A Report on the Akita Association of English Studies

Conference Keynote

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The following is a report on my keynote address titled "The Future is Now: Supporting Student Learning Through Effective Use of Digital Technologies", which was presented at the Akita Association of English Studies (AAES) Annual Conference in November of 2021. In this presentation, I discussed how new technologies afford teachers with opportunities to try out new pedagogies and introduced a framework to help teachers successfully integrate digital technologies into their courses. The purpose of this report is twofold: 1) to recapitulate the key points made in my presentation; 2) to introduce information that was not covered in the presentation due to time constraints. It is my hope that this report will help to further cement my assertion that emerging technologies afford teachers with unprecedented opportunities to transform learning in the English language classroom.

To begin, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the most severe disruption to global education in history. It not only tested core ideas about instruction, attendance, and assessment, but brought an abrupt transfer from face-to-face lessons to online lessons. This shift to online learning caused teaching and learning styles to transform rapidly along with the tools to accommodate these new modes of learning. Whether it is language learning applications, video conferencing tools, or Learning Management Systems, there has been massive growth in educational technologies due to a growing emphasis on remote learning. Advocates of the traditional approach to language learning would argue that technology removes the real and tangible dimension of learning, leaving learners isolated without the ability to communicate with teachers and peers in person. However, as was seen in the examples provided in my presentation, learning through technology does not mean doing away with the values associated with face-to-face communication. Rather, technology can augment and build on traditional forms of learning, resulting in an enhanced and more multifaceted approach to language learning. Mirroring the key points of my presentation, this report will begin by highlighting five important factors to be considered when choosing digital tools to be used in education. This will be followed by a recommended framework on how to best integrate these tools coupled with various examples. Finally, attention will be given to the importance of engagement in language acquisition and how it can be fostered though effective use of technology. I did not have time to present the latter and am therefore thankful to have the opportunity to present it in this report.

Selecting the Right Digital Tool

Upon completing my self-introduction, I began my presentation by highlighting five important factors to consider when selecting any technology to be used in an educational setting. The first and foremost factor is relevance. It is paramount that the digital tool you wish to utilize has a strong connection to the curriculum and/or topics being covered. Second, it should be user-friendly. That is, simple to use with a low learning curve. This applies to both teachers and students. Third, it should be customizable enabling you to change the content and settings to cater to your students' needs. The fourth factor is engagement. Arguably, one of the greatest benefits of utilizing technology in the classroom is its ability to raise the level of engagement. Therefore, educators should endeavour to choose a tool that will increase student interest and motivation. Having students complete a simple survey is an excellent way to determine how engaging a tool is before fully implementing it. The fifth and final factor is accessibility. Ideally, users should be able to access the tool easily and if possible, via multiple devices and locations. In addition, educators should ask themselves the following questions:

What am I hoping to achieve by using this technology?
How will it make a difference to my students' learning?
Why is it preferable to not using technology?
How equipped are my students and I to use this technology?
How much time do I have to invest in making it work?

