

## MODERN TECHNOLOGIES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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### Abstract

*Today's education aims at preparing students for life and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which requires gaining a number of skills and competences, including computer literacy and competence in foreign languages. Using ICTs may greatly improve the quality of the learning process. This article examines their role in foreign language instruction in the context of teaching representatives of generations Z and Alpha. It also discusses some current trends in educational politics in Bulgaria, and presents several online educational platforms and tools which have been used in ESL classes at Yoan Ekzarh Balgarski Secondary School, Shumen.*

**Keywords:** education, technology, foreign language teaching

**JEL:** I20

### Introduction

Modern education is aimed at preparing students for life and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which requires gaining a number of skills and competences, including computer literacy and competence in foreign languages. Educators around the world agree that present-day education must correspond to the needs of the contemporary society through the introduction of new technologies. The latest pandemic situation has accelerated the process of integrating ICTs in almost every aspect of education through the use various technological and digital tools.

Modern communications media have changed the social, economic and political structure of societies worldwide (Graddol, 2006). Language teaching has also been extensively influenced by these changes and by the innovations made in the field of science and technology, therefore, various changes in the forms and mode of education can be observed. Today's language pedagogy is leaning towards an integrated instruction with the use of ICTs, which is a way of learning in an interactive way with the use of modern technological means, i.e. learning interactively with an online support and the use of techno-based digital tools.

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## **Integrating modern technologies in the foreign language classroom**

### ***The role of ICTs in foreign language learning***

Innovations in technology have led to changes in the attitudes of language learners, language educators and publishers. Using some form of technology in all realms of everyday life, including education, is inevitable, so many researchers have attempted to define the role and explore the various uses of information and communication technologies in foreign language teaching and learning.

Chapelle (2003), Evans (2009), Thomas, Reinders and Warschauer (2013) and Wilkinson (2016), have all explored the contribution of ICT to the development of foreign language skills through the use of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Chapelle (2003) examines the potential of technology for language learning by suggesting some specific features in electronic learning materials and tasks, and illustrates how they could be implemented in learning materials, thus presenting some initial components of pedagogy for CALL. Wilkinson (2016) traces the history of using technological tools in the language classroom from the “phonograph records and reel-to-reel tapes” to CALL which “encompasses a range of platforms, materials, and approaches” (Wilkinson, 2016, pp. 257-258).

Rank, Millum, and Warren (2011) suggest that ICT is a useful tool to support enjoyable learning in the English language classroom. In *Teaching English Using ICT*, the authors offer some ideas on how to use technology in the English language classroom so that to enhance students’ performance in exploring texts, analyzing language, composing their own texts, etc. They also claim that ICT can be used to develop students’ communicative and collaboration skills and that it can be a source of inspiration and entertainment. Both Harmer (2007) and Martin (2009) point out a number of advantages of using computer-based presentation technology in the foreign language classroom. However, all these researchers imply that teachers cannot rely entirely on technology, and that there should be a balanced use of digital devices and tools, since as Steve Job, the founder of the technology company Apple, once said “What’s wrong with education cannot be fixed with technology” (Thomas, Reinders & Warschauer, 2012, p. 2).

### **Characteristic features of today’s students**

According to the classification of the Australian social researcher and demographer Mark McCrindle, today’s students belong to generations Z and Alpha. They live in a rapidly changing technological and social environment and they are skilful in using modern technology since their earliest childhood. They easily apply technology in almost every aspect of their daily lives, thus

becoming “digital integrators” (McCrindle, 2014). They are believed to be the first truly influenced by the effects of globalization and multiculturalism, which is expressed in the knowledge of different cultures, communicating with their representatives, following the world fashion and music trends, etc. They tend to perceive information more easily when communication is not encoded in written texts, but visualized in the form of videos or images. Along with this, there is a change in their attitudes to learning – since technology is a mandatory element of everyday life of modern students, they rightly expect its presence at school as well. Due to access to a huge amount of information, the question is no longer about memorizing it, but about developing skills for its understanding, analysis and critical selection. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a shift in educational engagement for Generations Z and Alpha, with schools switching from structural and auditory learning to engaging, visual, multimodal and hands-on methods of educating the new generations.

