

What English to Teach in the Digital Age

The internet has changed the experience of second language learners who previously relied on their prior knowledge of the language to complete language tasks. With an abundance of digital resources to assist in these tasks, teachers need to ask themselves if, when and how to integrate these digital tools into language learning. This article addresses these questions and suggests some practical ideas.

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Table of Content

Changed goalposts for users of English as a second language	3
Identification of relevant skills	3
Focus on language development	4
Focus on real-life skills	5
Translation engines, online dictionaries and other resources	5
Proofreading and learning about vocabulary and writing conventions.....	7
Digital resources that assist mediation tasks	8
Subtitles.....	8
Digital tools for autonomous language practice	8
Examples of tasks to train the use of digital resources.....	9
Project-based and task-based learning.....	10
Conclusion	12
Bibliography	13
Suggested answers - Examples of tasks to train the use of digital resources	14

What English to Teach in the Digital Age

“There is no such thing as a realistic exam”, one of my colleagues remarked during a meeting of the language team held at my institution to explore how to make exam questions more action-oriented and realistic. I sat up and gave this comment some thought. He was correct: most people today use digital resources to deal with language tasks in a real-life situation that are usually not allowed during formal language assessments.

Changed goalposts for users of English as a second language

Before the invention of the internet, speakers of a second language had to rely mainly on their previously acquired linguistic knowledge to complete a language task. The internet and its digital resources have changed this situation. These include websites, online programs, and applications such as online dictionaries, glossaries, and translation engines, and are often used to supplement existing skills or to compensate for inadequate skills.

In light of this development, effective real-life language strategies now extend to knowledge of how to use these digital resources. This fact is important for educational organisations, teachers and language schools when implementing an action-oriented approach based on task-based activities that mimic real-life situations in the classroom and during assessment. For example, the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), which is the standard for many educational institutions, is conceptually based on this methodology (rm.coe.int 2018).

Language skills are typically evaluated in controlled settings without any aids. But authenticity and action-orientation can hardly be achieved under exam conditions without access to the digital resources that would be employed in a real-life situation. This situation presents a dilemma for many institutions: for a setting to be regarded realistic, learners should be allowed to use digital tools to cope with a language task. This would prepare them for real-world situations. On the other hand, allowing digital resources during an exam would make it more difficult to assess learners' actual language proficiency.

Identification of relevant skills

According to the practice of constructive alignment, it is important that "the design of learning outcomes form the foundation for a system of learning, where outcomes are mirrored in learning and teaching activities as well as assessment tasks" (Monash). This

means that the learning objectives, teaching methods and types of assessment have been coordinated during the planning stage so that the structure and content of the course are consistent with the assessment tasks. Institutions and instructors therefore need to determine what key skills need to be developed and assessed, and to what extent digital resources should be part of the course.

Focus on language development

If the focus is on the learner's language development, as is usually the case in schools, language schools and for obtaining an official language certificate, the training of learners in the use of digital resources tends to play a secondary role because the goal is to achieve language proficiency. Rather than delegating part of the hard work of completing a language task to digital resources, learners need to develop these language skills by doing the cognitive work themselves. The aim of the assessment is to evaluate learners' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, or their competence in the communicative activities of reading, listening, writing and speaking, and sometimes in translation or other forms of mediation.

In this case, unless a project-based approach is used (see below), I argue that constructive alignment is most effectively achieved through traditional classroom activities that develop language skills. This includes tasks that are based on the communicative approach. Learners can also be introduced to the use of digital resources, especially online dictionaries, but this should be a secondary consideration.

Learners' skills are then assessed under exam conditions, in which representative samples of relevant and authentic language materials should be included so that it reflects real-life situations. In addition, a balanced mix of question types ensures that the exam covers a range of skills and abilities. This can be done by taking into account the cognitive process categories by Krathwohl and Anderson's revised Bloom's taxonomy of thinking skills, which comprise remember, understand, apply, and the higher categories that include analyse, evaluate and create (www.depauw.edu). For example, in a reading comprehension test, learners may be asked some questions to test their understanding (Why...? What...? How...?), then they may have to decide between true/false/not mentioned in the text, or decide which sentence best summarises a text or paragraph. This requires them to analyse the information for its true meaning. Higher-level or critical thinking would involve asking about the author's intentions (see also Krantz et al 2016). The teacher may ask why the authors present these ideas. Critical analysis of a text also entails determining if the authors provide accurate, pertinent, and

reasonable evidence to support their claims. It is often possible to adapt these critical thinking questions to lower language levels as long as learners are familiar with the topic and the vocabulary needed to understand the text and answer the questions. In terms of written production, essay writing is a valid assessment option, such as a descriptive or narrative essay at lower levels and an argumentative essay at higher levels. These tasks do not necessarily reflect an authentic situation, but show learners' language skills while performing different cognitive tasks.

