Integrating Technology into the Spanish Classroom: Ways to Engage Students Inside and Outside of the World Languages Classroom

BY PAMELA CULBERTSON

A GROWING TREND, SOME NUMBERS TO THINK ABOUT...

From wireless communication tools to the virtual world, technology has changed the lives of today's students. This is the world they have grown up in. Access to technology in schools and society is integrated into their lives, and their world has expanded through laptops, handhelds, tablets, cell phones, and whiteboards.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 2013 71% of the U.S. population age 3 and over have used the Internet. Of those, 91.5% use the Internet from home and almost all use high speed Internet access. (National Center for Education Statistics 2013). If we dig a little deeper into our middle and high school ranges, from ages 10 to 15, 71.4% access the Internet and 92.2% do so from home; and in the 16 to 19 age range the results are even higher with 84.6% using the Internet with 91.8% of those accessing it from home.

By high school, half of all students (51 percent) carry a smartphone to school with them every day –Grunwald Report. So do more than one in four middle school students (28%). Overall, 25% of all K-12 students take a smartphone to school every day, according to their parents, including 8% of students in Grades 3–5.

According to Growing Wireless.com and a variety of sources:

• 74% of school administrators feel that digital content increases student engagement
• 77% of parents think tablets are beneficial to kids
• 70% of teens use cellphones to help with homework
• Over 600+ school districts have replaced text books with tablets in the classroom

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It’s not just in the access they have but in the ways they currently use the technology they have. According to the Pew Research Center study, 92% of teens report going online daily—including 24% who say they go online “almost constantly.” More than half (56%) of teens—defined as those ages 13 to 17—go online several times a day.

Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat Top Social Media Platforms for Teens

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<th>% of all teens 13 to 17 who use...</th>
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<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
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According to the Pearson Student Mobile Device Survey: “When asked about their future use of mobile devices in class, one in three (36%) students would like to use mobile technologies more often than they do now, one half (48%) say their usage is just right, while one in five (17%) would like to use mobile devices less often than they do now. Currently, 12% of college students use a hybrid for school work on a weekly basis. 24% said they would like to use hybrids a great deal more in the future.”

“By high school, half of all students (51 percent) carry a smartphone to school with them every day.”

—Grunwald Report

So given the information that points to an ever increasing use of technology, and to students’ preferences to use more technology in their educational experiences, where does that put teachers?

Teachers face the challenge of keeping their students engaged in the classroom with activities and content that spark the imagination and challenge them to a deeper level of thinking. Learning a language is not just about vocabulary, grammar, and conjugations. It’s about other cultures, and not only the products and practices of these cultures, but also perspectives, and how those cultures compare to students’ own.

And while students may be digital natives and completely at home with technology, teachers may be a little wary of technology, hesitant to take the full digital plunge. We are offering some useful ways to integrate technology into the classroom that makes the learning and teaching experience more relevant to both students and teachers. While using the electronic tools, students have the chance to learn, practice skills, and explore; and teachers have the opportunity to have resources at their fingertips to support multiple student needs and diverse learner populations.

TECHNOLOGY SUGGESTIONS TO ENGAGE STUDENTS AND FACILITATE LEARNING

Mobile Apps—Fun and Immersive
Students seem connected to their smartphones 24/7. Why not use this medium as an opportunity for them to learn? Why not integrate free Apps into the classroom so they can practice Spanish wherever they are and wherever they go? A really good mobile App is one that enables them to listen to Spanish vocabulary and common phrases, and view model conversations. It should enable them to record and playback their pronunciation efforts for key words, phrases, and mini
Technology should be there to enhance and support the learning experience and the platform should be easily accessible for both students and teachers.

conversations. It should also include flashcards that the student can shuffle, and hide the words they’ve mastered with both the word and picture. A good App will be one that includes Spanish and English audio for the flashcards so students have more exposure to the pronunciation of the language as well as its meaning. If the App offers music that can connect the content students are learning while letting them follow along with the lyrics or hide them and remember them, even better!

**Desired outcomes:** Let students see and listen to what real Spanish model conversations sound and look like, using words they are using in the classroom. Increase their confidence and willingness to produce language. Increased practice time leads to increased language proficiency.

TECHNOLOGY TOOLS THAT ENHANCE STUDENTS’ LEARNING

Technology should be there to enhance and support the learning experience and the platform should be easily accessible for both students and teachers. Technology tools that can aid in this process include:

- Digital notes for teachers and students
- Self-directed learning activities
- Activities that can be modified
- Remediation content easily assignable
- Videos that contain closed captioning
- Videos that have the ability to slow down or speed up the rate of speech
- Student content that can be read by screen reader software
- Digital tools that capture their thoughts whether it be audio, video, notetaking, PowerPoints and more
- Digital notebooks that encourage students to make cultural reflections about the content
- Notetaking, bookmarking, highlighting capabilities help students note what is important, what to review and what to ask assistance with
- Interactive games that reinforce concepts and permit immediate feedback to students and teachers on their progress

**Desired outcomes:** Students that actively engage with the content and the culture. These students are likely to experience greater retention and make greater strides towards language proficiency. A record exists of their thoughts, and both students and teachers can see their growth over the course of the school year.