### ***Foreign language teaching in Bulgaria***

The Strategy for effective application of information and communication technologies in education and science in the Republic of Bulgaria (2014 – 2020) has laid the foundations of modernizing all realms of education and science through the means of ICT, as well as of improving the quality of educational and scientific activity in the country. This means that educational institutions in Bulgaria aim at implementing modern information technologies in the educational process, which may include various aspects, such as: using educational software and/or electronic textbooks with interactive content (including audio, video, 3D or even virtual reality resources); having academic discussions online; giving parents the opportunity to participate actively in their children’s education by using modern e-learning platforms, etc. Currently, as part of the “Education for Tomorrow” Project within the Operational Program “Science and Education for Intelligent Growth”, all Bulgarian students are provided with the so called ‘digital backpack’ through which they can access online educational resources and virtual classrooms.

The State general education standard and the State educational standard for profiling preparation contain the requirements related to the learning outcomes (in terms of skills, competences and attitudes) for each subject, at the end of each stage of the respective level of education in the Republic of Bulgaria. They also define the objectives, the content and the specific features of preparation and education. The key competences that students are expected to develop as a result of their foreign language education are: communication skills in foreign languages, competences in the field of the Bulgarian language, mathematical competence,

basic competences in the field of natural sciences and technology, digital competence, learning skills, social and civic competences, initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural competence and skills for expression through creativity, skills to support sustainable development and skills for a healthy lifestyle and sports.

The English language curricula correspond to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and provide some guidelines for developing the abovementioned competences. For example, it is envisaged that the development of communication skills in foreign languages is carried out through the integrated development of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The expected results include understanding and composing oral and written messages in a variety of situations depending on the level of education. Developing foreign language skills through the implementation of ICT in the classroom also helps developing student's digital competence.

Some of the listed activities for developing language skills and motivating a drive for continuous improvement are: role-playing games and simulations; specific tasks corresponding to students' individual interests; work on projects and presentations; didactic games in oral or written form (making up phrases, stories with certain words, grouping words, crosswords, etc.); use of modern and classic teaching tools: audio and multimedia materials; printed materials (stories, comic strips, excerpts from books, brochures, etc.); e-learning (educational software, online resources), etc.

### *The interactive whiteboard – a key technology in language education*

Nowadays, new technology is much cheaper and therefore widely available in schools and at homes, and can easily fit in students' and teachers' pockets. In *Learning Teaching: the essential guide to English language teaching*, Jim Scrivener provides a short list of some key technologies in language education that have been integrated in recent years: interactive whiteboards (IWBs), the Internet, research tools (search engines), presentation software (e.g. PowerPoint, mozaBook), tablet computers and netbooks, shared learning and social media (wikis, blogs, Facebook), virtual learning environments (e.g. Moodle, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom), etc. The author points out that most teachers need to take time to get used to the technological tools they are going to use in the classroom. They also need to find the best way to improve teaching and learning without letting the lessons become "technology-focused rather than aim-driven" (Scrivener, 2011, p. 334-335).

The integration of an **interactive whiteboard** in the language classroom has a lot of advantages. Most coursebooks offer IWB versions with animated pages, interactive exercises, built-in videos, audio files, etc. All interactive whiteboards

come with their own software which usually offers similar functions, such as: write or draw (either with a special pen or a finger), save and share the created digital content, show images, videos, 3D animations; access the Internet, etc. Scrivener distinguishes between two types of interactive whiteboards: **fixed** – an electronic board fixed to the wall, attached to the ceiling and a computer; and **portable** – a small device which is placed at one of the corners of a standard non-interactive whiteboard, thus adding interactivity (2011, p. 336). An overhead projector and a computer still need to be attached to such a device. A current trend is the use of **touch screen computers** with the size of a standard classroom board. They are a preferred option since there is no need to attach other devices to them and the visualized material is of a much better quality.

