



Teaching Advancement at Universities (TAU) Fellowship 2018/2019

Final report on individual project:

Integrating apps for English teaching through online collaboration

Dr Lizette de Jager (EG 5 & 6)
Department of Humanities Education, Faculty of Education
University of Pretoria
lizette.dejager@up.ac.za

1. Introduction and context

In the South African context, the learning of English as a second language and as Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) is fraught with difficulty. A grave concern is that learners may not only be hindered by their own low level of English language skills, but also by those of their teachers. Teachers' general competence in the language of instruction, their knowledge about the language and how they speak the language are crucial issues which could influence the effectiveness of their teaching and the learners' understanding of new content. Whereas the curriculum envisages high levels of proficiency in First Additional Language (FAL) (or the second language), what the learners acquire is, unfortunately, nothing close to the expected degree of language and communicative competence in English, and so also do pre-service teachers struggle with academic texts, both in written form and orally, and their communicative competence is inadequate.

As a further challenge, the use of technology in schools, as mandated by policy (DoE 2004), has not been as effective as had been hoped. Not only are teachers mandated by policy (DoE 2004) to nurture technology competences in their learners, but teachers also need to develop these competences in themselves. Increased access to information means that the teacher's role needs to change. In addition to supplying information, teachers now need to help learners find information for themselves, but also help learners to evaluate that information critically.

The increasing concern about the extent to which pre-service teachers struggle with mastering English and how they would teach the subject when placed in schools, coupled with the importance of teaching pre-service teachers not only what technology is, but also how to integrate technology into the English classroom, lie at the heart of this project. Pre-service teachers need to engage learners in constructivist learning through social and intellectual interactions to break the cycle of traditional passive learning.

My motivation was to develop a project so that three underlying challenges can be addressed, namely promoting communicative competence and oral proficiency, integrating

technology into instructional design, and working collaboratively online through social platforms. In the process transformed practice (Janks 2010), and student success may be achieved. The purpose of this project was to develop student learning in English education through online collaboration by incorporating technology, specifically Android Apps, into the instructional design of lessons.

2. Methodology

This project was framed within an interpretivist paradigm, utilizing a qualitative approach (Creswell 2013) and doing intervention research. The conceptual framework for the project emanated from areas of second language teaching and learning, which has as its main focus communicative competence (CC) (Hymes 1966), and technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPCK) (Mishra & Koehler 1986). Participatory reflection and action (PRA) (Chambers 2008; Patton 2002) and the principles of the Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison & Arbaugh 2007) were employed as framework for the methodology of the project. Participants were pre-service teachers enrolled for the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), and were all enrolled for the module Methodology of English (VES 410). The participants collaborated online in a dedicated module created on the institution's Blackboard system. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework used to guide the project.

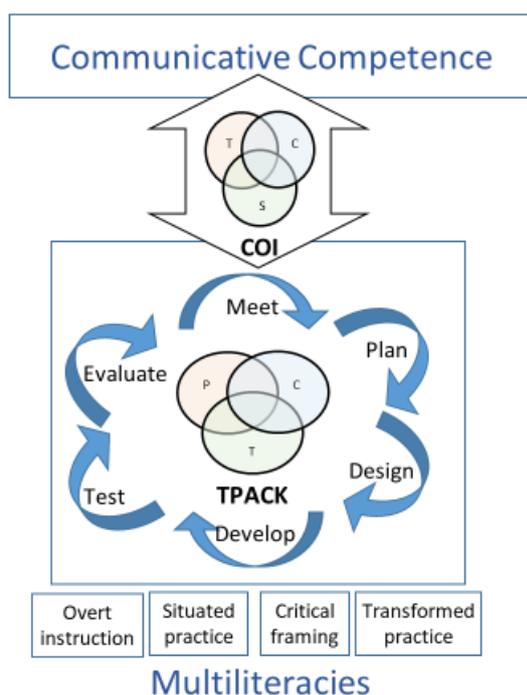


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

For data analysis I relied on thematic, inductive analysis of the matrices from the PRA workshops, the data generated by the discussion forums on Blackboard, the interactive lessons designed by participants, and the focus group interviews. Throughout the research project, I adhered to the guidelines for conducting ethical research (Ethics certificate number: UP 18/08/01) and aimed to obtain valid and trustworthy findings.

