

REVIEW OF *A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO USING COMPUTERS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING*

A Practical Guide to Using Computers in Language Teaching

John de Szendeffy

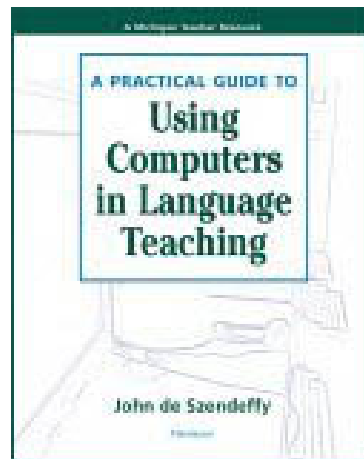
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Review by Jody Gabler, [American University](#)

Computers have come to play a role in nearly every aspect of our day-to-day lives, certainly including education. In the arena of second language instruction, computers enable learners to interact with others and become engaged in lessons in new and meaningful ways (Warschauer, 2006). In *A Practical Guide to Using Computers in Language Teaching*, John de Szendeffy provides a user-friendly look at how computer technology can be integrated into the classroom, regardless of the instructor's previous experience with computers.

Teachers who are new to using technology in their instruction seem to be the book's primary audience, although teachers and administrators of all backgrounds can find useful information and ideas to add to their program. The book's scope is wide in that it provides information on several topics, such as background on Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), technical advice, tips for classroom management in a computer lab, and advice for selection of an appropriate computer system for a particular program. Furthermore, the author provides a framework for numerous lesson and project ideas that would work best in academic programs for teens or adults (although these could easily be adapted for younger students or adult education programs). While the book is probably most suitable to those programs that have a computer lab or multiple computers, de Szendeffy does give some ideas for classes in which there might only be one computer available.

The book is divided into four sections. The first section of the book, entitled "What Is Computer-Assisted Language Learning?" is an important beginning for teachers or administrators who are not convinced of the rationale of using computers in the classroom, or for those who have little experience with teaching or technology. The first chapter of the section explains that computers are very effective for encouraging language use and practice in the classroom. The author gives a brief history of language teaching methodology and explains how particular technologies worked well with particular methods, e.g. audiocassettes were a natural complement to the audiolingual approach, allowing learners to listen and repeat chunks of language. The history overview culminates in the present day, with a preferred methodology of integrated lessons in which learners complete authentic tasks or projects using multiple

language skills (Brown, 2000). These lessons can be enhanced by the use of computers, de Szendeffy claims, because computers can be used for realistic tasks, such as writing up an interview, preparing for a trip, or chatting online, which require students to use multiple language skills and interact.

An important emphasis in the first section (and throughout the book) is that computers need to be used alongside—not in place of—a human teacher. De Szendeffy points out that many language-learning software programs are marketed as stand-alone tools for learning a new language. While these software packages may contain good self-access material to help learners practice on their own, they do not encourage students to interact with each other and the instructor in the target language and are therefore unlikely to fit well into a course's curriculum (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Instead, de Szendeffy explains that by implementing ideas from his "activities" section, teachers can use much less sophisticated (and less costly) computer programs, such as word processors and web browsers, to complement their lessons and engage students in authentic ways. This information is certainly useful for program administrators and teachers who are faced with the challenge of choosing software programs for their courses.

The first section also includes a list of tips for integrating computers into the classroom. For example, de Szendeffy tells readers to "prepare and be patient" (p. 20), "pace activities" (p. 23), and "orchestrate communicative activities" (p. 26) when working with computers. To those instructors who have received extensive training in second language teaching, this information may seem obvious. On the other hand, it may help teachers to see that incorporating computers into their lessons does not require them to fundamentally change the way they teach, but simply to add a new tool. As for TESOL students or inexperienced teachers, these suggestions can reinforce the principles of good teaching that they are learning and help them see how to apply those principles to technology-based lessons (Brown, 2000).

The book's second part, entitled "CALL Classroom Activities" is a very practical and extensive list of activity ideas whose content could be adapted to fit a wide array of classes. The section is broken into six chapters, each of which focuses on a different skills area or type of activity.

Chapter 4 deals with writing activities, beginning with lessons on how to use a word processor and building to more complex tasks, such as writing up an interview, writing a story, and writing a business letter. This chapter could easily be used to create a writing course curriculum. By following the sequencing of lessons in this chapter, course designers can build scaffolding and incorporate prior knowledge into the course automatically, helping students learn the information more efficiently and experience success (Hammond, 2001; Numelin, 1998). Alternatively, individual activities could easily be selected from this section and used to complement a particular lesson or fill gaps in a pre-existing curriculum.

Chapter 5 gives ten different ideas for how to use the Internet in structured activities. Some of these activities focus on personal communication via the web, such as talking to keypals (Internet penpals), using Internet chats, and sending electronic postcards. In these activities, students can interact with their classmates, the instructor, another group of students, or native speakers whom the teacher has selected to complete the tasks. The chapter also offers ideas for teaching effective use of web browsers through authentic tasks that learners may need to accomplish in their lives outside of class. These include researching current events, finding an apartment, learning about field trip destinations, and researching colleges online.