Interactive whiteboards, together with an appropriate educational software and applications, can be used in all stages of the language lesson, depending on its aims and objectives. For example, at the lead-in stage, the teacher can introduce the topic of the lesson by showing a short video. Then some key language (lexis or grammar) can be presented on the IWB and then the process could continue with skills practice. Almost all types of activities could be digitalized and performed on the IWB. The IWB can also be used in the final stage of the lesson (the closure) in which the teacher and the learners can summarise, revise and consolidate the key points of the lesson. For instance, students can play an interactive game revising the key language presented and practised throughout the lesson.

In *Activities for Interactive Whiteboards*, Daniel Martin suggests a long list of activities which could be created using an interactive whiteboard software. The author divides them into three main categories: image-based, sound and video-based, and text-based activities. Each of the presented activities goes with detailed information about the skills on focus, the required language level of the learners, and the respective ICT skills, as well as a description of what teachers should prepare in advance. Martin mentions a number of advantages of using an interactive whiteboard in the language classroom, such as: providing ambience, facilitating authentic experiences (e.g. checking out breaking news online), enabling better presentation and improving visibility, maximising teaching time, etc. However, he points out that teachers cannot be replaced by digital boards and they “need to strike a balance between technology and tradition”, so that to avoid “erratic and inconsistent teaching practices” (Martin, 2009, pp. 7-9).

### *Towards a more technological educational environment*

English language learning and teaching methodologies have undergone many changes over the last decades: moving from a traditional grammar-translation method to more student-centered methods, such as Total Physical Response,

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Learning (TBL). Recent innovations, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic situation, have led to completely new types of learning in the English language classroom facilitating the transition from traditional to remote and e-learning (e.g. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL)).

Information and communication technologies can be used as complementary to face-to-face learning or as a foundation of online synchronous and asynchronous learning (Wilkinson, 2016, p. 262). When ICT is used as a supplement to the face-to-face classroom, the lesson runs like a traditional one but learning activities are performed with the use of a variety of ICT tools either in the class or when students are assigned tasks for homework or individual work. Such activities could involve using a word-processing and presentation software or various online tools and applications so that students can work on projects in a web-based environment.

The current pandemic has also accelerated the process of integrating online educational platforms and web-based educational tools and resources in the language teaching and learning. Online learning environment with facilities similar to face-to-face mode of learning have been created due to the advancement of the Internet and web technology. Educational platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, Moodle, and many more, are now equipped with both oral and visual applications enabling audio and video conferencing. Thus, despite being separated by spatial distance, learners are able to get involved in group discussions or have personal face-to-face conversations with their tutors and peers.

However, there are a number of aspects which teachers need to consider when implementing modern technologies in their work. In the British Council publication, *Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Framework for teachers*, integrating ICTs in all subjects, including language teaching and learning, is said to involve the following elements: 1) Developing effective strategies for locating appropriate digital content. 2) Following guidelines for e-safety. 3) Evaluating the potential effectiveness and appropriacy of digital content, tools and platforms for achieving desired learning outcomes. 4) Using technology in the production of teaching and learning materials. 5) Setting up activities that support learning by exploiting appropriate digital content, tools and platforms. 6) Developing effective strategies for resolving potential technical issues. 7) Using technology for administrative tasks in accordance with data protection guidelines. 8) Promoting autonomous learning by exploiting digital content and technologies inside and outside of the formal learning environment. 9) Promoting collaborative and participatory learning by exploiting online communities, tools and platforms. 10) Reflecting on the effectiveness of the integration of ICT into the teaching and learning process.

***Web platforms and digital tools which can be applied in foreign language teaching – description and characteristic features***

In *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms* (1996), Richards and Lockhart discuss lessons as events with a recognizable structure, taking place in a particular setting and involving two type of participants. The authors distinguish between the following dimensions of structuring a language lesson: **opening** (how a lesson begins), **sequencing** (how the lesson is divided into segments and how the segments relate to each other), **pacing** (how a sense of movement is achieved within a lesson) and **closure** (how a lesson is brought to an end) (Richards and Lockhart, 1996, pp. 113-129).

