Teaching ESL/EFL in a World of Social Media, Mash-Ups, and Hyper-Collaboration

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This article explores the emerging pedagogical potential offered by today’s technologies and how understanding the relationship between emerging technology and emerging pedagogy can enhance the teaching of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL). The author begins with an overview of recent developments in the field, focused upon pedagogical practice and computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and then describes suggestions for incorporating various forms of social and new media within collaborative learning practices. By incorporating these forms of popular communication into language teaching, teachers can promote participation and engagement. They are also able to raise awareness of the benefits of various forms of literacy. The essay concludes with some thoughts about pedagogical and technological developments that teachers might anticipate in the future.

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We have witnessed dramatic changes in our understanding of the field of TESOL during my professional career. We have developed an appreciation for elements of constructivism within learning environments (McCarty, Watahomigie, Torres-Guzman, thi Dien, & Perez, 2004). We have witnessed a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction (Brandl, 2002; Taylor, 1983). We have developed an understanding of the value of authenticity across language input, tasks, materials, and feedback. We have developed an appreciation for the promotion of student autonomy and collaboration (Benson, 2007; Chamot & O’Malley, 1987; Warschauer & Healey, 1998) as well as project-based
instruction (Hanson-Smith, 2000) and content-based instruction (Gibbons, 2003). These evolving paradigms can all benefit from an enhanced understanding of the role of technology in the language classroom. Often language teachers react to the introduction of technology as if it is an external force rather than an obvious component within this changing pedagogical landscape. I think that it is critical that teachers develop an appreciation for the potential that today’s existing and emerging technologies offer as we rethink the nature of our classrooms and the roles that we as teachers and learners assume.

From the perspective of a computer-assisted language learning (CALL) professional, I believe the most significant changes relate to the evolution of how we access, construct, and exchange language today. The digital landscape that we are immersed in not only provides us with access to information, but it also requires that we play an active role in the ongoing exchange of information. After all, it is a participatory culture that is being co-constructed. We are not only surrounded by potential corpora of authentic linguistic input, but we are expected to engage with one another around the construction of new forms of language in the realm of social media. This linguistically dense realm offers English teachers and learners unlimited opportunities to interact around meaningful, authentic, and diverse instances of language practice. In order for teachers to recognize the potential of these environments, it may be helpful to discuss the pedagogical principles that are supported by these technological developments.

**COLLABORATIVE LEARNING**

One of the most compelling aspects of today’s social media landscape is the variety of ways that we can collaborate. The potential for creating collaborative activities is greatly enhanced by today’s technologies. In particular, social and other new forms of media create opportunities for linguistic interaction that never existed previously. Social media encourages people to engage in the participatory culture that pervades the Internet today and many of these activities fit perfectly in the language classroom. The potential for collaboration in the language classroom has long been recognized as beneficial. Recently, collaboration has been
promoted for contributing to the increased student control over learning (Chun, 2006), engagement with feedback (Storch, 2005), increased student motivation (Swain & Lapkin, 1998), and opportunities to engage in new forms of language use (Kessler, Bikowski, & Boggs, 2012). However, as some have noted, preparing students for optimal collaborative experiences will require rethinking classroom practices (Kessler et al., 2012; Storch, 2005). Such new ways of thinking are likely to align well with these new forms of media because they offer opportunities to collaborate in wholly new, creative, and motivating ways. In fact, there is a need to collaborate in these contexts in order for them to function properly. Through the incorporation of many of the activities included in this article, we can help students to gain valuable practice with the language while also becoming better collaborators.

