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Smart, not phon(e)y - Best practice examples of distance learning and digital EFL teaching – Michaela Quast, 2020

When creating modern and motivating English lessons, one has to admit that including digital tools is essential – at least from time to time. As McCarthy states, we cannot deny that “technology and globalisation have changed the way people – especially young people – think and learn” (McCarthy 2016: 1). Thus, schools need to embrace these topics and enable their students to deal with these changes. This is also due to the fact that “participation in a digital society, regardless of students’ backgrounds, is only possible with digital education” (Diehr et al. 2018: 1). But keeping an overview of the great variety of the worldwide market of applications (apps) and tools seems quite challenging in this rapidly changing field of teaching. Furthermore, the mere fact that a teacher has learned how a certain app works does not mean that s/he knows how to use it to full capacity within various teaching scenarios. This requires a profound knowledge of its didactic and subject-specific potential as well as the technical skills to command the app itself. This article aims at giving an overview of the most common digital tools for e-learning, distance learning and blended learning scenarios. Ideas for single lessons as well as for digital teaching sequences will be pointed out by making use of best practice examples from teaching English as a foreign language. Nonetheless, all practical examples can be easily adapted for other subjects and are applicable to various learning scenarios. On the contrary, digital tools or apps which are mainly designed for the field of foreign language teaching and learning (e.g. vocabulary or grammar revision apps, such as ‘Phase 6’, ‘Duolingo’ or ‘LearnEnglish Grammar’ by the British Council¹) will not be addressed in this article.

As a starting point, some terminology should be clarified:

- ‘Distance learning’ means that teacher and learners are not in the same room and online and offline material is usually provided by a teacher.
- ‘E-learning’ stands for ‘electronic learning’. One refers to that term whenever electronic or digital media is used for teaching.
- ‘Homeschooling’ or ‘home education’ is a term which is used when learners are taught at home and not at school. This can be done by their parents or by teachers alike. It can serve as a mode of distance learning.

¹ Refer to the following websites in order to get further information on those apps: For ‘Phase 6’ go to <https://www.phase-6.de/>; ‘Duolingo’ is accessible via <https://de.duolingo.com/>, and ‘LearnEnglish Grammar’ by the British Council via <https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/apps/learnenglish-grammar-uk-edition> (all links accessed on 05.10.2020).

- 'Blended learning' means that elements of regular face-to-face teaching in a classroom, where both learners and teachers are present, are combined with elements of digital learning (cf. Hrastinski 2019: 1).
- 'Synchronous' and 'asynchronous teaching':
 - o 'synchronous teaching' means that the teacher and students are in contact with one another and are present in the same (digital) room simultaneously, whereas
 - o 'asynchronous teaching' refers to a situation in which students work on material provided by a teacher who is not present at the moment, but assesses the work later on (with or without the student being present).

All tools presented in this article can be used within any of these learning scenarios (if there is limited use for a certain tool, this will be pointed out particularly).

Reasons for digital learning

First, digital learning fosters individualized learning and differentiation and can therefore be regarded as generally helpful and important. Secondly, it "promotes the effectiveness of learning" (Jun 2018: 400) and thirdly, it reflects everyday life: With 98%, smartphone use is the most preferred free time activity of all participants of the Jim-Study (2019: 13). This study investigates media usage, among other things, of minors in Germany every year. Thus, blended learning has to be motivating for students, but also teach them how to critically reflect on media content and use. Such a reflexion in the sense of a critical media usage is demanded by current curricula. The Medienkompetenzrahmen NRW, for example, requires teachers to promote media competence, which includes not only media usage, but also elements of programming etc. Here, the active and critical, not passive media usage should be one of the major goals of digital learning (cf. Medienkompetenzrahmen NRW).

Especially within asynchronous learning scenarios, learning becomes much more flexible: It becomes more and more independent of a fixed classroom and certain timetables. On the one hand, this can be seen as an advantage, on the other hand, this is also challenging for students and teachers (cf. Reinders 2012: 287): When it comes to distance learning, we can notice a shift of the traditional teacher's role from being the centre of attention of a whole lesson towards being rather a learning facilitator. Furthermore, for teachers it is challenging to monitor, guide and assess their students from a distance. However, only recently, the Corona pandemic has revealed that certain situations require distance and asynchronous learning, so just closing one's eyes with regard to digital learning is definitely not an option. Interestingly, the JIMPlus Study of 2020 shows that chats, video conference tools and other means of digital learning have 'only' been used by 20-55% of the students and their teachers during the first school shut

down in March / April 2020 in Germany (cf. JIMPlus 2020: 5). This proves that there is room for improvement regarding the involvement of digital tools in teaching scenarios. One argument which is frequently brought up by teachers is that they have been overwhelmed by changing their traditional face-to-face-teaching scenarios into digital ones for homeschooling. This is understandable, but also shows the necessity of making teachers capable of acquiring digital tools in a useful and didactically meaningful way.

