

Efi Pelekouda Interviews Bessie Mitsikopoulou, Plenary Speaker of the TESOL Greece 38th Annual International Convention



Efi Pelekouda

Bessie Mitsikopoulou is well known and respected in the academic world, having done extensive research in applications of new technologies in education as well as foreign language teaching. TESOL Greece is proud to welcome her as a plenary speaker to our forthcoming 38th International Convention. She is interviewed by

Efi Pelekouda and shares some of her extensive knowledge and experience in ELT and digital literacies, and she offers TESOL Greece members an insight into what they can anticipate to hear during her talk in March in Athens.

Using technology in class has created a new learning environment for students. What are the benefits of interactive technology and how does it enhance language learning?

Technology has always been used in the foreign language classroom, but the technology used 20 or 50 years ago is very different to the technology used today as in other areas of life. 'Modern' foreign language programmes of the 60s made effective use of the tape recorder and made sure that the language lab was used for the improvement of pronunciation. Slides, video, television and OHPs were popular in the 70s and 80s. Now, in the 21st century we have the digital media and web 2.0. The important difference between the technology of the past and the technology of the present is that today's technology is interactive and it brings real life experience in the classroom. It also builds on the literacies that learners develop outside the classroom by using their computers, the internet – making language learning relevant to their everyday life. At the same time, the use of various modes in multimedia applications caters for different learning styles, increases motivation and enhances understanding.

Is it all moonlight and roses? Do you think that technology could impede the process of learning on any occasion?

It always depends on what you do with the digital media, how you use them, and what you expect from their use. It's all about how you incorporate them in

your curriculum, what educational and pedagogical aims you want them to help you achieve. The use of technology on its own will neither impede nor increase the learning process. Research shows that the only thing it can do is perhaps increase learners' motivation at the early stages of learning. If, however, the content is just drill and practice, the students will eventually get bored. It's what you decide to do with the digital content that will make the difference. In the *Digital School project*, for instance, we prepared almost 1,000 learning objects over a period of 4 years to enrich state textbooks for primary and secondary education with digital materials. Some of them were materials aiming to *inform* learners about the language (such as audio extracts, glossaries, picture dictionaries, grammar and reading comics), others were instructional materials aiming to *guide learners in practicing the language* (for instance, edugames, self-assessment tests, listening and reading apps), others were experiential materials aiming to *provide exposure* to language use and facilitate personal engagement (such as digital stories, virtual tours and karaoke songs for our young learners) and, finally, others were exploratory materials aiming to help learners *make discoveries* about language (such as scenario-based mystery and lost series applications, English quests and genre-based writing applications). Each one of these types of digital materials has its own philosophy, serves different aims and addresses different aspects of language learning, and it is the language teachers who will decide *how, when* and *to what extent* they will incorporate any of these materials in their syllabus and for *what purposes*.

Let's keep in mind that the new Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum that will be in effect as of September 2016 in Greek schools requires language teachers to create their own syllabus for each one of their classrooms. This also involves selecting the materials (print, electronic) that will be used for each lesson.

In Greece, have there been any systematic attempts to incorporate technology in the foreign



B. Mitsikopoulou

language classroom?

Over the last five years we have seen the development of digital materials for the teaching of languages in Greece in the context of the National Strategic Reference Framework under the auspices of the Greek Ministry of Education. The Digital School project, which was implemented by Diophantus Computer Technology Institute & Press, is one of these projects which developed interactive textbooks and digital materials for all school subjects for primary and secondary education, and digital repositories, the Photodentro LOR and video, where these materials are hosted.

Another project is the KPG e-school which was part of a bigger project developing the exams for the Greek State Certificate in Language Proficiency (KPG). Recognizing the need to offer open materials for all Greek citizens in a period of crisis, the foreign language departments of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki prepared online KPG practice books, an electronic database of language activities, test-taking strategy multimedia applications, and a training platform for KPG assessors and evaluators.

Digital materials for young learners were also developed by the Faculty of English of the University of Athens in the context of the English for Young Learners Project (with the Greek acronym PEAP), with which English was introduced in the first two grades of elementary school, together with a complete online training program for EFL teachers which focuses on the teaching of young learners.