Focus on real-life skills

Let us now look at some scenarios that justify the use of digital resources to facilitate the action-oriented approach. When an English course has a concrete real-life objective, such as Business English or English for Academic Purposes, learners need to be able to use the resources that help them accomplish these tasks. In these cases, the goal is not only to develop learners' language skills, but also to teach them how to use these digital resources.

Translation engines, online dictionaries and other resources

One of the most significant game-changers regarding digital language resources is the recent development in **translation engines**. The so-called neural networks, on which Google Translator and DeepL are based, have enabled translation engines to produce mostly acceptable translations in a matter of seconds, whereas machine translation previously produced results that were of questionable quality or downright bizarre. This is because these programs no longer rely on word-for-word translation, but rather recognise word combinations and follow grammatical rules by comparing them to existing texts and translations. It goes without saying that highly specialised texts and literary works tend to be less suitable for automated machine translation. Translation engines also work better for high-resource languages, which have large data sets on the web. Examples of high-resource languages include English, Mandarin, Spanish and French.

Online dictionaries can be used to look up words, write a text or check a translation. There are many online dictionaries available, ranging from monolingual to bilingual to multilingual. Reliable online dictionaries should have a user-friendly interface that is easy to navigate. In addition, they should contain definitions that are accurate, up-to-date and complete. They should also provide contextual information on register and style, and include usage examples. Phonetic transcriptions and/or clickable audio icons to hear the pronunciation are helpful. A good dictionary needs to be reviewed and updated regularly to maintain its accuracy. The site should come from a reliable source, such as

a reputable educational institution or publisher. In the case of a technical dictionary, the authors need to be experts in their field.

Learners need to be aware that they do not only have to check their own texts and translations for errors, but also the texts that a translation engine has translated. The same applies to **paraphrasing tools** such as quillbot (<https://quillbot.com/>). The text may contain incorrect sentence structures, or words may have been translated incorrectly because they are polysemous (with multiple meanings) or the style and register of a word may be inappropriate. When in doubt, one strategy is to check the definition of the word in question using a **monolingual online dictionary**, such as the following dictionaries, which also provide sample sentences:

<https://www.merriam-webster.com>

<https://www.macmillandictionary.com>

<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com>

In addition, there are websites that can be consulted for synonyms and antonyms. For example, Thesaurus (<https://www.thesaurus.com/>), is a useful resource. However, the user has to be careful to choose a word that has the correct register, connotation and collocability. A very useful digital resource for productive activities in English is ozdic.com, a **collocation dictionary**. Different types of collocations, such as adjective-noun, verb-noun, preposition-noun combinations, and phrases, can be consulted for a keyword entered in the site's search box.

Another way to find out if a word or word combination is used correctly in a given context is to type the **contextualised word into a search engine**. Using quotation marks ("contextualised phrase") will narrow down the results. **Linguee** (run by DeepL) is another useful website for translation because it provides some context for the word in both the source and target languages. Users need to be careful, however, as these translations have not been verified.

For questions about grammar or vocabulary, **forums** that discuss these topics are helpful. Users can type their question into a search engine to find a forum where a question has already been asked.

Image search engines, such as Google Images, can help users determine what an object, food, dish, or technical device looks like, or check the translation of a term by typing the word into the search engine first in the source language and then in the target

language. Again, some caution is required, as a word may have been translated incorrectly, sometimes resulting in the wrong item being displayed. However, with some common sense, this method works well.

Proofreading and learning about vocabulary and writing conventions

Spelling checkers are valuable tools with regard to grammar and spelling when writing something. They are included in word processing programs and are also available as free or paid digital resources, such as Grammarly (<https://www.grammarly.com/>), a software that can identify spelling and grammar mistakes, as well as suggest improvements to sentence structure and overall readability.

