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Asian Language Teaching and Learning – The Influence of Technology on Students' Skills in SL Classroom

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1. Introduction

E-learning/teaching tools have been around for quite some time now. Although reports show many of their positive sides in educational environment (Dovedan, Seljan and Vučković, 2002; Lauc, Matić and Mikelić, 2006; Sendra, Jiménez, Parra and Lloret, 2015) still we have more teachers who do not use these tools for their classes than those who do. Ever since computers have been introduced to the teachers, they have, for different reasons, underused its power as a valid educational tool. Due to the fact that we are living in the 21st century, it is valid to ask if we, as educators, are depriving our students of needed knowledge. Are we failing to educate a 21st century student?

When it comes to teaching a foreign language with e-tools, things seem to be even more complicated. It was in the 18th century that Alexander von Humboldt suggested that the language cannot be taught but that one can only create conditions for learning to take place. Three centuries later, deep into the digital era, it seems that we are still not recognizing the power of technology and its usage for creating such language learning oasis.

2. Goal of the paper

At the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb we are conducting a research on the benefits technology can have in second language (SL) classroom taking the students' perspective into account. The goal of the research is to develop e-materials easily embedded into regular classroom lessons, following the outlines of teacher's curriculum and materials he/she wants to cover in the course from the first to the last lesson. The project, funded by EU, is focused on the implementation of such materials in the teaching of several Asian languages (Hindi, Japanese, Korean and Sanskrit) available at the University as well as in several private language schools in Croatia. After the initial survey of students' issues (N= 203 students: Japanese 104, Korean 46, Hindi 32, Sanskrit 21), a range of study materials have been developed to help students with memorising and extracting crucial information about vocabulary, grammar or syntax at the right moment and with a greater speed and precision. In this process we have used existing application developed for memorizing, Memrise, Quizlet and Anki. The reasons for such choice are several: 1. majority of language teachers would choose an already existing app to develop new materials and not develop his/her own; 2. existing application have a good technical team working on technical issues and to test the influence of the technology in the classroom it's good to have a solidly developed application and not a prototype; 3. students were already familiar with the applications as they used them more or less regularly for different purposes.

The paper is interested in following questions: 1. which difficulties do students report in language learning (ex. Figure 1), 2. which factors influence use of technology in language classroom, 3. can the use of technology influence students' interest in the language learning positively, 4.what type of influence do we see in students' approach and knowledge after the use of materials created on the applications. The long-term goal of those questions is to improve the language teaching practice of Asian languages in Croatia, widen students language resources and create an e-environment for learners of Asian languages.
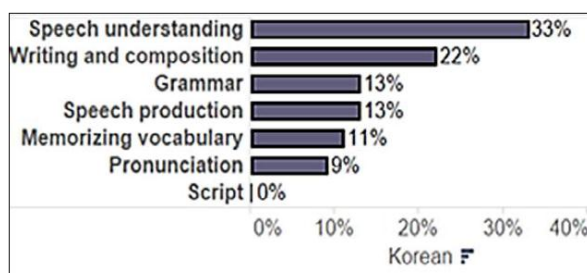

Figure 1: Students' analysis of issues in learning Korean.

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Hence, next to the production of materials, the researchers also gathered data on students' usage of materials for a period of several months, roughly from November 2015 to September 2016, in order to relate their usage and the results that students got when they were administered tests. Tests are administered to students in interval of several months in the said period and had tested students' comprehension of grammar and vocabulary. Tests (Figure 2) were created having in mind materials covered by students' curriculum and newly developed materials available on applications.

Figure 2: Question sample for Japanese and Hindi.

On the average, students have reacted positively on the creation of e-materials. After only 2 months of using the e-materials, they have obtained better test results which are more than 20% higher than their initial test scores. To understand the issues related to technology in language classroom better, research team had also conducted a short survey among language teachers of various languages at the Faculty, in order to reflect on the perception students and teachers have on the technology as such in the classroom. The results of students' usage show that teacher's involvement and perception of technology can and does leave its trace on students' scores.

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