Integrating Technology into the Learning Environment

The next part of my presentation focused on integration. I introduced attendees to what I consider to be one of the best frameworks for integrating technology into the classroom: the SAMR model, which was created by Dr Rueben Puentedura (2012). SAMR stands for Substitution, Augmentation, Modification and Redefinition. Substitution and augmentation refer to technology that enhances the learning, and modification and redefinition refer to technology that transforms the learning, in other words, tasks that would be impossible without the technology. The purpose of the model is to assist teachers in deciding how much technology integration is achievable in a particular learning environment. I then discussed the SAMR model in more detail. To better illustrate the differences between the stages, I provided examples of digital tools for each stage beginning at the bottom with substitution.
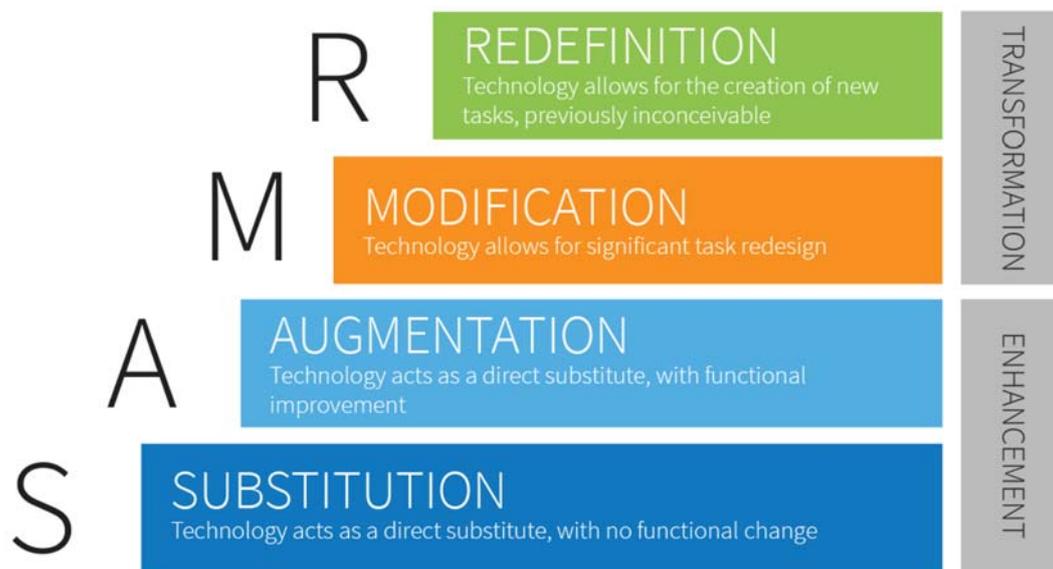
Figure 1 (Image Modified from Original by Lefflerd's on Wikimedia Commons)

Substitution

Substitution strategies can save you time and space by cutting back on pen and paper tasks. For example, at the Bunkyo English Communication Center (BECC) at Hiroshima Bunkyo University, all students are given an iPad upon entering the university. The iPad is a good example of a tool that can function at the substitution stage. At its most basic level, the iPad allows students to download lessons, type their work, submit assignments digitally, and complete quizzes online. However, using technology in only this way will result in very few learning benefits since the technology is being used as a direct substitute. At this stage, one may argue that the technology is being used simply for the sake of using technology. This is not to say that educators should not use technology in this way. Rather, it should not be used *only* in this way.

Augmentation

The next stage in the SAMR model is augmentation where technology not only acts as a direct substitute but adds some functional improvement. Returning to the previous example of the iPad, if students were to utilize a built-in dictionary, spell check, or word count function when typing a report on the iPad, then this would be considered augmentation because these tools result in some functional improvement. A good example application is Notability, a note taking application for the iPad. At first glance one may think that it's simply a substitute for paper. However, it does much more than simply allow users to take notes. Notability allows users to not only annotate a PDF, but also record audio, add photos, move items on a page, and

link to YouTube videos and other online resources. At the BECC, the general English curriculum is designed in-house and delivered to students via Notability. Lessons utilize the audio recording function for pronunciation activities and the ability to move items on a page enables teachers to create interactive drag and drop activities, which helps to increase student engagement. In short, a tool like Notability, if fully utilized, can augment student learning.

Modification

The following stage is called Modification. At the modification stage, technology is used to design interactive and dynamic tasks that go beyond the limitations of a traditional classroom. A good example of a tool that can achieve this is Showbie. Showbie is a classroom management tool which is used at all levels of education ranging from elementary to university. According to the Showbie website: "Showbie combines all of the essential tools for assignments, feedback and communication in one beautiful, easy-to-use app." (Showbie, 2021). At its most basic level, Showbie does everything that Notability does. You can annotate documents with a digital pen, highlight words, and add text comments. However, Showbie also allows teachers and students to share lessons and documents with each other. Documents can even be annotated synchronously by both a teacher and a student. Furthermore, Showbie also allows users to add voice notes anywhere within a document, which is a fantastic feature for language learning as students can ask their teacher questions verbally and teachers can share pronunciation clips, verbal instructions and more. Where Showbie really takes things to the Modification level is with its ability to enable students to upload presentation slides and then video record themselves speaking over the slides while annotating them. Students can share presentations in a class discussion page where they can ask questions or make comments about the presentations in a safe and secure online space monitored by the teacher.

