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## Surfing the global network! how to incorporate ict and social media in teaching and learning foreign languages

Adriana PRIZEL-KANIA\*

*The Center for Polish Language and Culture in the World, ul. Grodzka 64, 31-044 Krakow, Poland*

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### Abstract

The paper explores the use of Internet and social media in practical language teaching and learning. Nowadays there are many ICT applications and tools that can be used for language educational purposes but teachers should be able to select which one really make the learning process more effective.

The paper is divided into four sections. The introduction is followed by presentation of new interactive tools for practicing oral production and interaction in foreign language that were created within the framework of the SpeakApps project. The project was funded by the European Commission within the Lifelong Learning Programme with its main purpose being to provide holistic ICT-based services and pedagogies to practice oral competencies online.

Next section addresses the practical use of the Internet resources for developing writing and reading skills. As the conclusion the scenario of foreign language lesson with the use of ICT is provided as a sample. The scenario was designed for students who are learning Polish as a foreign language but can be easily adopted to teaching any other language.

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### 1. Introduction

We live in the era of progressive digitalization. The newest technologies can be found in almost all the areas of human activities: private, social and educational ones. A new generation of students starts academic education; they do not know the world devoid of the access to the global network. Therefore, it is more and more

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +48 12 421 36 92; fax: +48 12 422 77 01.  
*E-mail address:* [adriana.prizel-kania@uj.edu.pl](mailto:adriana.prizel-kania@uj.edu.pl)

noticeable that we need to include new technologies in the process of foreign language teaching. Many researchers studying language teaching agree with the motto offered by Turula (2010: 59): *If you can't beat them – join them*, stating that “if our students – digital natives – already exist and function successfully in virtual reality we should educate them in their natural environment instead of trying to invite them to lessons in our world”.

Skillfully applied multimedia can play a huge role in the process of teaching and learning. They enable the learners to discover selected fragments of reality available online; they help develop cognitive skills and, at the same time, are sources of new information and skills. That is why they have important functions from the didactic perspective: cognitive, educational and didactic (Wenta 2004:377). Wenta pays also attention to motivating roles of applying multimedia in the learning and teaching process:

*Activities converting the reality, including iconic and symbolic reality, are a particular function of information media as they enable comprehensive activation of learners in the process of information support, which can contribute to the increase in educational efficiency. It is connected with the fact that the learners have to perform both intellectual and manual activities in order to acquire the skills because modern educational media are usually interactive and require active participation in the form of searching for information and intellectual processing (Wenta 2004: 378).*

Owing to Internet we can also access an enormous number of various written and oral texts at differentiated communication levels: from interpersonal, group and institutional to mass communication. It is particularly important because, as U. Żydek-Bednarczuk (2005:13) writes “Each communication level has its own theories and also creates specific texts. [...] At each communication level there are differentiated utterances”.

This article is aimed at presenting the possibilities of developing language skills with the use of multimedia, and particularly Internet, which *being a communication channel integrates all other communication channels – both mass and interpersonal communication – and constitutes the restoration of communication channels that exist and are used in natural and social environment as well as offers new, undiscovered so far communication channels that are characterized by new features resulting from the environmental properties they exist in (Drzewińska 2008)*. The description of practical Internet application in language education shall be presented on the example of Polish as a foreign language teaching; however, the proposed methodological and technical solutions shall be certainly used also in didactics of other foreign languages.

When we think about foreign language teaching we mean mastering language skills with sustainable development of grammar and lexical competencies. According to surveys carried among 150 foreigners learning Polish language the most important skills are as follows: speaking (84% respondents assert the skill as “very important”) and listening comprehension (75% respondents said it was “very important”). The following skills are marked as follows: reading and writing (66% and 45% respondents valued them as “very important”, respectively). The research was planned and carried within the SpeakApps project implemented since January 2011 in the Center of Polish Language and Culture in the World by the Jagiellonian University in cooperation with the following universities: Barcelona (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya), Ireland (Dublin City University), Finland (University of Jyväskylä) and Holland (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen). The SpeakApps project has been created for foreign language learners who want to master their communication skills with respect to speaking and listening comprehension as well as for teachers who like to apply the newest solutions in their work offered by Information and Communication Technologies.

## **2. Langblog, Videochat and Tandem – new opportunities for developing speaking and listening comprehension skills**

Speaking is one of the most important skills when we learn foreign language. Speaking is also one of the hardest skill to put into practice because of complexity of speaking process. This section explores the use of those interactive tools for practicing oral production and interaction in foreign language that were created within the

framework of the SpeakApps project. The project was funded by the European Commission within the Lifelong Learning Programme with its main purpose being to provide holistic ICT-based services and pedagogies to practice oral competencies online (more information about project can be found on the website: [www.speakapps.eu](http://www.speakapps.eu)).

