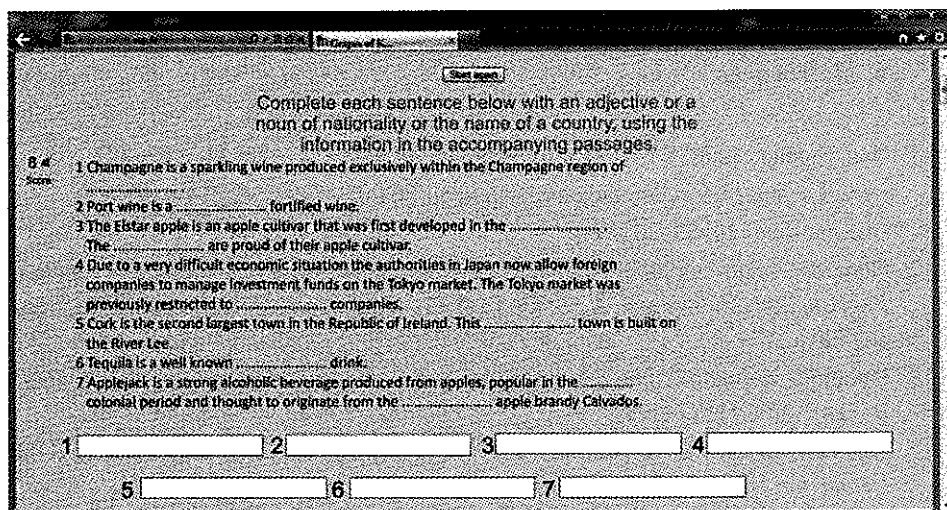


Figure 7 – Interactive exercise to support a coursebook unit

## 5. Conclusion

Language teachers have always been prepared for new challenges in teaching holding positive attitudes towards technology. The Net Generation students are stimulus junkies who multitask and demand response immediately. In order to comply with their needs language teachers have to adapt to facilitative roles and incorporate new technology into lesson plans at a faster pace than today.

However, there are a number of concerns frequently expressed about using technology. Some critics of computer-based interactive exercises argue that 'stimulus-response' activities such as gap-filling, true/false and mix-and-match activities are essentially boring and the types of feedback offered on many exercises is limiting. It is difficult to contrive the best solutions. Stephen Bax has written about the 'normalization' of technology. This is a time when technology is used in a wholly appropriate way, and is so taken for granted that it becomes 'invisible' (Bax, 2003).

The challenge for teachers, therefore, is to maximize the potential of F2F and online components in teaching. Their training in the uptake of new technology and the support of all the staff included in the high level education system is a vital factor that will create options for greater quality in a learning environment and hopefully lead to better learning outcomes, both for teachers and learners.

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## Die Nutzung von Technologie und ihre Anwendung beim Lehren von Fremdsprachen auf Hochschullichem Niveau

UDC: 378.147:81'243]:004  
Fachartikel

Posteingang: 05. 06. 2012  
Akzeptiert: 20. 10. 2012

**Zusammenfassung:** Diese Abhandlung erläutert die Bedeutung von Technologie in der hochschulischen Bildung und ihre Rolle im Fremdsprachenunterricht, damit dieser so qualitativ und erfolgreich wie möglich ist. Neue Generationen von Studenten (Net Generationen) sind mit Technologie aufgewachsen und deshalb ist es wichtig klassische Formen und Methoden des Fremdsprachenunterrichtes mit Unterricht zu kombinieren der im virtuellen Raum stattfindet. Die Kombination verschiedener Arbeitsmethoden und Medien in der traditionellen (F2F) oder online Umgebung bietet den Lehrern und Studenten verschiedene Möglichkeiten der Wahl und so wird die Einfältigkeit im Unterricht ausgeschlossen.

Es ist sehr wichtig den traditionellen Ansatz mit der richtigen Anwendung der Technologie zu harmonisieren, weil auf diese Weise eine qualitativ bessere und einfachere Kommunikation zwischen Lehrer und Student ermöglicht wird und so Ihre aktive Zusammenarbeit gefördert wird. Gleichzeitig ist eine leichtere Prüfung der Studenten ermöglicht und die Verfolgung Ihres Fortschritts, und Sie werden gebildet um Probleme erfolgreich zu lösen, selbständig zu forschen, zu analysieren und Informationen zu interpretieren. Die zeitliche und räumliche Flexibilität ermöglicht unbegrenzten Zugang zu Wissen und Bildungsinhalten. Bei der Konfrontierung mit den Herausforderungen der modernen Technologie brauchen die Fremdsprachenlehrer die Unterstützung der Fachleute die sich mit der Strategie der Verbesserung des Bildungsprozesses befassen und mit dessen Ausgang auf Hochschullichem Niveau.

**Schlüsselwörter:** gemischter Unterricht, Net Generation, Technologie, Hochschulische Bildung

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