

## Integrating Tech Tools to Support Various Modalities of Second Language Development

by NATALIA WARD AND BETTY THOMASON

Recent global events have challenged language teachers to reimagine how they incorporate technology and digital learning in their classrooms. In schools around the world, computer-based and smartphone-based tech tools offer educators and their students a means to collaborate, engage, and learn. From research, we know that integrating computer-assisted tools into traditional modes of teaching can improve students' language learning, especially when ample interactivity is present (Durrington et al. 2006; Sharifi et al. 2018; Tomlinson and Whittaker 2013). At the same time, technology is most effective when it is used in service of specific learning outcomes and instructional goals (Chapelle and Voss 2016). It is critical that educators consider the authenticity and intentionality with which they use technology in language classrooms.

In this article, we highlight several tech tools that we have found particularly useful in supporting language-learning objectives we set in the classroom. We searched for them online and in professional publications, like *English Teaching Forum*. To illustrate the innovative implementation of several free online tools, we describe their use as part of one junior high-school English as a second language (ESL) class in the southeast region

of the United States. Students were eighth- and ninth-graders, came from a variety of backgrounds, and spoke either Spanish or Japanese as their first language. We sought activities and tools that would offer the students a wide range of opportunities for participation in all modalities of language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In addition, it was important for students to gain content knowledge relevant to the topic of the unit and focus on activities and tasks that are cognitively challenging and allow for exploration. To meet this goal, we identified tools that offered adolescent English learners (ELs) the flexibility to participate in class activities whether they were present in the classroom or learning digitally from home. We describe these tools below and offer lessons we learned from this work. Finally, we provide examples from a unit of study on Central America to illustrate how the tech tools can be linked to specific instructional goals and tasks (see Figures 1 and 2).

### TECH TOOLS THAT SUPPORT LANGUAGE LEARNING

We organize the tools we selected in two broad categories, according to the specific communication mode they help develop. The interpretive communication mode

includes listening and reading; the expressive communication mode incorporates speaking, writing, and other forms of representing one's thoughts and ideas (WIDA 2020, 28). While these categories help demonstrate the use of tech tools in our classrooms, we want to emphasize that most of them can be used flexibly to support several or all of the communication modes. It is up to individual teachers to reflect on the use of technology as it fits within the content of their lessons and to create assignments and tasks that integrate technology purposefully.

### **Tools for Supporting the Interpretive Communication Mode**

*Language-learning objectives:* The tools in this category can support students' development of reading and listening skills.

Researching tools that would support students' reading, we discovered a number of apps and websites. For example, *Jamboard* is a free app that is part of the Google suite of apps. *Jamboard* bolsters reading skills by allowing students to share authentic thoughts in written form. This tool can also be used for sorting, matching, and cloze activities, and in other creative ways to manipulate written text and images. In our classes, we created personal pages for each student and sent students questions about the topic of the lesson or unit. They wrote responses to the questions using electronic sticky notes and text boxes, and they shared their knowledge with one another by visiting classmates' pages. Each student read all the responses from the other students. Students enjoyed reading their peers' posted messages, and the activity inspired a lively discussion about their responses. We, the teachers, could then view all pages and comment on them.

For adolescent ELs starting to learn English as their second language, listening to English at a conversational pace can be challenging. We needed to find a tool that could provide opportunities for ELs to practice listening to classroom content in English at a conventional speed. *VoiceThread* is a free app that allows students to upload presentation slides and

record comments for each slide. The saved presentation with comments can be shared with the teacher and other students. As the students viewed one another's presentations, they listened to their peers' remarks and noted key data described in the slides. The *VoiceThread* activity develops students' ability to listen closely to academic content and helps shape pronunciation. Another useful feature is that students can listen to the same presentation multiple times to ensure the accuracy of their notes. *VoiceThread* invites connectivity among students, whether they are at home or face-to-face. (See Figure 2 for an example of a *VoiceThread* slide created by a student.) Alternatives to *VoiceThread* include *ShowMe* and *Easelly*; both are interactive and offer options for including audio and visuals.

In addition, we utilized tools that would combine reading and listening in a fun activity using *Kahoot!*. In this app, the teacher or students create multiple-choice questions based on the topic of the lesson or unit. The questions and answer choices flash onto the screen, and students must propose an answer, listen to their classmates' ideas, and then vote for the answer they collectively choose. Students can play this game individually or in teams. Creating *Kahoot!* games can solidify students' content knowledge and provide practice for developing their reading and listening skills. Furthermore, the game-like format of this activity allows students to focus on demonstrating their academic knowledge in a safe and engaging environment. Educators can also try *Mentimeter* or *Plickers* to get students reading and listening while also demonstrating their learning through participation.

### **Tools for Supporting the Expressive Communication Mode**

*Language-learning objectives:* The tools in this category can support students' development of speaking and writing skills, along with other forms representing their learning.