Within the SpeakApps project there are tools for interactive teaching: LangBlog, Videochat and Tandem. The tools let teachers introduce differentiated activities that help improve production skills and oral interaction. They can be used for individual work (LangBlog), for pair work (Tandem) and for group activities (Videochat). LangBlog is a tool enabling the learners to directly record their statements in video or audio format, share them on the platform as well as listen to and comment on the materials shared by their friends from the group. As other tools it can be used both during online and traditional courses as a medium supporting the development of oral communication skills. In order to encourage students to use LangBlog teachers should prepare such tasks that require from the students recording oral statements and listening to files shared by the other learners. The tasks can be long-term, e.g. systematic sharing of impressions related to their daily life in Poland – students can in this way, for example, recommend good restaurants; talk about cultural events they participated in; make plans for going together to the cinema or theatre; share their recommendations for interesting places or where to do cheap shopping... The list of possibilities is probably unlimited. Students eagerly share their recommendations and listen to and comment on suggestions of other learners because the proposed range of issues is consistent with their interests and needs. LangBlog is also an excellent support for students who prepare to take the speaking part of certificate exams at the selected advancement level. Students can record their speeches on topics included in materials elaborated by teachers as examples of exam topics. Therefore, the teacher can offer adequate support while the student can listen to the recording for many times, find mistakes, correct them, evaluate and, thus, improve the language skills individually.

A tool devoted to the development of interaction and mediation skills is Tandem designed for pair work. The applied technology enables designing activities with information gap, activities consisting in the choice of the best variants or “find the difference” also online. The characteristic feature of such activities is the need to prepare two versions of complementary materials. Students working in Tandem obtain two specially prepared sets of materials, e.g. pictures with several differences or sets of graphic materials that need to be arranged in a determined sequence pursuant to determined criteria (the materials can include for example photos presenting various ecological disasters and the learners have to arrange them from the most to the least dangerous in their opinion).

The third tool is Videochat, i.e. videoconference that enables synchronic communication of up to 6 people. With the use of Videochat it is possible to introduce various discussions, organize role playing, prepare projects or discuss the contents of articles, audio recordings or video materials. It should be also added that the use of the tools enables the access to the enormous database which is Internet. Therefore, it is possible to share links to interesting articles, radio programmes, podcasts, films, commercials or photos that stimulate communication. Links can be shared by teachers as well as students. Offering the learners an opportunity of sharing their own materials is a step in the direction of learner-oriented teaching. In the case of mastering speaking skills it is especially important because the main motivation for speaking is, first of all, communication need connected with functioning in a given language environment, and secondly, internal self-expression need.

The primary advantage of LangBlog, Videochat and Tandem tools is the possibility of integrating the tools with local educational platforms. At present they are integrated with a Moodle platform and that is how lexical and grammar activities and tasks aimed at mastering communication skills are fully integrated. Prepared tools are the answer to the needs of students and teachers who are involved in language education online. So far foreign language learners online did not have so many opportunities of developing speaking skills as learners in the target language

country. Now the gap is filled by SpeakApps tools.

The created tools are also exceptionally valuable supplementary tools or even supplementary tools for traditional classes, first of all, because it is possible to plan activities developing oral communication skills as homework. Technological solutions enable the consolidation of speaking skills which are easily forgotten. The recording and repeated listening to own speeches lead to self-evaluation of the learners' progress while teachers can provide students with adequate support.

### **3. Hypertexts, webquests and blogs – the development of reading and writing skills online**

Another skill that can be efficiently developed online in this way is reading. As Komorowska writes (1999:186):

*Reading is the only skill that can be successfully trained alone by the learner. Therefore, reading is the most efficient support for mastering all the other skills as in the process of reading the newly acquired words, expressions and structures are repeated and memorized.*

Internet creates additional opportunities for developing the skill because it is a source of countless texts from all the areas and fields, of differentiated styles, functions and addressees. By using online resources learners deal with hypertexts, i.e. texts divided into fragments interconnected by various references. References are in other words hyperlinks that distinguish hypertext from traditional texts. Nonlinear text structure means that there is not a predetermined sequence of reading and the readers themselves determine which fragments of the text they want to read and when. As P. Szerszeń notices (2011:28) the structure of texts online reinforces autonomous decisions of learners as they are forced to undertake decisions while reading. "In this way learners are required not only to manage the navigation of the hypertext structure but also, first of all, the ability to find the required information, process it, organize data, create terms and, frequently, use symbols."