Depending on their specificity and functionality, a variety of mobile and web technologies can be used during the abovementioned stages of a foreign language lesson. A projector, an interactive whiteboard or an interactive display can no longer be considered an innovation in the contemporary classroom. They are essential for better visualizing the didactic resources and fulfilling the language objectives. Access to the Internet is also a must, so that students can work on school devices (PCs, laptops) or on their smartphones. The main features and some sample ideas for implementing some web-based educational platforms, digital tools and applications can be found below. They have all been used by foreign language teachers at Yoan Ekzarh Balgarski Secondary School in Shumen, and have proven to contribute to increasing the effectiveness of foreign language classes. Some of them are narrowly focused on specific functionality (e.g. assessment and feedback), while others have a wider range of application and their tools can be used at almost all stages of the lesson.

All Bulgarian teachers and students have been provided with free access to the so called “digital backpack” since the beginning of 2022/2023 school year. One of the ‘items’ in this backpack is a user account for the educational platform **mozaWeb** (<https://www.mozaweb.bg/>) through which they have access to a huge media library with interactive content (3D scenes and models, digital lessons, educational videos, etc.). Users can also download the educational presentation software **mozaBook** so that to create interactive presentations enhanced by the various educational tools and games, thus developing skills, improving visualization and enabling experimentation. The platform has a rich toolkit for creating didactic resources and presentation products, to which images, videos, 3D animations, hyperlinks, etc. can be added. The developed materials can be converted into images or pdf files. Interactive content can be shared both with other teachers using the platform, and with students’ accounts in the created virtual classrooms. The software supports touchscreen functions and its user interface can adapt to the display size, so that it can be used both on interactive boards and other digital devices. When being in a virtual classroom, students can also participate actively

if the teacher gives them the control over their screen, so that they can do the exercise as if they were doing it on the interactive board in the traditional classroom.

**MozaBook** can be used throughout the stages of almost every language lesson. For example, at the opening stage of a lesson with an emphasis on developing students' reading skills on the topic of cave painting, their attention can be attracted through the 3D scene "The Cave of Altamira" ([https://www.mozaweb.bg/en/Extra-3D\\_scenes-The\\_Cave\\_of\\_em\\_Altamira\\_em-389181](https://www.mozaweb.bg/en/Extra-3D_scenes-The_Cave_of_em_Altamira_em-389181)). Students can watch the short built-in animation and do the quiz within the scene. Once students are engaged into the topic, the lesson may proceed with visualizing the text and working on previously created activities for developing reading for gist or reading for specific information. If the lesson aims at enriching students' vocabulary, the platform can be used in presenting new vocabulary (using the rich image gallery), practicing the newly presented vocabulary items (e.g. using the built-in Test Editor) and consolidating the new material (with one of the language games on the platform). The opportunities provided by this platform are equally useful both in the classroom and at home when students do their homework, work on projects or study in a remote learning mode.

**Quizizz** (<https://quizizz.com/>) is an online educational platform which allows teachers to create digital presentations and quizzes and share them with learners via a link, a code or as an assignment in Google Classroom. The created resources can contain text, media (image, video, audio), shapes, tables, and different question types (multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, match, recorder, open-ended, etc.). Instructors can decide on the mode of learning, i.e. 'classic' – where students progress at their own pace and can see a leaderboard with live results, and 'instructor-paced' – where the teacher controls the pace so everyone advances to each slide/question together. The resources can be used during a live lesson (face-to-face or synchronous online learning) or assigned for homework (asynchronous learning). Users also have access to a rich library of educational resources created by other users.

Students are introduced to the topic of the lesson during the introductory stage, which is aimed at both provoking the interest of the learners (through interesting videos and presentation materials) and recalling and/or introducing the necessary vocabulary. Applications such as **Quizlet** (<https://quizlet.com/>) are particularly useful for this purpose. The tool allows teachers to create lists of lexical items to which an image, definition, translation and pronunciation can be added. The created lists can then be used for individual practice in the form of various types of tasks (flashcards, spelling and pronunciation exercises). Tests and games containing different types of exercises can be generated. The app has a free version. There is also a paid version where virtual classes can be created so that the teacher can share materials with students, monitor their work and track their progress.