TECHNOLOGY TEACHERS CAN USE TO CREATE CONTENT THAT IS RELEVANT AND USES REAL-WORLD CONTEXTS

World Language teachers are largely digitally savvy, very creative, and constantly on the lookout for content and experiences that they can connect to their lessons with contexts that are meaningful to their students' lives. Technology can be used to:

- Pair literary pieces with videos on authors, historical contexts and more
- Pair masterworks of art with historical perspectives and biographies and more
- Study countries and themes with relevant realia and authentic texts and multimedia experiences
- Provide a platform where teachers can:
  - Create, modify, and add content and links easily and have it available at point of use
  - Easily assign content to students for viewing and completion inside and/or outside of the classroom
  - Rearrange content in the way and in the order they would like to teach
  - Easily create learning groups and personalized learning paths

**Desired outcomes:** Learning a language is so much more than memorization, vocabulary, grammar,
and conjugations. It’s about the different flavors and perspectives of the cultures that speak that language. Bringing those pieces into the classroom adds a whole other dimension to the language learning experience, making it real for students. In addition, being able to create, add and modify content, and easily assign it to students saves teachers from having to lug around papers, so they have resources easily accessible and the ability to always keep them current as they find additional nuggets along the way.

TOOLS THAT CONNECT STUDENTS TO EACH OTHER AND THEIR WORLD

Based upon the earlier graphic (page 2), and teens’ preferred social media channels, the social sharing aspect is increasingly important in their lives and a key outlet for social expression and connectedness. Why not leverage that predilection for sharing in the classroom? Technology can facilitate this not only by bringing the world to teens, but also by encouraging them to venture out into it. Some suggestions include:

• Technology platform that enables students to upload their video, audio files, PowerPoints, links, and content they would like to share with the classroom
• Platform that permits students to collaborate with one another on speaking and other tasks and activities
• Platform that enables students to present their projects to the classroom and flip the classroom
• Shared discussion boards that facilitate dialogue, reflection, and sharing of students’ perspectives on themselves and on the cultures they are encountering
• Having authentic resources and realia at point of use—such as news articles, podcasts, works of art, historical documents, multimedia and much more—that can be used inside and outside of the classroom where students can share their thoughts and grow critical thinking skills
• Interactive maps
  – Explore the Spanish-speaking world with virtual fieldtrips that take students outside of their classrooms and themselves to experience a broader world
  – Deep dive with interactive maps that drill deeper into the places, products and perspectives with associated activities, and resources that can be completed online

Desired outcomes: By bringing students out into the world it broadens their horizon and viewpoint and makes it easier for them to compare and contrast, examine and reflect. It’s where they look inward so they can also look outward and gain a broader view of the larger world and of how they fit into it. It’s a place of discovery. Not just of a language, but also of a myriad of cultures. Technology tools can facilitate this process of self-discovery and growth. Technology makes it easier to curate resources that stir the imagination and embrace tools that capture students’ thoughts.

SPEAK AND RECORD CAPABILITIES—LANGUAGE REINFORCEMENT AND CONFIDENCE BUILDING

Whether students are completing individual, paired or group speaking activities, it is important that they are able to hear not just their pronunciation efforts, but also know how their vocabulary and grammar skills are progressing. With a class of 30 students, it is hard for the teacher to take the time with each student or group to listen to and provide individual feedback. Technology can change all that. Using a program that contains speak and record capabilities enables the students to practice their efforts over and over and save the version they want to submit to the teacher. In addition, by having students submit audio files, teachers save valuable class instruction time and have the time afterwards to listen to the student and provide feedback directly to the student/s in the system. This technology tool is a great way to capture and facilitate integrated performance assessments that focus on oral presentation.

Desired outcomes: Providing a tool where students can speak and record, and that provides immediate feedback to them as to how they sound, can increase students’ confidence in the production of the language and the willingness to produce a foreign language. Increased proficiency is the goal for each student. As we also know, not all students of a foreign language are extroverts who love to talk and who love to learn languages. This tool can help the more reticent students to overcome their shyness and lack of confidence, by
having a “safe space” in which to produce and submit their language efforts. It also enables those Pre-AP® students to become familiar and comfortable recording their efforts, which is something they will have to do on the AP exam.

**OFFLINE ACCESSIBILITY—CONTENT ON THE GO**

Teachers are looking for more ways to keep students from spending all their time in the classroom doing exercises and activities. And they are looking for more direct instruction time. An interactive digital program that includes the ability to download to use offline, where students can review materials and complete assignments at home or on the go that then syncs back, is a great tool both for teachers and students. This program would include multimedia resources as well.

**Desired outcomes:** Teachers can feel confident in assigning authentic resource videos, audio files and activities, and knowing that students can have enriching learning experiences outside of the classroom and comeback prepared to discuss, present, etc. Content on-the-go encourages exploration and self-discovery. Students can feel less stressed about completing all of their work during the allocated class time and school day. Having access to a fully digital course outside of the classroom makes students more likely to connect and engage with the content as well as complete the assigned tasks in a timelier fashion.