As we began by investigating computer programs provided by the school district, one tool that appealed to us was *OneNote*—an

Selected Tools for Supporting the Interpretive Communication Mode	Selected Tools for Supporting the Expressive Communication Mode
<p><i>Jamboard</i> Students sort interesting facts about the Central American country they are researching into categories of geography, history, and prominent people.</p> <p><i>VoiceThread</i> Students create a presentation of five to seven slides on the country they researched. Each slide can have images, words, and audio narration (see Figure 2).</p> <p><i>Kahoot!</i> With partners, students answer multiple-choice questions about the geography of the Central American countries they and their peers researched.</p>	<p><i>OneNote</i> In their digital notebooks, students take notes on vocabulary discussed in class. They then answer questions posed by the teacher. Students also locate and store maps and pictures of the Central American country they are researching.</p> <p><i>Flipgrid</i> Students write a response to a prompt by the teacher related to the history of the Central American country they are researching. Students then video-record their answer and share their recording with the teacher in <i>Flipgrid</i>.</p>

**Figure 1. Using tech tools in a unit of study on Central America**

electronic notebook, complete with sections and pages. Sections can be used just as tab dividers are used in a paper notebook, and pages can be compared to pieces of paper placed between tab dividers. In our case, we made a *OneNote* notebook for a content-based language class on world geography and created a page designated to Central America—the topic of the unit. On this page, students wrote notes from the textbook and class discussion. Because it is a digital notebook, students can easily locate their work and keep it organized. Students stored class notes, vocabulary, maps, and pictures in their *OneNote* notebook. Digital notebooks serve as a productive organizational tool that students can access at any point during their school day. We linked the student notebooks to the teacher notebook. This allowed the teacher to add information or instruction, monitor student progress on assignments, and evaluate student work. Other digital notebook apps that can be explored by teachers include *Evernote*, *Notion*, and *Simplenote*.

After we introduced the students to relevant vocabulary and content, we turned our attention to locating a free online app that would assist with the development of speaking skills. We finally selected *Flipgrid*, as it reinforces this development by providing students with opportunities to record their responses and listen to themselves and others. To use *Flipgrid*, the teacher creates a page

for each student or the class collectively and assigns students a question to answer orally. Students use headphones with a microphone to record their responses. Teachers can listen to the responses and send written or verbal feedback to students. This feedback may include comments on student pronunciation, syntax, content, and pace or length of response. For this unit, the teacher invited each student individually to participate in the exercise. Students used information they had collected to respond to questions that required them to explain information or justify their opinions. Teachers have the flexibility to ask students to collaborate or to post anonymously. Because adolescent learners in class were hesitant to engage with *Flipgrid* in front of their peers, we provided each student with an individual account, which prevented students from viewing each other's video recordings. We found *Flipgrid* to be a tool that supported our students' pronunciation development, syntactical awareness, vocabulary development, and language pacing.

## WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

The apps and websites we used in this unit represent only a small set of all tech tools available to educators. All tools we used worked purposefully to engage students in various modes of communication and to meet the goals of our lessons. Starting from the

lesson objectives and purposes for each tool was important; it helped us infuse technology into the fabric of the unit with authenticity and intentionality. When educators explore various tools available on tablets, computers, and smartphones, considering the educational purpose that the tools serve is paramount.

### Challenges

Several challenges arose with this project. First, it took some thinking, planning, and time to locate and vet tech tools to use, and then to clearly outline their purpose within the unit. However, once we planned how the tools would fit within the lessons, their implementation followed suit. Another challenge was teaching students how to use the technology before asking them to use it. Several students had limited experience with educational technology and required support in their first language to complete the tasks, especially at the start. Finally, students at times were hesitant to share their answers, products, and presentations. However, one-on-one support, peer assistance, and ongoing teacher modeling helped students get accustomed to the collaborative nature of the tools. As students gained experience, they became eager to try out new technology.

### Benefits

We discovered several benefits of implementing the tools we selected for this unit. The technology in the classroom often had a game-like aspect, which made learning enjoyable. Open-ended activities and the engaging interface of the apps invited students to be creative in their language use. The tools also provided a number of opportunities to make academic gains, as they enabled students to apply their learning in novel ways. Online tools offer educative activities that can strengthen ELs' language skills in all areas of communication. It is important that teachers select apps that spark students' interest and are purposeful to the learning goals of each lesson. We found that when students were able to create products and share them with others, they experienced a high level of engagement in the activities, which translated into increased academic growth. Educators



Figure 2. VoiceThread example

interested in incorporating technology in their teaching should consider tools like these while at the same time ensuring that they prioritize instructional goals and objectives, use technology in service of language learning, and allow room for new and exciting teaching opportunities to emerge through technology.

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**Natalia Ward, PhD**, is an assistant professor of literacy and language education at East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee.

**Betty Thomason, PhD**, is an English as a second language teacher in Maryville City Schools in Maryville, Tennessee.