Preconditions

When it comes to using digital tools regularly, some preconditions should be met – if schools as well as students are not equipped with the necessary hard- and software, all digital efforts will lose their purpose. Depending on where a certain school is located, technical equipment and internet access may vary. However, the Jim Study of 2019 shows that 96% of the participating minors own a smartphone, in 99% of all households smartphones are available, and in 98% of all households a computer is available. Furthermore, 98% off all participants have internet access (cf. Jim Study 2019: 5). One fact which the study does not reveal is how many pupils need to share their digital media. But the study clearly proves that the tools are generally there. Now it is time to make use of them!

For the tools presented in this article, students need a computer and/or a smartphone as well as internet access. When it comes to costs, only freeware is presented with one exception (*Lifeline – The Experiment App* costs approximately 1-2,50 euros). All apps presented are suitable for different ages and ability levels. They offer various possibilities for individualization and differentiation, which, however, will not be pointed out additionally. The best practice examples to be shown are mainly taken from English as a Foreign Language classes at German grammar schools for upper intermediate as well as for upper secondary schools, but they can be easily adapted for other subjects and types of schools.

There have been debates about privacy and data protection of both teachers and, above all, students. Most tools presented in this article only require the teacher to subscribe with an email address; some tools also need the students to register via email. In order to make sure teachers act correctly, school principals should be consulted for further advice and/or the parents of minor students should sign a data privacy statement, depending on the country or even the federal state within which a school is situated.

Digital tools

The following table gives an overview of the most commonly used digital tools in teaching English as a foreign language.

Tool category	Tool name	Link	Usage / Types of files	Advantages	Disadvantages / Limitations	Best practice example	Example of alternative tools
Apps for word clouds, evaluation, live polls etc.	Xmind	https://www.xmind.net/	<p><u>Usage:</u> allows to create different forms of visualisation, e.g. mindmap, timeline, herringbone etc.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - app needs to be downloaded for free, files can be saved - can be used for brainstorming, visualising complex topics, revision, exam preparation <p><u>Types of files:</u> text, photos</p>	- very easy and intuitive	Template designs are limited.	https://www.xmind.net/share/	Edkimo, Mentimeter, Answer-Garden
Video conference tools	Zoom	https://zoom.us/	<p><u>Usage:</u> video conferences, chat (allows to send files), breakout rooms, live polls, whiteboard, screen sharing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - can be used online, but more functions with app downloaded and full version <p><u>Types of files:</u> audio, visual / video, text, and others</p>	Many methods and approaches to teaching can be equally used via Zoom (or other digital conference tools), e.g. group or partner work, presentations etc.	The teacher does not have an overview of all breakout rooms at once, but can join each room individually.	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHd4Cff4Ha8	Jitsi, Microsoft Teams
Platforms for digital collaboration	Etherpad	https://etherpad.org/	<p><u>Usage:</u> collaborative text production and editing; feedback on texts, brainstorming</p> <p><u>Types of files:</u> text</p>	Students can write simultaneously; each editor uses a different colour. A chat function can be used.	Etherpad is limited to text files only.	https://etherpad.org/	Google Docs, Padlet
Cooperative learning apps	Oncoo	https://oncoo.de/	<u>Usage:</u> digital platform for cooperative methods (placemat, buddy system, bus stop),	- Students can write simultaneously. Their results are	Sometimes the server overloads. Instructions are	https://kmkdigital.de/2020	-

		oncoo.php	<p>brainstorming (clustering) and evaluation tool</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - group formation and tasks are done online <p><u>Types of files:</u> text</p>	<p>shown on the screens of other group members so that discussions and a group solution can be fostered.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Neither app download nor registration needed. - Teacher can monitor all groups; can include extra tasks. 	only given in German.	/02/27/oncoo-de/	
Quiz apps	Kahoot!	https://kahoot.com/	<p><u>Usage:</u> knowledge games, vocabulary and grammar quizzes in multiple-choice format</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - quiz is generated by a teacher, students or an educational publisher (e.g. Klett) - app or online quiz, digit code needs to be entered - while playing, a choice needs to be made within a limited amount of time - the person / team with the highest score wins <p><u>Types of files:</u> text, photos, videos</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - very motivating (gaming character, music tune, time limit, colourful) - results can be downloaded and used for evaluation 	Primarily receptive skills are trained. Communication and cooperation only within team mode.	https://www.klett-sprachen.de/digitales/quizfragen-fuer-kahoot/english/real-business-english/c-2844	Quizlet Biparcours LearningApps
Quiz apps	Bi-parcours	https://biparcours.de/	<p><u>Usage:</u> quizzes, guided (city) tours</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - various answer formats are available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - very motivating (gaming character); can be 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - finding a certain 'public parcours' can be a little 	https://biparcours.de/bou	Quizlet Kahoot! LearningApps