WebQuest activities, becoming more and more popular in foreign language teaching, consist in collecting necessary information and solving problems. Learners get involved in a team task and the main, and practically the only source of information are online resources. P. Szerszeń (2010:56) underlines the role of mastering the skills of fast and efficient search for information in foreign language and processing and using it for various purposes. An example of such a task can be planning a few day trip to another city. The learners are given guidelines as for what kind of information they need to collect – the topics include transportation, accommodation, meals, tourist attractions taking into account individual interests and interests of their friends. Thus, the search scope assumes reading various texts and the application of various reading types. Learners may therefore use both selective reading (consisting in the search for specific information and, in consequence, the selection of crucial and less important information), global reading (with the purpose of general understanding of the text) and detailed reading (detailed understanding of the entire text), and at the same time use various strategies (Lipińska & Seretny 2005: 194). Apart from local (detailed), global and metacognitive strategies characteristic also for printed texts, navigation strategies are also important here (Konishi 2003). The strategies include as follows:

- navigating to other pages,
- opening several articles in various bookmarks and shifting from one to another,
- using internal search engines on websites,
- using shortcut keys.

It is worth mentioning that skilful navigation of Internet websites can have an impact on the task completion time and efficiency (Bucko 2010: 36). Finding necessary information to a large extent depends on properly formulated search terms in the search engine and the selection of adequate keywords. It is connected with another skill which can be successfully developed with the use of multimedia. Before we present examples of activities related to the construction of written texts it is worth thinking for a while about the stage just before writing, i.e. grammar and vocabulary exercises. Also in this area the newest technologies can be useful, especially online learning platforms which allow learners to access various types of online exercises. Chudak (2003:58) points out six primary advantages of the application of interactive exercises during language classes:

- learners receive feedback with respect to each answer, which is not always possible during traditional classes,
- learners cannot check the solution before completing the activity so there is no risk they cheat while doing the task,
- wrong answers are accompanied by comments and additional directions which facilitate the correction,
- learners can use any type of information or support that can be helpful while solving the tasks,
- usually after the completion of the work it is possible to get acquainted with the statistics of errors and further analysis, learners can work in accordance with their needs and capabilities.

The first thought about the form of using Internet for developing writing skills is e-mail – correspondence between students or between students and a teacher is an excellent opportunity to create written texts of various length. Examples of the application of the tool can be stories written together (in this case Google Docs application can be even more useful) where individual learners write the subsequent fragments of one story. The resulting text can be analyzed together in the classroom, introducing necessary corrections with respect to grammar, style, vocabulary and composition.

Also writing a blog can be used for educational purposes. Learners at more advanced levels can in this way share their impressions from the stay in Poland. Their posts and observations are also an interesting starting point for the discussion on cultural and traditional differences, which boosts intercultural sensitiveness.

Another valuable method of improving and consolidating skills in foreign language is creating websites. These are long-term projects that require lots of work; however, they are of great value. The subject of the project can be connected with cultural or historical differences in the country of the language the learners are studying. Thanks to many templates of websites where placing information resembles using word processing learners can focus on language content and the form of the created website. Examples of such activities include, among others, “Subjective map of Krakow” created as a summary of a project implemented at all the advancement levels during a 6-week course of the Summer School of the Jagiellonian University in 2010 (<http://poprzednia.uj.edu.pl/SL/mapa/>). The presentation of work results in an attractive form that is additionally documented is exceptionally valuable also as a positive motivation for further education.

#### **4. Example of a scenario for using ICT and social media**

Topic: How to find a good job in Poland?

1. Students read a hypertext selected by the teacher and devoted to the situation on the employment market in Poland.
2. Learners complete various vocabulary exercises on the Moodle platform.
3. Students complete the “Vocational preferences” test (<http://testy-zawodowe.pl/testy/preferencje->

zawodowe).

4. Each student records a short speech (about 2 minutes) entitled “*For me the most important thing in work is...*” and comments on three selected speeches shared by other students from the group (Langblog).
5. Learners edit their profiles on a Polish business portal, e.g. Goldenline <http://www.goldenline.pl/>.
6. Students search for information on “How to write a good cover letter” and using Videochat together prepare a cover letter template.
7. Students complete exercises that develop competencies of creating and editing texts on the Moodle platform.
8. Learners search for a recording/film explaining how to get prepared for the job interview and on that basis they elaborate a “Guide” (a circulating document of Google Docs type).
9. Students search for an offer to match their needs on a selected Polish employment portal, e.g. <http://www.pracuj.pl/>  
<http://infopraca.com.pl/>
10. Learners write a cover letter in response to the selected job opening and send it via e-mail.
11. In pairs students role-play a job interview (Tandem).

In the scenario presented above there are several activities developing language skills based on technological solutions discussed in this paper. However, the basis for language development are multimedia texts and files available on the Internet which is the treasury of plentiful information as well as global information garbage. The ability to search and select necessary data becomes one of necessary skills, which is also underlined by authors of *Common European Framework of References for Languages* (2001), distinguishing from the learning skills within the framework of general competencies important heuristic skills, such as searching, understanding and providing information with the use of materials in foreign language as well as the ability to use new technologies.

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