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The Absence of the White Elephant in the Language Classroom: Pedagogical Implications for Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

This article critiques the overreliance on technology in second language instruction, particularly within the framework of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Arguing that excessive technological integration can hinder rather than help language acquisition, the paper advocates for a re-centering of the human and interactive elements of language learning. Emphasis is placed on deliberate practice, contextual learning, and the cognitive benefits of traditional tools such as handwriting. The argument is grounded in current pedagogical theory and supported by empirical findings.

Keywords

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Educational Technology, Language Pedagogy, Cognitive Engagement, Second Language Acquisition

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Introduction

In the modern language classroom, technology is often perceived as an essential pedagogical tool. From interactive whiteboards to language learning apps, digital innovations are lauded for their capacity to enhance engagement and streamline instruction. However, there is growing concern that the pervasive use of technology may inadvertently disrupt the core objectives of language learning. Within the framework of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasizes real-world interaction and contextualized communication, the presence of technology can become a pedagogical "white elephant"—a large, unwieldy presence that overshadows essential human interaction and cognitive engagement.

This paper posits that meaningful language acquisition occurs most effectively in an environment that prioritizes comprehension, social interaction, and deliberate cognitive processing over the spectacle of digital tools. Drawing on current research and reflective pedagogical practice, it explores how minimizing technology use can foster deeper learning and more authentic communication.

The Role of Human Interaction in CLT

CLT emphasizes the integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing to develop both linguistic proficiency and cultural competence (Savignon, 2002). The teacher in a CLT context acts not as a transmitter of knowledge but as a facilitator of interaction and inquiry. Effective second language instruction is rooted in realistic, contextualized scenarios where students are encouraged to explore, negotiate meaning, and apply language in socially meaningful ways (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

To achieve this, instruction must prioritize comprehension before production. As Swain (1985) noted in her Output Hypothesis, students must first understand and internalize linguistic input before they can produce meaningful language. The presence of an overbearing technological interface can disrupt this progression by shifting focus from content to form, or from dialogue to display.

The Cognitive Costs of Digital Overuse

While digital tools can offer efficiency and visual engagement, they often compromise the depth of learning. PowerPoint presentations, for example, may visually stimulate but tend to create passive learning environments that discourage active participation (Tufte, 2006). Moreover, the constant switching between screens and multimedia formats can fragment attention and impair working memory, both of which are essential for language processing (Mayer, 2009).

Several studies have identified the negative consequences of excessive screen-based instruction. For instance, Mueller and Oppenheimer (2014) found that students who took handwritten notes retained conceptual information better than those who used laptops, suggesting that the slower pace of handwriting fosters deeper cognitive engagement. Similarly, Sana, Weston, and Cepeda (2013) demonstrated that the use of laptops in classrooms leads to lower academic performance not only for users but also for their peers, due to distraction and reduced focus.

The Pedagogical Benefits of Analog Tools

In contrast to technology-mediated learning, analog tools such as pen and paper promote intentionality and reflection. Writing by hand engages the sensorimotor system and encourages semantic encoding, which enhances memory and understanding (Mangen & Velmans, 2013). Furthermore, the physical act of writing fosters a sense of ownership and agency over one's learning, reinforcing self-efficacy and metacognitive awareness.

These benefits are especially critical in language learning, where the mastery of grammar, vocabulary, and syntax requires sustained cognitive engagement. By encouraging students to write, revise, and reflect manually, teachers can cultivate linguistic awareness and critical thinking—skills that are often diminished in tech-saturated environments.

Reclaiming the Language Classroom

The argument here is not to eliminate technology entirely but to restore balance and intentionality in its use. Pedagogical decisions should be driven by instructional goals, not by technological capabilities. As Selwyn (2016) warns, the uncritical adoption of educational technology risks turning the classroom into a site of digital compliance rather than intellectual engagement.

Instead, educators should prioritize practices that reinforce human interaction, cultural relevance, and learner autonomy. This includes structuring classroom discourse around authentic dialogues, integrating culturally grounded content, and fostering environments where students are encouraged to speak, listen, and write with purpose and confidence.

Conclusion

In the absence of the “white elephant” of excessive technology, the language classroom reclaims its identity as a human-centered, cognitively rich environment. Through deliberate practice, analog tools, and socially meaningful interaction, language learners are better positioned to acquire not only the mechanics of a new language but also the cultural and communicative competence necessary for authentic engagement.

Technology, when used judiciously, can complement this process. However, it must not be allowed to overshadow the fundamental pedagogical principles upon which effective language instruction rests. The challenge for educators, then, is to resist the allure of the digital and return to the essentials of human learning: connection, comprehension, and communication.

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Author Biography

I, Anahit M. Hakoupian, Ph.D., Associate Professor (Teaching), have dedicated over three decades to advancing second-language acquisition through innovative methodologies and immersive learning experience. As a faculty member in the Department of Latin American and Iberian Cultures at USC, I have played a pivotal role in curriculum design, experiential learning, and interdisciplinary collaboration, shaping transformative educational opportunities for my students.

My student-centered approach integrates listening, speaking, reading, and writing with cultural awareness. I have designed interactive classroom activities such as the “Town Hall Meeting” and “Broadcast News Station,” which immerse students in real-world scenarios that enhance linguistic fluency and critical thinking. By incorporating technology, including multimedia presentations and video projects, I have modernized language instruction to make learning more engaging and effective.

Beyond the classroom, I have championed study-abroad programs and service-learning initiatives that connect students with organizations such as Carecen, USC's Neighborhood Academic Initiative, and Hope Street Family Center. These experiences have reinforced the importance of language learning in community engagement, leading to student achievements such as Outstanding Service Awards.

My scholarly work explores the intersection of literature and pedagogy, contributing to the discourse on effective teaching methodologies and literary preservation. I have presented research at national and international conferences, and furthermore published articles in *Pedagogy and Literature* further advancing knowledge in second-language acquisition and instructional innovation.

In faculty development and mentorship, I have trained Teaching Assistants in my home department as well as the Language Center, provided model classes, and mentored RTPC faculty in the Department of Latin American and Iberian cultures for over a decade. In addition, I am a recipient of Center for Languages and Culture Certificate in "Communicative Teaching" and "Using Technology in a Communicative Class." My service on key university committees, including the Undergraduate Studies Curriculum Committee and the Faculty Advisory Board for Trojan Bloom, reflects my dedication to enhancing academic programs and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration.

Recognized for my commitment to innovation, I have received the Faculty Development Grant for Technology and the Dornsife Faculty Development Fund Award. My participation in USC's Course Pilot Project led to the development of "Spanish Composition through Literature," a testament to my dedication to curricular innovation.

My impact extends beyond USC, with teaching experience at UCLA's Department of Spanish and Portuguese and UCLA Extension. I have designed specialized courses such as Spanish for Business Communication and Spanish for the Media, demonstrating my adaptability in curriculum development. Additionally, my work with non-profit organizations, including "We Care for Youth," has provided underprivileged students with language tutoring opportunities, reinforcing my belief in education as a tool for social change.

My dedication has been recognized through outstanding student evaluations and my ranking as the number one faculty member in USC's Top Ten Faculty for Outstanding Teaching. My ACTFL OPI certification and completion of advanced language teaching courses further highlight my commitment to professional growth. Looking ahead, I remain dedicated to mentoring future educators, refining pedagogical approaches, and promoting global engagement initiatives that advance second-language acquisition research.

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