**RECENT DEVELOPMENTS**

Over the last decade we have seen a number of developments in technology that have greatly expanded and complicated the landscape of language teaching resources. Some of these have been predictable while others have been largely unanticipated. Most are not obviously beneficial in the ESL/EFL classroom at first. In fact, the greatest challenge for many English teachers today is managing to sort through the wealth of resources to identify those that are most useful for their own teaching contexts. We are faced with an array of tools that allow us to interact with one another through multimodal means, simultaneously and at our convenience. However, some teachers may find that when so much is left to our convenience that no sense of convenience remains. It may be of primary importance for teachers to establish a set of expectations for themselves as well as for their students prior to experimenting with these new tasks and contexts. The pages of this journal could be filled for years with examples of technologies that could be used to enhance the ESL and EFL learning experience, so the examples here are by no means comprehensive. I have simply selected a handful of examples that illustrate the impressive array of resources that exist today.
Using the Internet as a Learner Corpus
With the wealth of English language material on the Internet today it would be difficult to argue against using it as a corpus for learners. However, the quantity of material may overwhelm teachers. There are a number of practical tools that may help us tackle this abundance of linguistic data. It is not only important that teachers understand how to sort through this exponential mass of language, but that we also assist our students in developing their emerging English language data management skills. Some of the most obvious tools include those that treat this linguistic data as conventional corpora. These web-based concordance tools offer easy access to large bodies of text.

Basic Corpus Tools
Some of the basic corpus tools that I like to share with my CALL MA candidates are gathered in Corpuseye (corpuseye.com), which is a collection of traditional and web-based corpora, including the British National Corpus in both spoken and written forms, the UCLA Television News, a Chat corpus, the Enron email data set, and the Supreme Court dialogues. Corpuseye provides an easy-to-use interface for doing some basic searches and collocation activities that can help students recognize patterns within authentic language use (Granger, 2003).

Archived versions of Wikipedia can also be searched via Corpuseye. With the constant state of potential change that is inherent in Wikipedia, using an archived version provides a static instance of the encyclopedia that can be accessed at a later date with the same results. However, accessing Wikipedia directly has many more potential benefits for the language classroom. Students can contribute to Wikipedia entries directly, particularly entries which are related to their areas of study or cultural background. Such contributions are likely to welcome feedback in the form of content and grammatical correction as well as textual exchanges in the meta-discussion “talk” area that accompanies each entry. This
backchannel “talk” area also offers students an opportunity to explore or engage in discussion about the complexities or nuances of definitions that extend far beyond the surface level of the current entry.

Search engines have become ubiquitous in our daily lives. Google, probably the most popular search engine, provides extensive authentic language samples for any possible topic. It is certainly easy to recognize the value that such an enormous collection of language samples could present. Not only can we provide students with examples of target language text in contextualized use, but we can also gather audio, video, and images for use in the classroom. Some have also promoted the use of Google as a corpus and concordance for language learning. Recently, there have been suggestions that using Google can be superior to conventional corpora due to the usability and result options (Sha, 2010). Others have suggested that this practice can help students improve phraseology (Geluso, 2013), largely due to the extensive output that is provided (Shei, 2008).

**Aggregators**

Some of the most interesting resources that have become available in recent years are data aggregators. There are a wide variety of aggregators that gather data from across the web and present it in a synthesized, summarized, or otherwise meaningful way. These aggregators often make it possible to gain a holistic perspective on topics that might otherwise be difficult to capture. It is common for these aggregators to combine cultural data with geographic data such as a geographic representation of voting trends or the juxtaposition of other socioeconomic data with available public resources. While the content provided by such tools may be quite useful for certain topics in a variety of language classrooms, they are perhaps most useful in our field as extensive examples of authentic language use.

**Automated Language Analyzers**

A number of tools are designed specifically to automate language analysis. Among these are tools that assess the accuracy and complexity of writing and speaking. Cotos (2012) provides an
overview of the automated writing evaluation tools available today. According to *The New York Times*, the non-profit EdX has designed a system that will evaluate students’ compositions that will be freely available on the web for anyone to use (Markoff, 2012). While such developments are promising, some critics of this approach to writing evaluation argue that this kind of evaluation may promote predictable and formulaic writing. Another very useful tool is the syntactic and lexical complexity analyzer (http://aihaiyang.com/synlex/), which can be downloaded or run directly through a web browser, allowing users to copy and paste any text and evaluate the lexical and syntactic complexity based upon numerous possible metrics. Teachers can use this to demonstrate student use of redundant vocabulary or to promote longer and more sophisticated sentence structures. By providing students with an observable metric (and tool to revisit as they revise) such a tool can help to raise students’ awareness of these important aspects of writing. Interested readers can find examples of how this tool has been used to evaluate syntactic complexity (Lu, 2012) and lexical complexity (Lu, 2010).