Learners also need to be able to distinguish between formal and informal styles and recognise their characteristics. **Authentic online English texts**, such as business letters and academic or scientific articles, can be used as examples to familiarise them with the conventions and vocabulary of a given text type. When studying these texts, it is important to show learners how to notice relevant linguistic features, as Thornbury noted in 1997: "Learners must attend to linguistic features of the input that they are exposed to, without which input cannot become 'intake'" (1997). This can be achieved through exercises based on these texts, such as gap-filling, finding synonyms, translating key words, or the dictation exercise known as "dictogloss", where learners listen to a dictation and note down key words, which are then used as a basis for reconstructing the original text. Learners should also be encouraged to look for and note down useful vocabulary, collocations and common phrases when reading relevant texts.

Online English **glossaries** on a variety of topics are another useful resource for specialised language courses. With regard to business English, there are various websites that provide phrases and samples of different types of business letters. You can find them by typing "samples of [type of business letter]" in the search box of a search engine. For academic writing, the University of Manchester provides a very useful resource, **The Academic Phrasebank** (<https://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/>) is a collection of generic phrases for different contexts of academic writing that can be incorporated into the different parts of learners' writing. Additionally, online resources such as **Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)** provide guidelines for specific text-type conventions such as APA and MLA formatting.

Concordancers have been around for some time and are a useful tool for learning about collocations and vocabulary used in a particular context. A concordancer is a computer program that analyses a piece of text, identifying the frequency and context

of a specific word or phrase. By highlighting patterns and trends in the use of words, a concordancer can help the user better understand the nuances and context of language in a given text. More information on how to work with a concordancer can be found here: <https://www.eapfoundation.com/guides/concordancer/>

Digital resources that assist mediation tasks

Digital resources can also facilitate some mediation tasks, such as communicating specific information, e. g. translating tourist information, a restaurant menu, or other types of spoken or written text. Useful tools include translation engines and **smartphone apps**, such as real-time voice translation or applications that allow users to take a picture of the text and have it translated automatically. It goes without saying that, although these translations are helpful, they are not perfect and human translation skills are still required to verify them.

Subtitles

Regarding audio-visual reception, when watching videos on video platforms, streaming sites and DVDs, it is often possible to generate machine-translated subtitles in English or the learners' first language and many learners use real-time or live-speech translation programs outside the classroom. With the help of these tools, even lower-level learners can watch authentic audio-visual content. However, they need to be aware that automatically generated subtitles contain errors, and more advanced learners can be asked to identify and correct the errors in a classroom activity.

Digital tools for autonomous language practice

Learners can use artificial intelligence tools such as translation engines, auto-subtitling and paraphrasing engines to enhance their language learning. Translation engines like DeepL can help learners to understand texts written in a foreign language or compare their translation with the one generated by artificial intelligence, while auto-subtitling engines can be used for watching foreign-language videos. Paraphrasing engines can help learners practice writing skills by providing alternative ways of expressing the same idea.

There are also a number of **online vocabulary trainers** to help learners improve their vocabulary. In most cases, users will have the option of inputting their own vocabulary. For more information, click on the links below:

<https://www.learningenglishonline.net/vocabulary-trainers>

<https://www.sprachheld.de/besten-vokabeltrainer-apps/>

Examples of tasks to train the use of digital resources

Use the internet to answer the following questions. What strategies do you use?

1. Checking Meaning

What is the meaning of the following expressions and how can you translate them into your language?

"Our novelty gifts are the perfect present option for any recipient. Whether you are looking for something to gift to your partner, sibling, parent or friend, our quirky, novelty gifts are ideal for presenting to the ones you love..."

<https://www.flamingogifts.co.uk/occasions-c117/novelty-gifts-c119>

During the meeting, no one wanted to talk about the elephant in the room - the fact that our profits had fallen for the third quarter in a row. Everyone tiptoed around the issue, pretending that everything was fine, but it was clear that it had to be addressed if we were going to turn things around. Finally, someone had the courage to bring up the elephant in the room and we were able to have an open and honest discussion about how to improve our financial situation.

"Soul food dishes are just what they sound like: food for the soul. These delicious recipes are made with love and inspired by long-held southern traditions."

<https://thekitchencommunity.org/soul-food-recipes/>

2. Finding synonyms:

- What other words are there for "big" in "a big problem"?
- Which collocation is correct a "steep rise" or "heavy rise"?

3. Checking grammar – Which sentence is correct?

- I look forward to meet you.
- I look forward to meeting you.
- I am looking forward to meeting you.