Another online tool that modifies learning is PlayPosit, an interactive web-based video platform, which allows users to add formative assessments to videos. Educators can select almost any online video and augment it with time-embedded activities such as graded questions, reflective pause, open discussion and much more. PlayPosit also helps to gamify activities by incorporating game elements such as points, awards, and immediate feedback to motivate learners. According to Werbach and Hunter (2012), gamification is "the use of game elements and game design techniques in non-game contexts" (p. 26). One example of how to gamify a lesson using PlayPosit is to create a choose your own adventure activity. In such an activity, if a learner selects a specific answer, or if they get a question right or wrong, the learner will be taken to a different point in the video. Students receive points as they progress through the adventure and discussion forums can also be added allowing learners to debate the next best path.
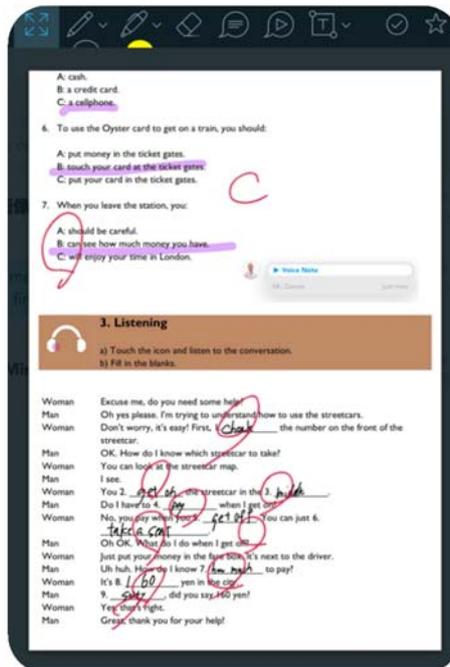
Figure 2: Screenshot of Notability Activity
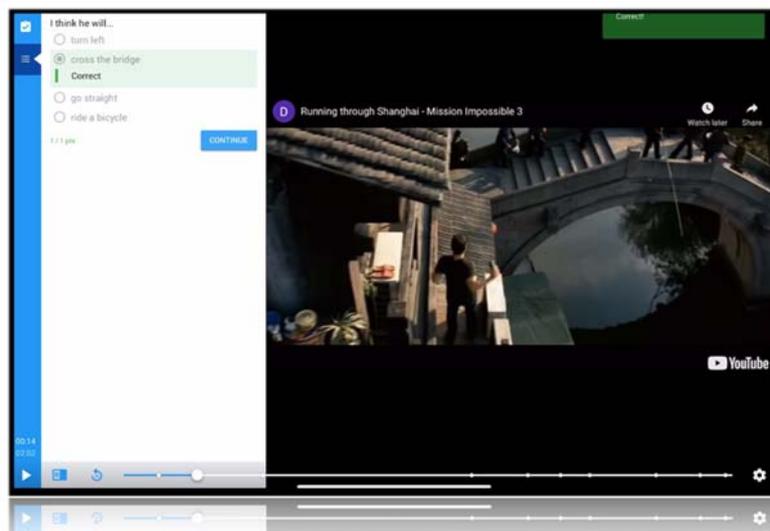
Figure 3: Screenshot of PlayPosit Activity

Redefinition

The final stage of the SAMR model is redefinition. At this stage, technology is used to make entirely new learning opportunities possible. In other words, technology that allows for

the creation of tasks that were previously inconceivable. One digital tool that can redefine learning is VoiceThread. VoiceThread allows users to upload a slideshow and/or video and then add video comments while simultaneously annotating over the presentation or video. Teachers can have students record video comments around a slide or have students upload their own presentations and have their classmates interact with it asynchronously via video or voice. Personally, I have used VoiceThread as a fun and engaging way to introduce students to my family. I had each of my family members, who are in Canada, post a short video introduction next to a map of Canada. They were able to highlight where they are from in Canada and circle places they recommend visiting. Students were then able to ask my family questions and hear their responses asynchronously. This served as a fantastic alternative to a live video chat, which can be logistically difficult to organize.