**TECHNOLOGY PROVIDES FASTER FEEDBACK AND HELPS INFORM INSTRUCTION**

There are higher expectations for faster results and feedback both from students and from teachers. Students want to know how they are doing and teachers want to show administrators how their classes are performing. Spanish teachers are pressed for time and would like to spend more time for planning, as well as developing content and activities, and less time grading activities. Great technology tools integrated into the classroom can facilitate:

- Self-checks and activities that can be autograded
- Banks of items that can be easily pulled together for formative and summative assessments that are also autograded
- Student viewing of their progress on assignments and tasks as well as grades received and teacher feedback on both oral and written performance-based assessments and project-based assignments
- Data by class for assignment and overall classroom mastery
- Data by learning groups for assignments and standards mastery
- Data by student for work not yet started, work in progress, work completed, grades by assignment and by mastery as well as usage reports

**Desired outcomes:** With relevant and meaningful data at their fingertips, teachers can modify instruction for learner groups such as Heritage Speakers, Pre-AP students, struggling students, students with special needs, etc. In addition, student, parent, and teacher discussions and conferences can become more productive and streamlined as data and notes for the student are readily available. Teachers also want their students to become more self-directed learners. By giving students access to their results and instant feedback activities, student engagement and commitment to learning and progress is likely to increase.

**ONLINE CONTENT—CURRENT AND UPDATED CONTENT AT YOUR FINGER TIPS**

Keeping content current and relevant and preventing the “stale factor” is important for teachers. Technology can facilitate this with a platform that provides:

- Integrated multimedia content at point of use
• Content that is updated on an ongoing basis
• The capability to create, add, modify content and curate links
• Integrated search engines that provide additional content

Desired outcomes: Engage students with authentic resources and experiences that connect them to the products, practices and perspectives of the various Spanish-speaking cultures, and foster greater cultural understanding and Spanish language proficiency.

SUPPORTING DIFFERENT MODALITIES OF LEARNING IS EASIER AND MORE ENJOYABLE USING TECHNOLOGY

As mentioned in a whitepaper by author Rich Sayers, Differentiating Instruction in the Spanish Language Classroom, “Students may have preferences in the way they learn and are able to better access and retain the content when presented with the content and activities in a manner that takes advantage of their natural inclinations and learning style.” Technology can be used to help foster learning for the following groups:

• **Mathematical/Logical Learners**- Learn best when taught using visual materials, computers, statistical and analytical programs, and hands-on projects. Incorporate technology using:
  - Digital content with as many touch points as possible
  - Interactive digital games
  - Mobile Apps where they can see, hear and see model conversations
  - Recorded feedback and progress tracking
  - Theme-based projects and project-based learning activities where they use digital tools to create the result
  - Cross-curricular activities that include an analysis piece
  - Interaction with authentic multimedia content that compares and contrasts cultural products, practices and perspectives.

• **Visual/Spatial Learners**- Learn best when taught using written, modeled, or diagrammed instruction and visual media. Visually and spatially talented students have good visual memory for details. Incorporate technology using:
  - Activities that include Interactive Whiteboard activities, movies and videos
  - Content that includes art, photography, maps and other realia such as surveys, recipes etc. giving them a visual reference
  - Project-based learning where they have to create something tangible such as a video, website, display, etc.

• **Verbal/Linguistic Learners**- Learn best when taught using spoken or written materials. Rather than activities that are based on abstract visual information, Verbal/Linguistic learners prefer those that are based on language reasoning, and they will usually enjoy written projects. Incorporate technology using:
  - Online journaling, written lists, reflections, blogs, discussion boards, written comparisons on culture and their own perspectives
  - Authentic texts from a variety of sources, realia, videos and video models and audio sources
  - Project based-learning and integrated performance tasks that focus on written presentation to help them relate to the content in a meaningful way and show what they can do with the language
  - Interactive digital games that use word searches and songs that help them learn concepts and vocabulary grammar
  - Mobile Apps where they can interact with songs, model conversations, and have the ability to speak and record

• **Kinesthetic Learners**- Learn best when they are permitted to use their tactile senses and fine and gross motor movement as part of the learning process. They often prefer direct involvement with material they are learning. Incorporate technology using:
  - Project-based where they produce audio, video or other files
  - Digital flashcards
  - Interactive digital games
  - Songs, music videos, and videos
  - Recorded audio/video files
  - Mobile Apps where they can interact with the content
DESIRED OUTCOMES SUMMARY

Increased language proficiency and a deeper cultural understanding both of themselves and the world around them are the goals we have for our students in foreign language classrooms. And while we are not advocating a totally digital approach, there are very effective uses of technology platforms and tools that can greatly facilitate and enhance the learning process.

Embracing the changes to digital media resources and tools in the classroom makes school coursework more relevant, meaningful, and engaging to students, bringing their language study to life. At the same time, it enables teachers to spend more time doing what they do best—teach Spanish.

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Bibliography


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