"Sí Se Puede": Using Innovative Application of Apps in Language Learning

Heather Campbell-Speltz
University of Kentucky, heather.campbellspeltz@uky.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/greaterfaculties

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons, Higher Education and Teaching Commons, and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons

Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.

"Sí Se Puede": Using Innovative Application of Apps in Language Learning

Heather Campbell-Speltz

Department of Hispanic Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
University of Kentucky

Anyone who has made the decision to be an educator does it, at least in part, hoping to see the light. The dawning glow of comprehension, the flicker of growing interest, the glimmer of excitement in our students that tells us that they are starting to share our own passion, either for our fields of study or simply for the experience of learning something that enriches their world. Yet, for many of us in the classroom we often feel we are competing with another light, that glow emanating from the many screens that have gradually become a part of our teaching space. Trey Conatser touches upon this subject in a 2017 interview with two UK professors in Arts Administration that explores their success in incorporating the use of students' personal devices into the face-to-face classroom (Conatser). Yet, many second-language instructors often view digital devices and applications as a hindrance to the development of language proficiency. These devices and apps can distract and inhibit students from using their own knowledge and skill to practice and effectively communicate in a second language. On the other hand, the availability of these technologies is a part of our reality, and their effective use can support meaningful communications across languages and cultures. Of course, there are myriad applications, both free and for-purchase, that address the idea of learning a language through technology, but these apps are primarily marketed to people who are doing their language study

independently, not with an instructor in a class (whether in-person or online) (Gangaiamaran and Pasupathi). So, the challenge for language educators is two-fold: to incorporate the technology that is now inextricable from our students' daily lives in a way that contributes to the learning outcomes of our courses and to do that in a way that keeps the second language we are teaching at the forefront.

Through CELT's Teaching Innovation Institute and the Smart Campus Initiative at the University of Kentucky, I was able to explore this challenge in two different types of classes focused on second-language acquisition: a 200-level grammar class designed to prepare students for majors and minors in Spanish, and a 300-level Introduction to Interpreting class that included learning outcomes focused on increased proficiency in Spanish. Both classes were heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. They were taught in a hybrid format where students attended both in-person and virtually. In-person students were required to wear masks and maintain a safe distance from each other and me as the instructor. This modified classroom format incurred significant challenges regarding established interactive exercises designed to facilitate comprehensible input and linguistic production in the foreign language. For instance, asking students to circulate through the classroom and engage with multiple peers in conversation, or to physically gather in groups to collaborate became untenable. Likewise, I could not circulate through the classroom to engage with students as I would normally. As these and other common practices in the communicative-based language classroom were no longer either comfortable or acceptable, student-centered learning and interactive activities in the second language required a new format. It was important that the revised format and structure of these activities rely upon devices students were already comfortable with. CELT's Teaching Innovation Institute was instrumental in introducing new ways to facilitate student interactions in the COVID-altered classroom and helping me to feel comfortable experimenting with applications that are not necessarily designed for language learning but that lend themselves to the kind of collaboration that is essential to a second language classroom.

The two apps that served best in creating opportunities for the creation of meaning in the second language, one of the primary goals of a communicative-based program that includes SPA 210 Spanish Grammar and Syntax, were Google Slides and Jamboard. Google Slides became a go-to strategy to encourage written participation in most of my classes. These apps allowed students to collaborate in groups face-to-face or in a distance learning setting and allowed the blending of those two settings if students were logged in at the same time, regardless of their physical location. Students who were quarantined or unable to attend class for other reasons still had the opportunity to participate in the class activities for the day. In addition, the apps helped create a more inclusive environment for students with mobility issues or who tend to be introverted during verbal class discussions and activities. They can participate, produce, and perfect their skills without undue anxiety, or what is frequently described as a "high affective filter" in the communicative language classroom (Schinke-Llano and Vicars). Google Slides further avoids the anxiety associated with errors as it allows the instructor to discuss and correct the students' language production without identifying a particular student's answer. The format of Slides as opposed to Google Docs allows groups to work simultaneously on brief exercises without interfering with each other, since each slide is independent of the document as a whole. Jamboard presents many of the same advantages for collaborative work that can be found with Google Slides but in a format that facilitates creativity.

Jamboard provides room to utilize images in space and express themselves through color and form also. I designed Jamboard activities that used images to inspire creative use of language. Students at home and on campus were able to contribute to those boards synchronously and receive live feedback from the instructor.