In chapter 6 on audio/video activities, de Szendeffy argues that computers provide students and teachers with greater control, access, and integration of material than older tape recorders or videocassettes. This chapter gives useful information on how to digitize material and easily create recordings for activities, such as dictation or oral comprehension questions. Readers also obtain good suggestions for listening activity material, such as online broadcasts, TV advertisements, and students' own recorded speech. These ideas help incorporate more aural activities into a class and move away from all-written tasks,

which is especially important in a conversation or pronunciation course (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996).

Chapter 7 gives the reader numerous ideas for long-term projects. Again, de Szendeffy has sequenced the activities to provide excellent scaffolding using realistic tasks. The projects offer ideas on designing and evaluating web pages, creating class books, creating videos and slideshows, and conducting surveys. This chapter is an excellent starting point for a curriculum designer, because each project idea includes many components that could be completed over the length of an entire course, providing the foundation for a course curriculum.

Chapters 8 and 9 are both relatively short, dealing with text-based activities and content activities, respectively. These chapters provide useful information about resources that teachers could pass along to students, such as online corpora, online learning sources, and lists of software programs. These ideas may be more difficult to incorporate into class lessons because they do not offer as much information on what students will actually do with the listed resources. To its credit, chapter 9 provides an extensive list of software and online programs that may be useful to teachers when preparing for their own lessons, or for administrators when making curricular or program-wide decisions about technology.

All of the activity chapters follow an easy-to-use format beginning with a brief introduction including key questions the chapter will answer, general information about the chapter's activities, and a rationale for using that type of activity in the classroom. The remainder of the chapter outlines each activity, including the computer skills needed by the teacher, the student level, the content objectives, the necessary software, and instructions for teacher preparation and student instruction. [Table 1](#) and the following bullet points show an example of this layout for a short writing activity from Chapter 4 (pp. 45-46).

Table 1. Sample Activity Format

Activity 6: Interview	
Teacher skills:	word processing, using a spell-checker and a thesaurus
Student level:	high-beginning to advanced
Content objective:	interviewing, note-taking, writing interviews
Software:	word processor

At the beginning of the semester an interview activity can serve as an icebreaker while reinforcing word-processing skills and formatting conventions. Students interview each other in pairs or in a chain where *a* interviews *b* who interviews *a*. The subject can be simply biographical or a position on a topic and can become part of a class book later in the semester (see Chapter 7, Project Activities: Class Books on page 139).

Teacher Preparation

- Assign pairs or groups to interview each other.
- Give students hints on questions and demonstrate how to ask follow-up questions.
- Show them examples of how to take quick notes without taking dictation.

Steps for Students

- Interview your partner or group members.
- Take notes but not dictation.
- Type up the interview, observing the formatting guidelines learned in Activity 2.
- Give a draft of your interview to your interviewee so he or she can check it for accuracy and comment.
- Correct your draft.

- Save the interview file for a possible class book later.

In his activity instructions, de Szendeffy includes technical notes, examples, possible technology glitches and how to work around them, tips for classroom management, and pictures of what will appear on the computer screen. These additional notes are very helpful for teachers who are not familiar with a particular computer program or who do not have experience working with computers in the classroom. The author is also careful to provide instructional steps for both Microsoft-based programs and Macintosh-based programs, so that activities can be easily carried out on either.

The third part of the book, a short section entitled "Technical Considerations," is an important source for administrators or teachers who need to choose a computer system for a program or class. The book provides some basic information on the differences between available operating systems (Macintosh, Microsoft Windows, and Linux), and de Szendeffy explains that any of the operating systems will largely meet teachers' needs despite their slight differences. For those teachers who do not have input into their institution's technology choices, this chapter is largely unnecessary.

The book ends with several appendices that may meet teachers' specific needs, especially for those who have little experience with computers or those who are making program-wide decisions about computer use. The appendices provide information on computer terminology, options for saving and sharing files, proper e-mail etiquette, basics of web browsers, tips for creating websites, fair use guidelines for using copyrighted materials, a sample letter for gaining permission to use copyrighted material, and a CALL resource list. Again, these appendices contain very specific information that can serve as a reference for some, but are likely to be ignored by others.

To return to the author's goals for this book—to provide a practical and user-friendly guide to help teachers integrate computer technology into their language teaching—it can be concluded that those goals have been accomplished. The book is very easy to read and includes numerous tips and suggestions for those with different levels of comfort and experience with teaching and technology. The book is very likely to encourage teachers to try new computer programs or to use old programs in new ways for language learning purposes. It can also serve as a guide for those who are making program-wide decisions regarding technology. One drawback of the book is that, while it provides good information on many topics, it is unlikely that any teacher or administrator will be able to benefit from all of its sections. Teachers may likely find the activities section most useful and ignore the section on technical considerations, and administrators may likely do the opposite. Still, having a copy of the book available in a program library would allow both teachers and administrators to access the information they need. De Szendeffy clearly understands that teachers do not want to replace themselves with computers but instead want engaging and meaningful activities to accompany what is already taking place in the classroom, and he offers interesting and helpful suggestions to allow teachers to facilitate tasks and projects.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Jody Gabler holds an MA in TESOL from American University in Washington, DC. Her interests include teaching pronunciation, English for Academic Purposes, and curriculum design.

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