Figure 4: Screenshot of VoiceThread Activity

The final digital tool I introduced was Moxtra, recently renamed "Moxo", which serves as another good example of a tool that redefines learning. Moxo houses an incredible collection of features such as the ability to store, share and annotate documents, collaborate both synchronously and asynchronously, text chat, video chat, and create voice threads all within a private and secure online space. In combination, these features enable "users to connect easily with other users and to communicate with others in multiple ways, giving birth to an online social space conducive to social learning" (Davies, 2019, p.6). Thus, Moxo may be considered a Social Networking Site (SNS). Kachniewska (2015) defined SNS as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and depend on mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content" (p. 18). Thanks to its SNS capabilities, Moxo serves as an excellent platform for supporting collaborative projects. Students can create a private space where they are able to invite users to join from anywhere via any device. Members can add and edit documents such as PDFs, photos,

PowerPoint slides, and even video both synchronously and asynchronously. In brief, both VoiceThread and Moxo enable educators to redefine learning through the creation of tasks previously inconceivable.
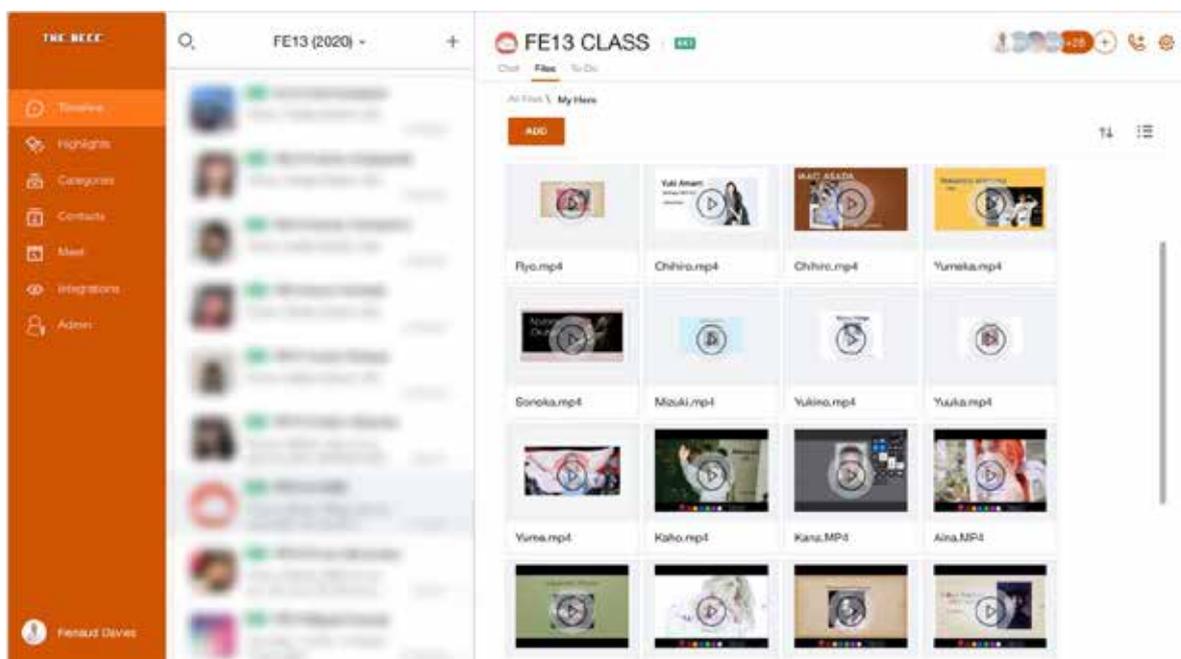
Figure 5: Screenshot of Moxo

Flow within SAMR

The final portion of my presentation, which I did not have sufficient time to cover, looked at the numerous benefits to using technology both inside and outside of the classroom. Such benefits include increased engagement, a more student-centred environment, enhanced collaboration, greater learner autonomy, and improved life skills. In particular, engagement is arguably one of the most important factors to consider when implementing technology into any educational environment. According to Krashen (2011), "Interest may be not enough for optimal language acquisition. It may be the case that input needs to be not just interesting but compelling . . . so interesting you forget that it is in another language" (p. 1). As educators, we want to help our students achieve a state of flow, described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as a state characterized by intense focus, involvement, and enjoyment that leads to improved performance on a task. As educational technologies continue to grow exponentially, it is becoming clear that online interactive media can enhance input and consequently, greatly facilitate flow (Tractinsky, 2013). In fact, findings by Egbert (2003) suggest that flow exists in language learning and that flow theory can be a useful framework for evaluating learning activities since "Flow and language acquisition occur under many of the same conditions" (p.