In the "Introduction to Interpreting" class, the focus was different, and the students were doing a great deal of language practice in their online activities to improve their interpreting skills. When I first considered the goal of the Teaching Innovation Institute, my interest was in helping students to learn how interpreters can integrate tablet technology in their professional interactions. Groups like the American Translators Association and several blogs produced by language service providers (companies that provide translation, interpretation, and localization services) offer many suggestions for how professional interpreters can incorporate tablet applications into their professional life and I had hoped to facilitate shadowing opportunities for my students with local interpreters to observe those practices. However, with the necessary restrictions put in place in medical and legal environments, those community-based learning opportunities were severely curtailed. This prompted a revision of how to incorporate useful technology into the face-to-face portion of the course. As consecutive interpreting practices often require interpreters to listen to long oral passages and then reproduce them accurately in the target language, there are several activities in the class dedicated to practicing appropriate note-taking skills. The Apple Notes application on the iPad was useful in allowing students to practice the format for consecutive note-taking and then share them with others in the class. Jamboard also allowed students to draw their symbols (Fig.1) and share with the class so we could observe how each of us conceptualized the terminology in our notes.
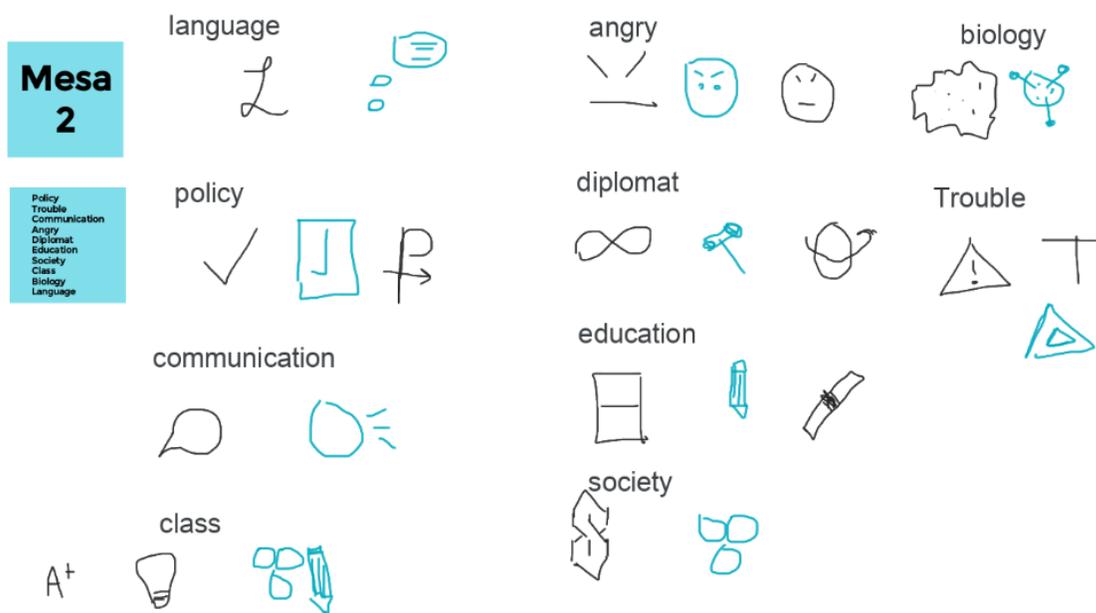

Fig. 1 Screenshot of Jamboard activity.

While none of these apps were incorporated seamlessly into the classroom, and each required a certain amount of class time to introduce the students to their functionality and allow them to do no-stakes practice, each of them did add to the value of the classroom experience, a sparkle of interest, a glimmer of humor and a dawning light of comprehension of the concepts and skills that contribute to the learning outcomes of the class. Can technology in the language learning classroom create the kind of comprehensible input and target language communication that is our ultimate goal as language educators? It takes work and a willingness on the part of students and instructors alike to experiment, stumble and try again, but ¡sí, se puede!

References

Conatser, Trey. "The Apparition of These Screens in the Crowd." *Greater Faculties: A Review of Teaching and Learning,* vol. 1, 2017, DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/GFv.2017.08.

Gangaiamaran, Ramya and Pasupathi, Madhumathi. "Review on Use of Mobile Apps for Language Learning." *International Journal of Applied Engineering Research,* vol.12, no. 21, 2017, p. 11242-11251.

Schinke-Llano, Linda and Vicars, Robert. "The Affective Filter and Negotiated Interaction: Do Our Language Activities Provide for Both?". *The Modern Language Journal,* vol. 77, no. 3, 1993, p. 325-329.

Media

Blaber, Isabelle. Photograph of dishes, Spain. 2015. Photographer's personal collection. All rights reserved.

Campbell-Speltz. Photograph of Jamboard Activity. 2020. Photographer's personal collection. All rights reserved.

License