While some have suggested that automated analysis could potentially replace the need for teachers to ever need to do this kind of work, I feel that these tools function best when integrated with the guidance of an informed language teacher. In fact, some automated language evaluation can be misleading or detrimental without such intervention.

**Language as Multimodal Input**

It should be obvious that the wealth of English material on the Internet is not limited to traditional forms of text. Various forms of media and multimedia will be addressed later in this article, but there are also many new ways to visualize text. Many recent social media developments have resulted in opportunities to represent, view, and display textual language samples in ways that add value or enhance the stimulus. In fact, many sources of meaningful authentic language that are available on the Internet today may not initially strike the casual observer as language at all. Internet memes, word clouds, and viral videos are some examples. Teachers should recognize the benefits that such
nontextual representation may offer learners with varying learning styles. These representations are also becoming important new forms of literacy across the digital landscape.

One example of a tool that allows for a visual representation of text is a word cloud generator (WCG). WCGs create visual clouds of words in which the prominence of the word is correlated with the frequency of that word in the source text. Source texts can be copied and pasted directly into the WCG or fed from a variety of social media sources. These collections of words can be used for a variety of language learning activities, including developing prereading strategies or introducing new vocabulary prior to a reading exercise. Some suggestions for using word clouds in the language classroom are offered by Baralt, Pennestri, & Selvandin (2011). There are a handful of WCG tools on the Internet today, including Wordle (wordle.net), Word it out (worditout.com), and Tagzedo (tagzedo.com). As you might expect, each offers a slightly different set of options for your word cloud creation. Tagzedo generated a cloud using the source of the entire March 2013 issue of *TESOL Journal*. As you can see in Figure 1, this tool also allows you to choose from a variety of shape layouts.

![Figure 1. TESOL Journal, March 2013, word cloud](image-url)
We can see that many of the most prominent words are those that we ought to expect from *TESOL Journal*. A teacher could generate a cloud using a reading text prior to reading or even a related text that might introduce important concepts without directly exposing students to the exact vocabulary in question. One feature of a Tagzedo-generated cloud is that by scrolling your mouse over any given word, a user can see that word magnified so that less frequent words are available in an interactive manner. Such a word cloud could be used in an English classroom in an exercise that encourages students to explore why some words might be much less frequent than others in a given text. An example of this display can be seen in Figure 2.

By combining the text with a meaningful shape and interactive ability to zoom in on any word, users are presented with a meaningful way to explore the language. These maps are only one example of mash-ups.

**Mash-Ups**
The term mash-up originally referred to a combination of technologies that would meet a new purpose that was not met by

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Figure 2. Less frequent word *integration* in word cloud magnified
each of the technologies in isolation. In recent years digital culture has been inundated with mash-ups in music, fiction, and just about any aspect of culture that can be imagined. We have also seen a mash-up of language and varied forms of media. In this participatory culture, many participants in social media have developed a complex mash-up of language and media that might as well be a foreign dialect for many language teachers. This landscape of mash-ups has great potential for the language classroom. Of course it makes sense to work within a context that is relevant to our students, but there are also many ways that the extralinguistic digital artifacts constructed within these environments can be utilized by those who are less technologically savvy. By incorporating mash-ups as prompts or activity goals we can accommodate lower level learners in their development. For example, sentence or phrase level reading and/or writing activities can be built around the use of Internet memes.