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a quiz is generated by a teacher or students or an extracurricular education partner (e.g. libraries, clubs etc.) - app needs to be downloaded, registration via email - aim: to get the highest score of the class <p><u>Types of files:</u> text, audio, video, photo, coordinates/locations, other</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - played in teams or individually - various competences can be fostered 	challenging; the exact link is needed.	d/thisislondon	
Video (quiz) apps	Edpuzzle	https://edpuzzle.com/	<p><u>Usage:</u> videos are edited or extended by audio or text comments / questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - various answer formats (only text-based) - can be done by teachers and / or students - no download needed, registration via email, students use a code <p><u>Types of files:</u> video, text</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rather active and reflexive media consumption - teacher can track students' answers and how many times a video has been watched 	- primarily done individually, no communication among students needed	https://edpuzzle.com/media/5f4f5bb7afa87d3fa60fbd20	-
Webquests	Web-Quest.org & Questgarden.com	http://webquest.org/ http://questgarden.com/	<p><u>Usage:</u> WebQuest.org and QuestGarden offer templates and further advice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - QuestGarden suggests a "task cycle" which includes six steps (introduction, task, process, evaluation, conclusion and credits) and offers many open source webquests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - complex, 'real-world'-learning scenarios can be created - webquests can foster communication among students 	Some open source webquests contain mistakes!	http://questgarden.com/37/09/1/080825172926/	-

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - webquests can be generated by a teacher or students - no registration needed, can be done online <p><u>Types of files:</u> any</p>				
Tools for digital teaching sequences	Padlet	https://d.e.padlet.com/	<p><u>Usage:</u> learning platform including a digital/online pinboard</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - several people can edit it simultaneously - files can be used to collect information (e.g. during a lesson) or to plan lessons - links to other digital tools and offline material can be included <p><u>Types of files:</u> any</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - an overview of a whole teaching sequence can be given - very motivating, very intuitive for students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rather focuses on receptive skills 	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wl2awEEEx10	-
Storytelling apps	Lifeline – The Experiment	Download via <i>App Store</i> or <i>Google Store</i>	<p><u>Usage:</u> a digital reading experience, comparable to a short 'conventional', analogue novel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - story is told via digital messages sent by the protagonist to the reader's smartphone - the reader has to make choices about how the plot should continue - can be supported by a (digital) reading log or (e-)portfolio <p><u>Types of files:</u> text</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - highly motivating; resembles real-life communication - played in real time; creates a lot of suspense 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - violence included, rather for older students - costs: 1-2,50 € 	Acker & Quast 2020. „Das Unterrichtsvorhaben: <i>Lifeline – The Experiment</i> “. In: Schlaak / Willems: <i>Kompetenzorientierung, Handlungsorientierung, Outputorientierung</i> .	-

E-Portfolio/ E-Reading Log	Mahara	https://mahara.org/	<p><u>Ideas for a teaching sequence with Mahara:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the app 'Lifeline' could serve as topic - aspects like the setting, narrator, characters, plot, further information about topics included could be part of the e-portfolio - various other topics for portfolios / reading logs can be used <p><u>Types of files:</u> any</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - very individual learning process, esp. with optional / creative tasks - formative assessment; the ability to self-evaluate und self-correct can be assessed 		https://saadfaruque.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/mahara-eportfolio-portfolio.jpg	Wordpress
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(All links accessed on 20.09.2020).

Conclusion: What are challenges and potentials of digital learning?

It should have become clear that digital learning puts “higher demands” on teachers with regard to “adopt[ing] appropriate teaching technologies in relation to teaching aims and demands” (Jun 2018: 400). In addition to traditional teachers’ competences, which comprise a profound knowledge of the subject(s) taught as well as a profound knowledge of didactics and teaching methods, teachers need to have a deeper understanding of digital tools and even programming nowadays. Above all, a combination of all three areas (knowledge of subject, of didactics / methods as well as of digital tools / apps) is required of them, in order to incorporate an app or a digital tool into a didactically useful classroom scenario (cf. Jun 2018: 400). It should be emphasized again that when doing so, focusing on one’s pre-set learning objective is still the key to lesson planning. Do not use a digital tool just for the sake of it, but use it for a reason – even if it is only to make a rather theoretical lesson more fun.

Additionally, digital learning also puts higher demands on students. Especially asynchronous and distance learning requires them to be much more self-reliant, which can be challenging (cf. Jun 2018: 400). Teachers need to support their students with additional material and (online) guidance.

Another result of digital teaching scenarios is that students’ and teachers’ roles become more balanced: Students as the so-called ‘digital natives’ sometimes have an even better knowledge of digital technology than their teachers – which is positive. Teachers should not think of it as a competition, but let their students support them whenever they think they can (and, of course, vice versa).

One rather negative side-effect of incorporating distance learning, video conferences and apps that are used individually (rather than cooperatively) into teaching is that those might reinforce teacher-centred classroom scenarios with less communication among students. Especially from a language-learning perspective, but also from a psychological point-of-view, there is a great danger of diminishing students’ abilities to communicate and cooperate with one another. Hence, teachers need to include as many interactive and collaborative (digital) learning scenarios as possible when planning their lessons and teaching sequences.

Taking all these potentials, challenges and suggestions into account, incorporating digital tools into modern classroom scenarios on a regular basis will benefit both students and teachers alike.

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Further Reading:

Medienberatung NRW: *Best of distance learning. Die 14 besten von uns getesteten Dienste und Apps für das Arbeiten zu Hause. Eine Empfehlung der Medienberatung Köln*. https://schulwiki.koeln/mediawiki/images/e/ea/Best_Of_Distance_Learning.pdf (02.09.2020).

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