EMTAS Position Statement: the role of technology in supporting learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL)

This Hampshire EMTAS Position Statement provides guidance on the use of technology with learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL).

Its intended audience includes Head Teachers, Senior Leaders in schools, EAL Co-ordinators/Inclusion Managers, Governors with responsibility for EAL, Class/Subject Teachers and Learning Support Staff.

Key Considerations

Introduction

The integration of technology in mainstream education has the potential to significantly enhance the learning experiences of learners with English as an Additional Language (EAL). There are also benefits to staff, enabling practitioners to quickly and easily make their lessons more accessible to their multilingual learners. Technology can provide personalised support, foster engagement and bridge language barriers, ultimately contributing to more equitable educational access and outcomes.

Despite all the benefits, there are drawbacks with the use of technology of which practitioners should be aware. Both the pros and cons are covered in this Position Statement.

Assistive Technologies (ATs) for learners of EAL

ATs such as screen readers, speech-to-text apps, translation tools etc. can be used to access learners of EAL to the mainstream curriculum in various ways. Practitioners will need to check what skills the learner has in their other language(s) in order to make informed choices about which ATs to offer.

Screen Readers & Scanner Pens

Audio-enabled screen readers and scanner pens can 'read' content aloud to learners. For learners whose listening skills in English are better developed than their reading skills, this can enable better understanding of, and engagement with, content. The reading speed of screen readers can be adjusted, while text highlighting supports learners to track through the text as it is read. Screen readers and scanner pens with a translation facility enable learners to draw on their first language (L1) skills to access content. This is often quicker and more effective for the learner than using a traditional paper-based translation dictionary.

Where use of the above ATs is a normal way of working for a learner of EAL, check for possible access arrangements:

Key Stages 1 and 2: Standards and Testing Agency (STA)
Key Stage 4: JCQ website

Speech-to-text apps and software

For learners whose speaking skills in English are better developed than their writing skills, speech-to-text apps such as Google Translate and Microsoft Translator can offer support with writing tasks. For further examples of such apps, see Course: Resources for use with learners (hants.gov.uk) (open access).

Some apps support dictation in English whilst others allow learners to dictate in a preferred L1. Where L1 is used, it is possible to translate what the learner has produced into English using other apps and software tools.

Note that background noise can cause interference when learners are using speech-to-text apps; for best results, consider providing a headset. Strong accents can also be problematic, yielding unreliable results.

Translating lesson content

Content on PowerPoint slides can be translated quickly using the in-built 'translate' function (in 'Review'). It is also possible to record a narration on to slides, which can support learners to access them more independently eg when completing homework tasks. Narration can be added in English or another language chosen from an extensive drop-down list.

YouTube can be set to show subtitles in English and in translation into various different languages, which may be useful for children

who are literate in another language. It may also be useful for parents/carers who are supporting their child with their learning at home.

To provide content on a subject in another language, try Wikipedia, available for free in a wide range of languages, or BBC Bitesize (through the Immersive Reader tab).

Capturing children's learning

Learners may benefit from different options when it comes to how they demonstrate their learning. If encouraged to write in L1, practitioners can use apps like Google Lens to get an instant translation into English where needed.

Learners may have better developed speaking skills in English than writing skills. Where this is the case, supporting them to audio record their responses to a task can be useful. Apps like BookCreator enable learners to produce high quality audio-enabled output, adding text and images too as appropriate.

Supporting learners' writing in English

AI-powered writing assistants such as Grammarly can be used to help EAL learners to develop their writing skills. Many are available as an app or as a plugin for browsers and other wordprocessors. They check for grammatical errors, suggest improvements and provide vocabulary enhancements.

Other assistants such as Read&Write by Texthelp can read emails or documents out loud. Their functionality may include features such as text prediction, picture dictionaries, summary highlighters and a grammar, spelling and confusable words checker.

E-Books

There are lots of online sites offering reading books translated into various languages. Some e-books also have a read-aloud function, which can support learners' engagement with content regardless of their literacy levels.

A curated list of e-book sites can be found on the EMTAS Moodle Course: Resources for use with learners (hants.gov.uk) (open access). Many are for reading for pleasure but there are some KS3 and KS4 set texts available too.

Considerations when using technologies

While the use of technologies offers many benefits for learners of EAL, there are also some potential drawbacks to consider.

Online safety & safeguarding

Use of L1 to access content online can lead to concerns about children's safety, especially where staff do not share the language – the use of built-in translation tools can be a helpful way of checking. Care should be taken to ensure learners are kept safe online. An acceptable use agreement, translated/audio-enabled where necessary, and signed by the child can be a step towards

achieving this. The best examples include guidance on what the child should do if they become concerned about anything to do with their activities online.

Over-reliance on technology

Teachers should ensure the use of technology enhances their learners' access to the curriculum in an inclusive way, enabling them to participate fully in lessons. Teachers should be mindful that their learners do not become too dependent on the use of technology, as this may hinder their learners' ability to practise their language skills in the classroom.
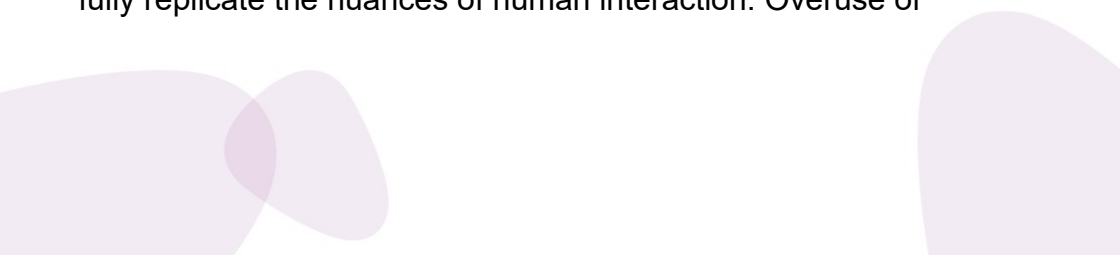
Accuracy

Machine translation and other language tools are not always perfect. They can sometimes provide inaccurate translations and/or grammatical suggestions, which might lead to misunderstandings and/or the reinforcement of errors.

Equity and access

Not all learners have equal access to the necessary technology and internet connectivity. This can create disparities in learning opportunities and outcomes.

Lack of human interaction

Language learning is inherently social and technologies cannot fully replicate the nuances of human interaction. Overuse of

technology might reduce opportunities for learners to practise speaking and listening in real-life contexts.

Teacher training and integration

Effective use of technologies requires that teachers are adequately trained and feel confident to integrate them into their teaching practice. This may have implications for staff CPD.

Despite the potential drawbacks, with careful planning and ongoing evaluation, there are many benefits to be gained from the use of technology in supporting learners to access the mainstream curriculum.

**Hampshire EMTAS Specialist Teacher Advisor team
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For further information

Visit the EMTAS website.