The term meme was originally defined as “a cultural item that is transmitted by repetition” (Dawkins, 1976). Internet memes are comprised of the merging of an image (or video) and a brief portion of text. These memes have become quite popular in social media contexts and present an opportunity for students to engage in simple brief writing tasks that can convey rich cultural awareness. Students could be presented with specific images and asked to write the accompanying text and then share with their classmates to elicit feedback. Students could also gather images from the Internet or create their own. If these memes were posted by students in a social media environment, such as a private Facebook group or a similar alternative system such as Ning, teachers could help students recognize and exploit the culturally rich potential of these social artifacts. There are numerous tools and websites devoted to the simple creation and archiving of these types of memes and as of this writing there are estimated to be well over 9,000 memes currently residing on the Internet. There are also sites devoted to categorizing and ranking these text/image Internet memes (http://www.squidoo.com/top-10-internet-memes; http://knowyourmeme.com/)

Another example of popular social media that may not seem obvious in the language classroom is social video such as Vimeo
or Youtube. In addition to the simple act of commenting on videos, these sites allow students to create and share their own video projects or construct mash-ups or responses to existing videos. One recent example is the popular Youtube video *Gangnam Style*. This video is the first to be watched by more than 1 billion people and it has spawned numerous fan fiction imitations (Darth Vader style, Minecraft style, etc.). It is just the kind of media that can motivate students to actively participate in learning, particularly if they are encouraged to collaboratively construct their own rendition.

The formal language conventions of education are changing rapidly. Some have transitioned writing classroom exercises to incorporate media and digital delivery. Joel Bloch, an ESL composition professor at Ohio State University, has been using digital storytelling in his classes for years. Students write their autobiographical stories with the intention of composing a montage of images, text, and video that results in a compelling presentation. Students are motivated and engaged and even look forward to “reading” their classmates’ work. This transition is taking on many different forms.

Teachers today have a variety of media to create activities that engage students within authentic contexts. These media are also changing the very nature of the way that language is being represented and used. We can see examples all around us of creative mash-ups between language and media. One useful example is Newspaper Map (http://newspapermap.com), which provides an interactive map of thousands of online newspapers across the globe and allows users to filter by language and location. Full articles are available in 60 different languages. Translations are also available from foreign language newspapers into English. Figure 3 illustrates this site.

There are a number of other interactive and mash-up maps that could be quite useful in the ESL classroom. *The New York Times* hosts an interactive map that allows users to observe different ethnic waves of immigration to the United States from 1880 to 2000 by scrolling through each decade’s census data point. Users can get detailed information by scrolling the mouse over any given county in the nation. Figure 4 shows this map in 2000.
This particular data set converges geographical and social constructs throughout the past 13 decades of United States history. Students can identify the patterns of immigration over time according to ethnic group and location. Like many of these multimodal resources, this map provides data that is complex, rich, and easily manipulated by users. This easily manipulated and interactive data offers students the ability to take control of their own learning and to access information as it is needed and when it is most salient.

With interactive exercise generation tools such as Hot Potatoes (hotpot.uvic.ca) or those included in various learning management systems, users can embed interactive maps such as the one above. This allows teachers to create interactive lessons with media that can be easily manipulated in a way that can be very engaging.

Games and Gaming
There has recently been a surge of interest in games and gaming across the education landscape. Language teaching and learning are in many respects an ideal context for the integration of these concepts. A handful of games have been specifically designed for
teaching English. Among these is the game Trace Effects (http://americanenglish.state.gov/trace-effects), which was created by the U.S. Department of State. This collaborative and interactive virtual reality language learning game is constructed around the learner goals in the TESOL Technology Standards (Healey et al., 2011). The interface provides learners with opportunities to explore a number of important destinations in the United States and interact with a diverse group of English-speaking interlocutors as the player completes numerous puzzles and quests that reinforce the learning of language and culture. Although this game is targeted to teenage English learners outside of the United States, it is available online to any interested teachers and learners. The high-quality production and thoughtfully designed interface are likely to influence future games targeting English learners.

While games designed for language learning are fairly straightforward for teachers, there are many other games available...
that can be easily integrated into language lessons. Teachers can have students observe each other while playing the game and narrate or describe each step of the process or achievement. With the walkthrough videos for games like Escape the Classroom (http://tinyurl.com/cs25sx4), you can pair students so that one student sees the video of the solutions and has to explain it to another.

There are many other simple games that can be used in the language classroom—for example, Every Day the Same Dream (http://tinyurl.com/yc5dttp), in which students determine the outcome by making decisions and in which they can narrate potential outcomes; and Façade (http://www.interactivestory.net) in which players visit old friends who are married and in the middle of a fight and the players’ choices can have predictable and/or interesting outcomes.