13 pre-service teachers participated in the project and collaborated online through discussion threads to help one another choose the most applicable Apps for their teaching

purpose and phase/grade. Five language lecturers participating in the project acted as monitors and facilitators. The project was conducted in the following phases:

Phase 1: Pre-intervention planning workshop with lecturers

A half day planning workshop was conducted with the five lecturers involved in the project. The theoretical underpinning for the project was discussed at length and a step by step process was developed for the participants to use when they sourced and evaluated the Apps. The principles of Backward design, TPCK and SAMR, as well as social constructivism, were kept in mind in the designing of the process.

Phase 2: Pre-intervention training workshop with participants

A training workshop of three hours was conducted with participants where they were trained in the principles of TPCK and the SAMR model. They were also shown how to do a basic search on the tablets and which aspects to look out for, among others, developer name, size, reviews, and so on (see addenda A and B)). The criteria used to evaluate the Apps were also discussed at length (please visit our Enquiry Group website at www.etau.co.za for a list with the criteria used for evaluation). Participants were afforded the opportunity to practice a search for an App on their tablets and to discuss what they had found with the rest of the participants. These Apps were evaluated to show the participants what to look out for.

Phase 3: Research, selection and evaluation

The research phase comprised two actions, namely searching for Apps and then evaluating these against set criteria provided to them. Based on their evaluations, participants could do further searches. Participants collaborated with members of their community online and discussed the various Apps they identified. They reached consensus on the most applicable and relevant Apps to teach an aspect of language or literature. Students were then required to upload the 10 best Apps as well as the evaluations for these Apps onto the Blackboard module to share with all the other participants. Lecturers monitored their activity online and commented, discussed and guided the process as required.

Phase 4: Intervention

Participants then designed an interactive language or literature lesson, making use of at least two of their chosen Apps. The interactive lessons needed to have as its aim the enhancement of communicative competence. The lessons were uploaded onto the Blackboard module and lecturers and participants critiqued and discussed these lessons and provided detailed feedback. The participants then presented their lessons during their official Work Integrated Learning period at the schools at which they were placed. Participants were then required to spend some time online again in collaboration with their fellow students to reflect on the successes and failures of their lessons and the relevance and applicability of their Apps.

Phase 5: Reflection

The reflection phase was conducted in the form of a PRA workshop where the outcome of the project was evaluated. The focus was the experiences of the pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers reflected on their actions and wrote down their experiences and thoughts on a matrix on A3 charts. The matrix is divided into planned actions (training workshop), actual actions (intervention) and new actions (adaptations and improvements after

reflections) for future implementation. The participants were asked to what extent their own teaching practice had been transformed by the project.

3. Impact of the project

Since the project has not been completed yet (due to be completed by October) and because I followed a participatory approach when developing the technology intervention, I cannot predict the content of the project at this stage. However, early indicators are that a wide range of educational and generic Apps, study Apps, summarizing Apps as well as gaming Apps for the teaching of English were identified across the phases (Intermediate to Further Education and Training) which acted as a vehicle that enhanced the interactive nature of instructional design, ultimately aiding in the development of learners' English language use as well as their communicative competence. Participants said that by using technology in the classroom they were able to close the gap between traditional methods of teaching languages and the way in which technologically intelligent learners learn a language. Moreover, apart from assisting learners to improve their communicative competence, participants stated that their own communicative competence improved greatly, since they themselves had to play and work through the Apps, thereby learning not only the content of the subject but also coming to a better understanding of the strategic competencies required for communicative competence. This new understanding has had a positive and transformative effect on participants' teaching practice.

From initial findings, it seems as if technology can be the change agent that will take the language classroom into a whole new direction of learning a language and transform the teaching practice of pre-service teachers. Participants indicated transformed thinking in instructional design which led to transformed practice. Participants were able to develop and improve their use of technology and experience self-efficacy, thereby experiencing directly the benefits of integrating technology into the teaching of English. Participants indicated that in the process of evaluating and selecting appropriate Apps for their teaching, in the process they improved their own understanding and language proficiency, thereby improving their own communicative competence. From the findings, it is clear that it is not about the technology in instructional design, it is about the pedagogy. What is potentially new and transformative about integrating Apps in instructional design is a change from didactic pedagogy to reflexive pedagogy.