A more recent project, AESOP, the Advanced Electronic Scenarios Operating Platform, developed by the Institute of Educational Policy, is a state-of-the-art online platform for the development of online educational scenarios and online lessons through its multimedia tools which enable the creation of online activities by its users and the building of an online lesson.

Now the extent to which these materials are actually used in the English classroom remains to be investigated. It is important for EFL teachers to be informed about these developments, to familiarize themselves with these materials so that they feel comfortable enough to use them in their classroom.

Stories, as one of the most important ways of communication, help young learners improve their linguistic and cognitive abilities. How does digital storytelling enhance their literacy skills?

Digital stories may be developed by learners themselves in the form of a collaborative project in the English language classroom. Learners prepare the script, select music and pictures and put the whole story together. Throughout the project they need to make a lot of decisions, negotiate with their partners and come to an agreement, find the most appropriate way to visually depict their story, develop a storyline and use the various media effectively to construct a video. Therefore, during the process they need to activate linguistic, cognitive and social skills of different kinds.

Research has shown that 80% of what we learn, we tend to forget by the end of the day. Based on your experiences in the classroom setting, what are the most effective ways to assess students' assimilation?

Assessment is most often conceived as one-way process but it does not really have to be like that. A good alternative would be to activate various forms of self-assessment, in which learners assess themselves and they may even create the tools to do that. Through self-assessment responsibility for learning turns from teachers to learners, and assessment becomes an active part of the learning process. Digital tools can be a great assistance here, since there are a lot of online self-assessment tools that English teachers may use, they may even create their own tests or, at a level of meta-awareness, have their learners develop the criteria for their self-assessment. Portfolios (print or electronic) is another good example of alternative assessment which gives learners a good sense of what they have achieved over a period of time. By keeping a record of their work and by completing self-evaluation logs systematically, learners develop an awareness of their progress and a kind of responsibility of their learning.

Testing and scoring students' work is an integral part of a teacher's duties. However, a poor grade can deprive our students of the pleasure of learning a foreign language. What are the best ways of providing students with constructive feedback?

Constructive feedback can take many forms, depending on learners' age, level and purpose of an activity. We are often driven by traditional ways of providing feedback, but we can also experiment with some alternative forms. For instance, descriptive feedback and evaluation might take a teacher longer to prepare but it's much more valuable to tell each one of your learners what they have achieved, in what

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ways they may improve, where to pay attention, etc. Instead of a number or a letter and a brief comment, we could be positive and focus on giving learners a report of their achievements. Constructive feedback is positive feedback and a good alternative would be to focus on what the learners have achieved not what they have done wrong.

When it comes to giving feedback on writing, I found peer feedback an excellent alternative technique which activates learners' skills and raises their awareness in a unique way. This of course involves inviting learners to become critical readers, not teachers who correct mistakes in someone else's writing. Learners need to be trained to approach a piece of writing as informed readers and respond to it and they also need to practise peer feedback systematically in order to have good results. It takes time but it's a learning process for all, so it is eventually rewarding.

In the end, with a view to “keeping it practical” which is the theme of the Convention, what would you suggest a teacher should

have in mind when it comes to teaching in the digital era? Have, or will traditional practical ways of learning become obsolete?

Language teachers, EFL teachers in particular, have a long tradition in experimenting with new methods and approaches and with new types of technology and more recently with digital media, tools and materials. Above all, I would suggest the need to be eclectic and decide each time what would be the most appropriate medium, tool and material for each lesson and each activity. After all, it's only the teacher, the informed teacher, who knows best the needs of a particular group of learners and is in the position to make informed decisions.

Useful sites

Τα αγγλικά στο Ψηφιακό Σχολείο <http://micro.photodentro.edu.gr/english2015/?q=el/node/51>
KPG e-school <http://rcel.enl.uoa.gr/kpgschool/>
PEAP <http://rcel.enl.uoa.gr/peap/>
AESOP <http://aesop.iep.edu.gr/>