**edu Buncee** (<https://app.edu.buncee.com/>) is an online platform with easy-to-use intuitive tools to create digital products in the form of a virtual poster, a greeting card, a presentation, a booklet, a lesson or a questionnaire. These digital products can combine texts, video and audio files, images, 3D images, stickers, animated pictures, hyperlinks, etc. It has a built-in text-to-sound converter. Each „Buncee“ can be shared via a link, embedded in a site and downloaded as an image or a pdf file. There is an opportunity to create a virtual class and monitor students' progress. The platform is paid, but there is a thirty-day free trial period for all resources.

**Wizer.me** (<https://app.wizer.me/>) can be used during all the main stages of the foreign language learning process. The platform has a free version that allows teachers to create digital worksheets, interactive lessons, tests and assignments and enables interaction with a variety of media applications (video, audio) and other platforms (LearningApps, Quizlet, etc.). The platform provides easy-to-use tools for creating didactic materials with questions of different types: multiple choice, linking, inserting, grouping items, open-ended answers, etc. Assessing can be automatic and the teacher can provide quick feedback to students in real time in the form of written or verbal comments. A premium version is also available – it provides opportunities for differentiation of the created resources, for adding questions to the video materials, for integration with Google Classroom, etc.

The Internet leader Google and the leading technology company Microsoft Corporation provide the most widely adopted digital classrooms, namely: **Google Classroom** and **Microsoft Teams**. They provide a number of opportunities that can be applied in both synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning. For example, Google's virtual classroom (<https://classroom.google.com/>) is in close connection with Google Docs, Google Drive, Gmail and YouTube and allows diversification of the educational process. Through Google Classroom, the teacher has the opportunity to manage classes, set individual or group assignments, initiate discussions. Student performance data is updated in real time, allowing for instant feedback in the form of comments and grading. Embedding content from other educational sites is also possible. Access is free, but Gmail registration is required (Chakarova & Koleva, 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bulgarian Ministry of Education provided all Bulgarian teachers and students with Microsoft accounts, so that they can work together, create content, share resources and have free access to Microsoft Teams (<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/education/products/teams>) and Office 365.

**LearningApps** (<https://learningapps.org/>) allows the teacher to create various interactive online exercises for assessment and self-assessment for free. These are separate items and can take the form of multiple-choice quizzes, matching pairs exercises, crosswords, word grids, etc. Teachers can share the exercises via a link or embed them into other websites.

**Liveworksheets** (<https://www.liveworksheets.com/>) is an educational tool that allows foreign language teachers to transform traditional worksheets (in .doc, PDF, .png or .jpeg format) aimed at developing different language skills into interactive ones free of charge. These interactive worksheets can be assigned to students in a virtual classroom and can contain fill-in-the-gap activities, multiple choice cloze, matching activities, dragging and arranging items, adding audio and video, etc. These online exercises can be used for consolidating knowledge and skills, self-testing and formative assessment of students.

The list of educational web platforms and applications presented above is far from exhaustive. The necessity of developing students' key competencies and skills of the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires continuous updating of the already existing digital tools and the development of new ones. Modern technology has already entered every aspect of our daily lives, and has an increasingly important role in education as well. The changes that occurred with their introduction are primarily associated with providing new opportunities for presenting, storing and delivering learning content, sharing resources and good practices, and accessibility to modern and quality learning, without limitation due to distance or time.

## Conclusion

The role and use of technology as a tool for foreign language teaching in general and English language teaching in particular is increasing, as educators have realized how important it is to create both independent and collaborative learning environment in which students can learn English with much ease. Teachers are expected to be innovative and enthusiastic in their teaching with ICT. One of the major roles of the teacher is to assist students to learn key language (lexis and grammar) and develop language skills by equipping them with tools and strategies for learning. The integration of modern technologies contributes to increasing the efficiency of language teaching and learning. The combination of working with written or oral texts and illustrating them in the form of sound, picture, animation, video, interactive or digital content helps students to retain the newly gained knowledge and leads to better learning outcomes.

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