4. Checking style

Rewrite the following text to make it sound formal:

A lot of parents are pretty worried about internet dangers. They don't know what to do and they need hands-on tips on the question: How to protect their kids?

5. Assessing the accuracy of translations

Usually, the original text in the source language needs to be provided, as well.

The following excerpt is from a text written by the German poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724 - 1803). It has been translated into English using the DeepL translation engine. Check the excerpt for linguistic accuracy and readability. Improve it if necessary.

"But who should I talk to? With friends? Of course, I like talking to them the most. I could only say half a word to them, and they would understand me."

Source: Klopstock, Friedrich Gottlieb. Aufsätze und Abhandlungen. Von der heiligen Poesie. Kopenhagen, 1755

The following text is a translation of the foreword to the German children's book *Struwwelpeter*. The original text is written in couplets (two lines of the same length that rhyme) and has a rhythmic structure. Assess the text translated by DeepL regarding its linguistic correctness, readability, and aesthetic effect on the reader.

Foreword:

If the children are good,
The Christ Child comes to them;
If they eat their soup
And don't forget the bread either,
If they, without making a noise,
Quietly with their seven things,
When they walk in the streets
And let mama lead them,
They'll get enough goodies
And a nice picture book.

Source: Hoffmann, Heinrich. *Lustige Geschichten Und Drollige Bilder für Kinder Von 3 - 6 Jahren*. Frankfurt am Main: Literarische Anstalt (J. Rütten), 1846.

6. Assessing paraphrases

Has the meaning of the original text been kept without copying words or structures?
Has the style been maintained?

Original text:

A concordancer is a software tool that analyses a text corpus and generates a list of all the words in the corpus along with the context in which they appear. It allows researchers to identify patterns, collocations, and other semantic relationships within a text or a group of texts. Concordancers can be used in various fields, such as linguistics, literature, and translation studies, for analyzing language and extracting information from large datasets. They can also aid in language learning by providing examples of vocabulary usage in context.

Paraphrased text by Quillbot:

A concordancer is a piece of software that analyzes text corpora and compiles a list of every word that appears in the corpus together with its context. It enables scholars to spot patterns, collocations, and other semantic connections in a text or collection of texts. Concordancers can be used for language analysis and information extraction from huge datasets in a variety of disciplines, including linguistics, literature, and translation studies. They can help with language acquisition by giving real-world examples of word use.

Project-based and task-based learning

According to the organisation PBL Works, "Project Based Learning (PBL) is a teaching method in which learners gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge". Task-based learning (TBL) is similar, but is usually based on a simpler task that takes less time to complete.

In language learning, the approach emphasises the use of authentic, real-life tasks as a means of language acquisition. It focuses on the practical application of language skills in a task-centred environment, allowing students to develop both communicative competence and language fluency. By engaging students in purposeful and meaningful activities, task-based learning encourages active participation and critical thinking, promoting a deeper understanding and retention of the language.

In addition, the approach allows learners to practice 21st century skills that are needed in an increasingly complex world. Broadly speaking, these skills include critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. PBL and TBL are also effective methods for training learners to use digital resources in the classroom by actively engaging them in real-life, hands-on projects and having them reflect on the experience. For example, learners can be asked to work in small groups to plan an event, evaluate a translation, or design an infographic on a particular topic. They use digital resources during the project and present it to the rest of the class when it is completed. The assessment can be based on the presentation of the project or it can be part of a traditional exam in which learners write about their project and their experiences while working on it.

For advanced levels or translation courses, one possible task is for learners to critically evaluate and improve a machine translation using the digital resources described above. This task requires critical thinking skills in analysing and evaluating the translation, as well as some creativity in suggesting alternatives. Technical texts, literary texts and some song lyrics are suitable, provided they present some translation challenges. Learners can be asked to evaluate the translation in terms of linguistic accuracy, faithfulness to the message, appropriate style, readability and, in the case of a literary text, aesthetic effect.

Another way to train intermediate or advanced learners in the use of digital resources is to create a bilingual or monolingual glossary in English, for example, on specific vocabulary relevant to them. This task requires advanced research skills and trains linguistic skills, such as translation and precise and concise definition of terms.

In the following example of a TBL activity, Social Work students had been introduced to several digital resources before the assignment. They then worked in small groups over two to three sessions to create an infographic on a social issue and prepared a short presentation. The activity can be used in preparation for the written exam or as part of the assessment.