506). Flow can occur at any stage within the SAMR model; however, tasks within the modification and redefinition stages tend to be more flow stimulating. This is yet another reason for educators to utilize technology that not just enhances learning but transforms learning. The following diagram may serve to illustrate the above:
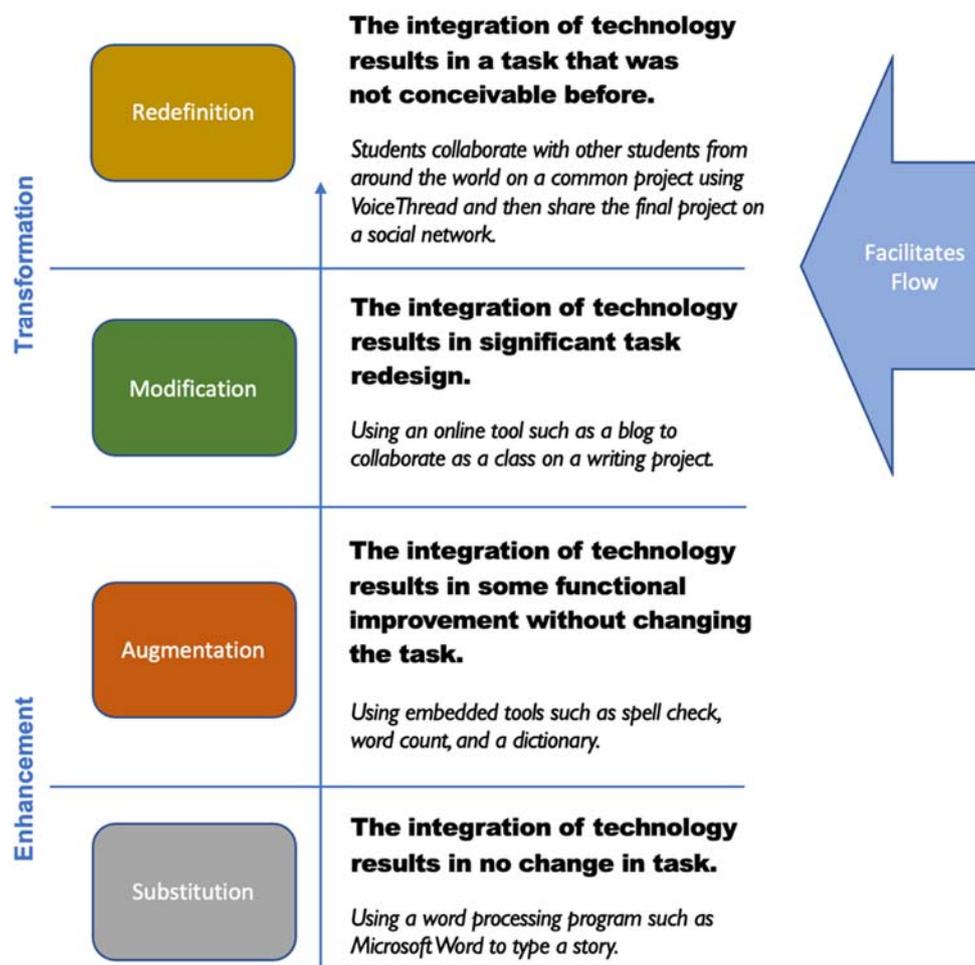
Figure 6: SAMR model by R. Puentedura. Adapted with permission from The SAMR Model:
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In conclusion, as technology advances, it is becoming easier for educators to find appropriate digital tools, which can help to stimulate students' motivation to learn and transform language learning tasks. When selecting a digital tool teachers should consider factors such as relevance, user-friendliness, customizability, engagement, and accessibility. They should also reflect on what they hope to achieve with the technology and how it will benefit their students. As for integration, the SAMR model is an excellent framework for helping teachers to successfully integrate technology into their curriculum. The model supports teachers as they

design, develop, and integrate technology into their courses, allowing students to advance their own learning in a transformational manner. It was a pleasure to present the above at the AAES conference. I hope that my presentation helped to encourage teachers to incorporate more technology that modifies or redefines language-learning tasks to enhance learning, further engage students, and facilitate flow in the language classroom. Thank you for the opportunity to write this report and I look forward to attending the conference again in the future.

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