

New Technologies in Language Education: Opportunities for Professional Growth

by Michael Rost



Michael Rost has been active in teaching and teacher training for over 20 years. He has taught in West Africa, Japan, Southeast Asia, England, and the U.S. He specializes in oral language development and learner strategies, and has a particular interest in links between self-access learning and the classroom. He has written several articles and books on teacher training, including *Teaching and Researching Listening* (Longman, 2002).

the promise that some of them just might improve our teaching. The challenge lies in remaining aware, evaluating what is genuinely new, incorporating what is helpful, and assessing the effects on our students' learning.

I personally have come to enjoy this evolutionary aspect of the profession and liken my own development as a language teacher to a journey along a spiraling pathway. Like all language teachers, along this journey I have come upon frequent opportunities to explore and take on innovations in my teaching practice. Each encounter, each decision constitutes a forward step in this excursion.



Michael Rost language teaching map

I view new teaching ideas as one of three types: hard technologies, soft technologies, or instructional technologies. What I mean by "technology" is simply "a way of accomplishing something." For the teaching profession, this almost always translates into one of four goals:

- (1) giving students real opportunities to learn and

helping them learn more effectively;

- (2) increasing the enjoyment of language learning;
- (3) improving students' ability to become better language learners, or
- (4) making our own teaching more enjoyable and rewarding.

Hard technologies are the physical tools we use in our teaching: chalk, magic markers, blackboards, whiteboards, notebooks, chairs, audio players, video players, video cameras, and computers. In addition to these tangibles, hard technologies also include delivery systems, particularly electronic tools: tapes, discs, CD-ROMs, email, websites, chat rooms, discussion boards.

Soft technologies constitute the actual content of our communication, the form of the interaction that we use in our teaching. Selection and use of soft technologies come closer to what most of us consider the act — and the art — of teaching. Many teachers, when asked about the tools that have improved their teaching, will cite the softer technologies: actual course books, grammars, reference books, particular video and audio tapes, and specific websites that enhanced their teaching — and their students' learning.

Both hard and soft technologies tend to grow on us. The more we use them — the more the technology "matures" — the more we tend to take the technology for granted. The technology becomes both essential — we think we just couldn't teach without it — and

invisible — we just assume it will always work for us. We actually need technology to become invisible for us before it does really work; otherwise we are simply preoccupied with getting to know the tools and distracted from our goals in using the tools.¹

Although developments in hard and soft technologies are often intriguing and inspiring, the most interesting and most important decisions in language teaching come at the level of **instructional technologies**. These are the theories, models, techniques, and strategies that we develop and communicate in and through our teaching. In my own career (which includes many "technology-poor" contexts), I think back to my important "discoveries"—that is, discoveries for me, even if the ideas had been around for ages. In my case, key discoveries were the theory of communicative language teaching, the model of the functional language approach, the techniques of cooperative learning, and the teaching strategies for developing learner autonomy.

Now, as we are faced with an emerging wave of hard technologies, it seems that the metaphors for evaluating and adapting innovations may have shifted. We currently are faced with developments that just five years ago would have seemed implausible: e-learning applications, smart libraries, asynchronous threaded discussion sites, synchronous multi-user virtual environments, interactive presentational media, video-conferencing, instructional media frameworks, interactive assessment, and online communities.

There's been a true proliferation of potentially useful ideas, ideas that can improve our teaching. But have these new technologies altered the way that we should evaluate and adopt innovations in language

teaching? Actually, they haven't — or they shouldn't. The paradigm for how successful educators make decisions is the same. We as teachers must sample and evaluate the technologies, to find out for ourselves if they serve our goals:

- Do they give learners more opportunities to learn?
- Do they help learners learn more effectively?
- Do they help learners become better language learners — more motivated, more satisfied, more self-directed, more "intelligent"? And do they make *our job* easier, more enjoyable, more rewarding?

For me, the recent advances in the hard and soft technologies of electronic learning tools and multimedia are exhilarating. And the tools themselves are not difficult to learn. Indeed, we must "make them invisible" as soon as we can, so that we can decide how well they serve our teaching goals. What is most exciting is the instructional technology that parallels these hard technology developments, in particular the hybrid model of instruction that allows for an integration of out-of-class, self-access learning with in-class, teacher-guided learning.²

This integration of self-access learning and classroom learning is an important challenge in any educational enterprise, but it is a particularly crucial challenge in language education. How do we actually deal with the needs of students for social learning environments, for large numbers of contact hours, for massive amounts of listening, for focused communicative tasks, for guided feedback? Recent surveys of successful second language learners have suggested that most people — children and adults — need 200 hours of instruction a year just to

show progress.³ Regardless of the actual number of hours any individual student needs to make progress, we do know that all learners need social settings which bring them in frequent enough and sustained enough contact with target language users to make language learning possible.

Electronic learning tools and multimedia present very real possibilities for enhancing both the quantity and the quality of self-access learning. These tools obviously represent a breakthrough possibility for amplifying instruction, but how will they help us? Essentially, I think these tools can help us focus our instruction by letting us guide and monitor what learners do outside of class. When we guide learners in their self-directed learning — and the technology will not do this by itself — we can become more creative, interactive, and communicative with our learners in the classroom. And that's a step in the right direction.

References

- ¹ See Donald Norman, *The Invisible Computer*. MIT Press, 1999
<<http://www.jnd.org/dn.pubs.html>> for further discussion of this point about the need for "invisibility."
- ² See Philip Benson, *Learner Autonomy*, Longman, 2001
<<http://humanities.business-minds.com>> for a thorough discussion of hybrid models of language learning.
- ³ This was from an address by David Nunan at TESOL 2002, "Teaching Language to Young ESL and EFL Learners;" see also Lily Wong Fillmore, "Second Language Learning in Children: A Model of Language Learning in Social Context," in E. Bialystok, Ed. *Language Processing by Bilingual Children*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.
<<http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/linguistics/people/grads/macswan/fillmor2.htm>>

One of the most satisfying aspects of language teaching is that it offers continuous opportunities for personal and professional evolution. Because language teaching involves an integration of psychology, sociology, linguistics, education, and instructional design, there is *always* something new on our horizon. We are continually presented with new options and fresh technologies of *all sorts*, with