Task: Create an infographic about a health or social issue

During the next three sessions, you will work in small groups to complete an assignment. You will also prepare a presentation and write a report on a social or health issue.

The situation:

You are applying for funding to educate about a social problem or health issue of your choice.

Work in small groups (3-4 students).

Decide on a health or social issue you want to address.

Create an infographic to explain the problem, its causes, possible interventions, and how you plan to use the money you raise. In addition, write a report for potential funders.

Your presentation:

- Present the problem and your infographic.
- Reflect on your teamwork and your role on the team.
- Describe how you used digital resources during the project.

Your report

Write a proposal to potential funders. Remember that different funders want different information, so be sure to include everything your funder has specifically asked for. In this case, funders are looking for the following information:

1. Information about who you are (short biography)
2. A description of the problem
3. Why this is an important issue to raise awareness about

Conclusion

Language teaching institutions and teachers can no longer afford to ignore or resist the use of digital resources. The fact that digital tools are constantly changing, and that a resource that is current today may be obsolete in a few years, does not make a difference. And there will be more challenges to overcome. The natural language processing chatbot ChatGPT (<https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt/>) is the latest innovation.

Students can have it write their essays and term papers if they have access to the internet while writing and use it for other applications. Although the chatbot does not yet meet academic standards because not all the information it produces is accurate, which is known as hallucinations, and the fact that it does not cite sources, it can still save students a lot of time and effort. Technological resources have changed, and will undoubtedly continue to change the way language tasks are handled. Teachers need to find ways to meet the challenge in their classrooms and facilitate hands-on language learning.

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Suggested answers - Examples of tasks to train the use of digital resources

1. Checking Meaning

Novelty item:

An object that is expressly made to have no practical purpose is known as a novelty item. It is typically a small, inexpensive ornament, toy, or trinket.

The elephant in the room:

A major problem or controversial issue which is obviously present but is avoided as a subject for discussion or conversation

Soul food:

A style of cuisine that is associated with the African-American culture in the southern USA

There may be no one-to-one translations for these concepts in other languages so they need to be defined or a new word needs to be coined.

2. Finding synonyms:

What other words are there for "big" in "a big problem"?

Use ozdic.com to find suitable synonyms, for example *enormous, grave, great, or serious*.

Which collocation is correct a "steep rise" or "heavy rise"?

Use ozdic.com. You will find a "steep rise", but not "heavy rise".

3. Checking grammar – Which sentence is correct?

I look forward to meet you.

I look forward to meeting you.

I am looking forward to meeting you.

The second and third sentence are correct.

Type "difference between look forward to meet and look forward to meeting you" into a search engine. Among the results, you will find language forums where this question is discussed. Then do the same with "look forward" and "looking forward".

4. Checking style

Rewrite the following text to make it sound formal.

A lot of parents are pretty worried about internet dangers. They don't know what to do and they need hands-on tips on the question: How to protect their kids?

Formal version:

Many parents are concerned about the dangers of the internet. They do not know what to do and need practical advice on how to protect their children.

Check the text for informal words, contractions, direct questions and awkward structures. If you are unsure, type the question into a search engine to find out if a word is informal: "Is 'kid' informal?" You can also use a paraphrasing tool and check the result for correct meaning and formal style.

5. Assessing the accuracy of translations

Check the excerpt regarding linguistic correctness and readability. If necessary, improve it.

The text contains two grammar mistakes:

- "*With friends*" instead of "*To friends*"
- "*the most*" instead of "*most*"

A more accurate translation would be "Even if I said only half a word to them, they would understand me."

Struwwelpeter

"Seven things" has been translated literally from German, which does not make sense in English. The correct translation would be "belongings". The sentence "If they without making a noise ..." is incomplete. The aesthetic effect on the reader of the English version is not maintained because there is no rhyme nor rhythm.

Mark Twain's translation of *Struwwelpeter*, *Slovenly Peter*, conveys the message of the text more faithfully and produces a similar aesthetic effect on the reader of the English version. It can be accessed here:
<https://www.struwwelpeter.com/SP/vorsp.php>

6. Assessing paraphrases

Has the meaning of the original text been kept without copying words or structures?
Has the style been maintained?

The paraphrase preserves the original meaning of the text. The style has also been retained, except that the word 'spot' is more informal. The majority of words has been replaced by synonyms. However, the sentence structures are very similar to the original text, which may be considered plagiarism if the function of the text is a non-literal quotation.