**CHALLENGES**

Some have observed that we are inclined to use social media to extend our ability to surround ourselves with those who resemble us socioculturally or philosophically. However, the increasing social nature of the Internet allows us to strive to reach outside of these expectations. I personally feel that it is important that ESL/EFL teachers create opportunities for engaging with a variety of authentic speakers of English, including those who may not share the same opinions or perspectives.

In fact, it is easy to envision a future where navigating and negotiating groups of people who have disparate views from our own is of critical importance. In order to prepare for this, we as teachers need to use the Internet to help students engage with and grapple with other opinions and other views. After all, in the attempt to prepare students to engage in English-speaking culture through exposure to the cultural values of the English-speaking world, students ought to be not only exposed to differing opinions but also encouraged to contribute their own values and opinions in the process. This kind of engagement can help to motivate students and support their ongoing efforts as language (and culture) learners. Some have suggested that addressing controversial issues is a key aspect to teaching culture.
In the crowd-sourced and aggregated world that we now inhabit, we are able to get varied forms of feedback from numerous sources. This can mean that teachers who carefully design activities no longer have to be the only external source of feedback for their students. Students can be encouraged to contribute to Wikipedia on topics that they are either familiar with due to their academic pursuits for those in higher education or familiar with from their cultural backgrounds for others. Not only will this invite others to offer adjustments and corrections directly to the contribution, but it can provide the opportunity for students to engage in the meta-discussion that takes place in the background of each Wikipedia entry. These meta-discussions can provide fascinating and informative insights into the negotiation of the task of accurately defining terms, which may otherwise seem simplistic and superficial. Students who contribute can gain valuable feedback about not only their language production, but also about the effectiveness of their thoughts about terms. It could certainly be valuable to simply have students delve into these negotiations to develop a better sense of how consensus is formed, as well as how nuanced some definitions can be.

GUIDELINES FOR TEACHERS

Hopefully these suggestions for activities, along with these few examples, provide you with an idea of how you might begin to integrate authentic social media contexts and forms of communication into your teaching. Not only do these activities and contexts promote engagement and participation that support extensive practice for students, they also provide opportunities to contribute in public contexts that welcome linguistic and content-oriented feedback from others. They also encourage students to cultivate a voice and sense of ownership around topics about which they may be knowledgeable.

Of course, the awareness of these technological developments can be equally exciting or intimidating depending on your perspective. Smarter tools mean that teachers need to be more informed about how, when, and why to incorporate such tools. Such decisions suggest that CALL teacher preparation is now more important than it ever has been. While extensive preparation
within contextualized practice would be ideal, it is possible to provide some basic guidelines for teachers who are interested in incorporating these technologies into their teaching.

- **Focus on pedagogy.** It is important to maintain a focus upon the learning objectives. Unfortunately, it can be tempting to be swept away with technological innovation, but teachers should reflect on the purpose for the technological intervention.

- **Allow classroom practice to mimic authentic communication.** Reflect upon your own use of technology outside the classroom, particularly related to communication. It is likely that there are practices that you already engage in that could inform interesting and innovative practice in the classroom.

- **Don’t wait to be an expert.** Many teachers who are intimidated by technology are inclined to avoid it altogether. The resources and tools mentioned in this article are accessible to everyone. There is no learning curve and no place for fear!

- **Ease into new practices.** You can’t expect everything to perform anything perfectly upon first implementation. Effective integration requires reflection and repeated practice.

Teachers can also benefit from becoming familiar with the TESOL Technology Standards. The technology standards provide an overview of the goals and objectives for teachers with background information about the research and practice that informed them. The standards include vignettes of classroom practice and can-do checklists. The framework document can be downloaded for free from TESOL’s website (http://www.tesol.org/docs/books/bk_technologystandards_framework_721.pdf) and the full volume can be purchased from TESOL Publications in the online bookstore (http://iweb.tesol.org/Purchase/SearchCatalog.aspx).

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REFERENCES


