

The background of the image is a dark blue and purple night sky filled with numerous white stars of varying sizes. In the foreground, there is a silhouette of a forest of evergreen trees. The text is centered in the upper half of the image.

TOPIC OF THE WEEK

NOVEMBER'19 (14 to 20 Nov)

Communication and Creativity: Blend

No language is an island, but Icelandic tries. To keep alive its rich culture it has built linguistic defences to prevent erosion from outside influence. Yet the technological revolution of recent years has seen Iceland submerged by a rising tide of English.

At least a score more European languages, repositories of history and culture, face the same problem. Technology ought to be able to accommodate and encourage the rich variety of global communication. But this raises a wider question about modern-day nation states: can they encompass a multiplicity of languages and still appear coherent?

In the European context a single dominant language was historically seen as the indispensable glue that keeps citizens together. It would be wrong to think that languages do not have political purposes. They do. Obviously the dominant narratives that emerge from a people, and the language used to express them, influence the way a society views itself and forms its priorities. It is how we accommodate the languages within borders that is important.

Europeans fear being scattered by a babel of tongues, yet the EU, where nations cooperate, has defied historical experience. The heterogeneity of the EU's geographic community is a lesson worth learning. Instead of thinking that a nation is only unified by one language, a modern-day nationalism would represent its semantic diversity.

As more and more schools invest in mobile technologies, such as iPads, a common question on language fora is "can anyone recommend a good list of apps for language learning?"

Typical response is to suggest a range of generic apps for creating multimedia content (audio, video, animation, e-books, cartoons and so on) which promote productive skills of speaking and writing, higher-order thinking and that allow pupils to publish the results to a real audience.

Researching good apps and web tools takes time and keeping up to date with the latest innovations in educational technology is not a priority for some. For others, using authentic materials or web tools is an essential part of their practice to make their lessons as relevant and pedagogically purposeful as possible.

The 'MFLtwitterati' is a grassroots community of UK-based modern foreign language teachers on Twitter. It

has proved to be an invaluable testbed for ideas on using new technologies. Over time the group has developed a strong ethos of sharing innovative classroom practice, encouraging each other to experiment and feedback their findings for further discussion and reflection.

The use of social media has allowed colleagues to get to know each other as real people not just teachers and this has strengthened the sense of cohesion, solidarity and collective confidence. The reach of the MFLtwitterati goes far further than the UK, though. For example, the hashtag #mfltwitterati is now being used by language teachers all over the world and the MFL Twitterers list has more than 770 subscribers. This begs the question are MFL teachers the ultimate innovators with education technology?

Gauging the influence of an online community or to claim one group is better than another is at best problematic and at worst divisive. That said, based purely on anecdotal evidence would suggest that the MFLtwitterati is in fact leading the way as a subject-specific group promoting the use of technology, not only online but also face-to-face at conferences and networking events such as Teachmeets.

The more interesting question is: how well is technology suited to MFL? Well, one of the fundamentals of language learning is real communication and new technologies can certainly facilitate this essential aspect through, for example, videoconferencing and blogging. There are also lots of ways of recording and editing audio as a method of improving pronunciation, boosting learner confidence, extending speaking skills and deepening understanding. Filmmaking and animation also draw on a variety of useful skills and promote creativity, collaboration and personalised learning.

Teacher-produced audio or video podcasts are useful for encouraging autonomy and distance learning outside of the classroom where students are able to revise at a time which suits them. Moreover, the more pupils regularly access resources independently, the more opportunity they give themselves to master new skills and develop their learning further.

There are a plethora of possibilities for enhancing language learning with technology as there are colleagues willing to help from language for a and social media. The stumbling block for many is not having the time to seek out new tools and become familiar with

them, as well as the fear of relinquishing control to their pupils who may be more techno-savvy than they are.

The issue now is the widening gap between those who pro-actively use technology to promote creativity and collaboration, and those who only tick the ICT box with the same old 'drill and kill' websites (that focus on excessive repetition of simple, isolated skills) and MS Office.

Technology is not going away and language teachers need to embrace its full potential to engage our 21st century learners.

For reference:-

- <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2019/aug/15/why-its-time-to-stop-worrying-about-the-decline-of-the-english-language>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2013/may/16/language-teachers-technology-social-media>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2014/may/12/technology-language-teaching-learning-pedagogy>
- <https://www.tampabay.com/opinion/2019/11/08/pe-destrian-deaths-are-up-what-do-we-do-editorial/>