Based on the findings I will be able to refine and improve the technology intervention for follow-up projects with future students. The immediate aim is to include other languages such as isiZulu, Sepedi and Afrikaans in the next cycle of the project, since the issue of second language learning is central to all languages in South Africa. The ideal is to implement it across disciplines and across higher education institutions on the African continent. I foresee that the outcomes of this project will have value for both the lecturers and the pre-service teachers, and may potentially inform future technology activities, thus supporting student learning and development.

4. Small successes

4.1 Funding

I was able to secure SoTL funding for the project from the University Capacity Development Grant (DHET). This allowed me to do a few things:

- a) I purchased 14 Lenovo 4 tablets with covers for the participants' use when searching for Apps. These tablets remain the property of the institution. Each participant received a contract agreement in this regard, which they all signed. The tablets will be returned at the end of the project. The tablets were numbered, updated and preloaded with a Google team drive.
- b) I arranged two breakaway retreats for the lecturers participating in the project; one for training purposes and the other as a writing retreat to plan and draft possible academic articles emanating from the project.
- c) I arranged a two-day breakaway retreat for all the pre-service teachers participating in the project, one day for the focus group interviews with the pre-service teachers and the second day for the transcriptions of the focus group interviews.
- d) I was able to include all the participants (lecturers and pre-service teachers) in a practitioner demonstration and presentation at the Flexible Futures Conference on 9 September 2019.

4.2 Teaching and Learning activities

I have been engaged in a number of activities that promote the scholarship of teaching and learning in my Faculty and at other universities:

- a) I have developed a team of co-workers who work in the field of languages and technology with the aim to make the scholarship of teaching and learning the focus of their research. My work with these colleagues falls within the broader field of multiliteracies and includes African languages (isiZulu and Sepedi) and Afrikaans, and will inform future cycles of the project.
- b) I presented a paper at the T & L Colloquium on 14 May 2019 hosted by my Department (Department of Humanities Education) and will be hosting a T & L seminar in September in our Faculty (Faculty of Humanities).
- c) I was invited by colleagues from Unisa to do a presentation on my work and the scholarship of T & L on 22 May 2019.
- d) I will present a paper that includes the final findings of the project at the HELTASA conference in November 2019

It has been rewarding to see the impact on colleagues and pre-service students. Many of them have implemented the integration of technology into their own modules and teaching practice. I have received numerous requests for follow-up workshops and seminars as the interest in T & L increases. I hope that as a change agent and through activities such as these and future cycles of my project across disciplines and institutions, I can help transform practice and enhance the scholarship of T & L not only at my institution, but also at other institutions.

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Addendum A: Process for sourcing and evaluating Apps

A step-by-step process for the sourcing and evaluation of Apps was identified and is shown in figure 1 and 2.

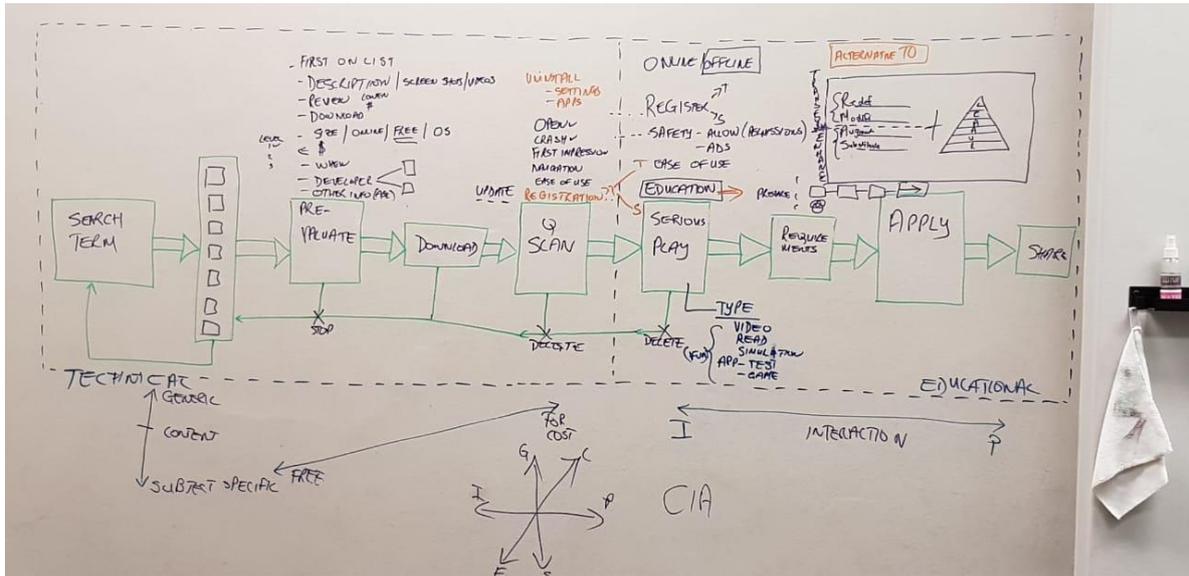


Figure 1: Draft process for sourcing and evaluating Apps

Addendum B

The draft process was refined and resulted in the diagram shown in figure 2.

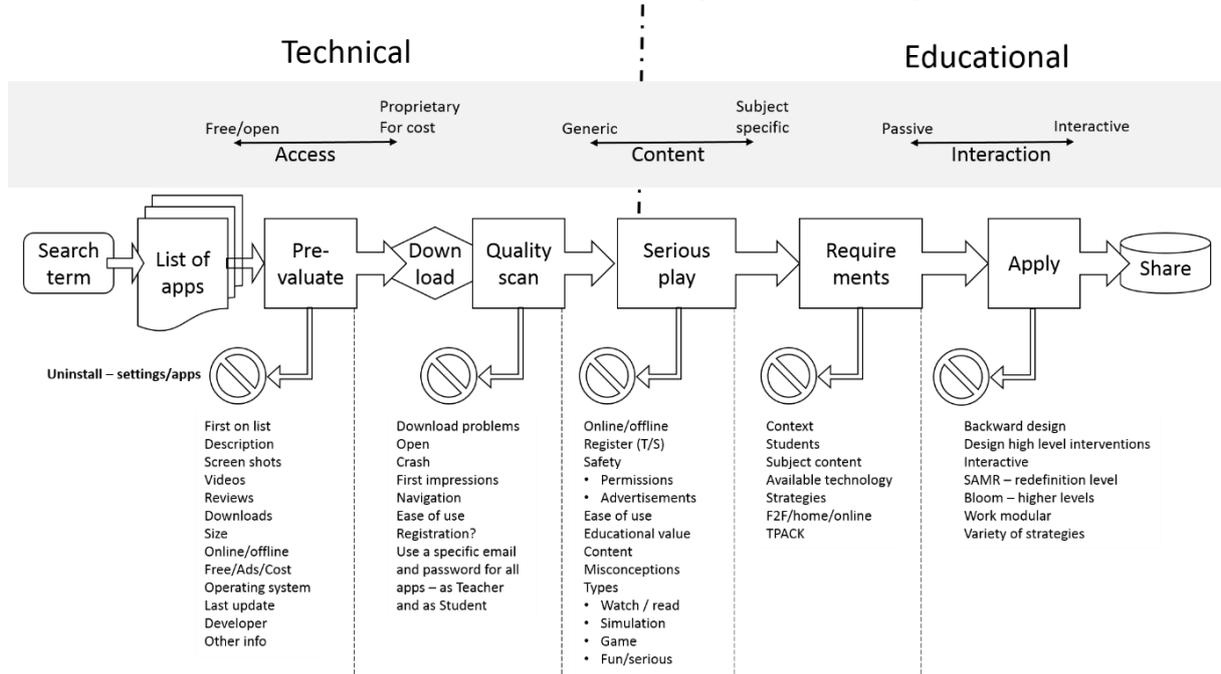


Figure 2: Final process for sourcing and evaluating Apps