

DII Academic Makes Impression at Dushanbe 'Technology in Language Education' Conference

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On 28th November, The Tajik International University of Foreign Languages (TIUFL) held its annual conference concerning technology in education. Mr Glen Clifford, head of English at Dushanbe Innovation Institute (DII) was invited to attend, where he also presented a talk entitled 'The Successful I.T We Never Really Used'. His talk featured two sections; the first providing reasons why educators have often seemingly 'failed' to utilize current technologies, followed by a second section which introduced some of the best in current and freely available technology for language training classrooms.

Although the conference subtitled 'Innovation, Problems, and Prospects', was not necessarily focussed on artificial Intelligence, the three speakers that preceded Mr Clifford spoke solely about A.I, providing an upbeat assessment about a technology that is yet to make any meaningful impact within language training classrooms. In contrast, Mr Clifford's talk addressed the subject of 'problems' that language educators face today while, at the same time, providing a sharp critique of artificial intelligence.

Upon his return to the DII campus, Mr Clifford met with our department in order to discuss his background, the main message of his talk, and to offer some extracts from its recorded transcript. However, at the conference itself, Mr Clifford gained much attention by his opening, highlighting -

"there's so much hyper-excitement here today about A.I, and how it is going to revolutionize language education... But after decades of development involving interactive multimedia and virtual reality, I don't see any A.I. in any real-life language training classrooms... Even looking around the conference room here today, the only artificial intelligence I see are icons on smartphones... These applications, such as Duolingo, are far removed from best practices, and what is supposed to be actually happening inside foreign language classrooms".

Conversing with DII, Mr Clifford reflected, *"for several different reasons, I was maybe the ideal person to burst the I.T - A.I bubble in the conference room... Firstly, there is my previous career, as a radio presenter and producer... I worked in radio for 17 years, and this is an industry where professionals use technology everyday in order to produce content, aiming to inform and communicate... Any person calling themselves a 'media professional' should have a solid background in communication history, theory, and audience psychology... This connects to my second point: When I became an academic, I could immediately see how modern educators are expected to use technology in a very similar way, to produce educational content to inform, communicate and mediate information with students"*.

He continued, *"nowadays, as an academic and educator for almost 20 years, I have already witnessed several technology bubbles, that have ultimately created no benefit, and only caused damage to the education sector, including the most basic learning objectives... Specifically, in terms of language education, technologists continue to create technologies that do not support proven teaching methodologies, associated approaches, and generally 'best practices' -- what I still understand from somewhat of an audience psychology perspective"*.

Mr Clifford detailed to DII that there is a long and well documented history concerning the use of technology in language education. This started in the 1920s, when vinyl disks, recorded with foreign language drills, were tested on students. Over the decades, studies and experiments continued, with claims in 1941 that, 'television will create a complete revolution in education, equal to the invention of type' (ed. of course, this was a totally unrealistic claim, and an early version of an I.T bubble).

Several more technological evolutions or revolutions followed television, leading to the recent but barely memorable 'internet of things' (IOT) that reached its peak by 2013. IOT promised to deliver everything from refrigerators that would order food from local supermarkets, to home-based robot tutors. It was another I.T bubble that became less than five percent of what it promisingly imagined.

More recently, Meta (the parent of WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook) announced that it will slash funding to its 'Metaverse' virtual reality (VR) project. Metaverse has been a personalized and privately owned I.T bubble, where Meta has lost at least 60 billion dollars since 2020. Again, Clifford says, that *"VR language education was all-the-talk from 2020 onwards, but is now nothing but a huge loss for a private I.T company"...* He quickly added, *"thank goodness Meta did not try to roll it out to the wider education sector, otherwise the geeks would now be firmly pointing their blame finger at us"*.

He further described, *"the outcome from most of these failed revolutions and evolutions, is that technologists have inevitably blamed educators for not creating or modifying proven methodologies and approaches to suit their new inventions... Unfortunately, technologists have a long history of not seeing that, as qualified and real educators, we simply could not imagine or create any new methodology to work alongside or complement their wonderful new inventions... Further, when educators have modified proven methodologies and approaches, it has almost always been a case of trying to violently push a square peg into a round hole... The broken methodology still doesn't suit the wonderful technology"*.

Mr Clifford's central belief is that every new language teaching technology needs to work with a proven, or even better, a superior teaching methodology and its associated approaches. He added that technologists usually prototype or trial their inventions or creations in very artificial teaching/learning environments, hoping that educators will automatically create or modify teaching methodologies to suit a new technology. There is usually very successful testing within trials, featuring ideal simulated situations, ideal sample students, ideal teachers, and the moderate use of some new or existing methodology.

However, as Mr Clifford explains, these successful trials always have little relationship or connection to real-life language training environments and their common situations. Invariably, when the technology is rolled out across education systems, nations and their associated cultures, it has usually failed or - at best - it has become only a shadow of what it envisioned... Then, he says, the 'blame game' usually begins.

The solution, Mr Clifford said, *"I think that educators should be very wary of anything that technologists bring us, especially when they excitedly insist that some new technology has 'already proven to be successful'... Whenever this happens, a situation very often takes place where educators are expected to sacrifice proven methodologies, while being succumbed to create new methodologies to satisfy some technological beast - a beast that rests on very shaky foundations - and most probably resting on an I.T. bubble"*.

He continued, *"over a very long history, language education has been like a magnet to technologists, and for decades educators have been far too naive, welcoming, kind and too tolerating when it comes to new technologies... We have uncritically accepted the many exciting claims made about new technologies, and how they are going to change the world"*.

"But this old situation is a bit deeper than expected: One of the main reasons why our area is a magnet, is because technologists can clearly see that most language educators fail to really use technology... They use mass-market Windows ecosystem applications that have no value in terms of language education, or they use something that the local I.T department has mirrored into program files, usually VLC media player, and previously it was WinAmp... So, part of the blame is also on the shoulders of educators".

"Be wary of exciting claims, and push the envelope about how you use I.T.; don't just use what is installed on some machine... But, the best solution is that educators need to imagine technology, we need to design the front-end, we need to test and modify it, and most of all, we need to make it a tool... We need to get the I.T developers working with us, but also for us... We should not be making ourselves a slave to some I.T that isn't working out... The moment we are slaving over a piece of I.T or software, it is no longer a tool"...

After this valuable background covering the history of why seemingly promising technological evolutions in language education have often failed, Mr Clifford proceeded to content that focused on the title of his talk, 'The Successful I.T We Never Really Used'. This included the introduction to readily available tools and software, all of which he requested upon his appointed by DII -



"I wanted smart chairs - DII acquired them, I wanted surround sound - DII got it... Soon, I'll want a coffee machine", Mr Clifford joked about his continual development of DIIs 'Immersive Training Studio' (the I.T.S).

Jokes aside, the simple act of acquiring the right tools, being 'smart' wheeled study-desk-chairs, has had a major impact on the quality of language training, as he explains -

"None of the speakers or attendees at the conference could ever have imagined that the first item on my list would be furniture! ... Yet having smart furniture, such as completely maneuverable wheeled study-desk-chairs, is one of the best technologies any language training environment could acquire... Each chair is supported by six strong wheels and has a fold-down writing table; they are sturdy and allow any student to quickly travel around the I.T.S to form or dissolve groups for pair or teamwork".

He reiterated, *"a good language training classroom needs to allow the instant creation and disbandment of groups... This means that if the instructor or teacher says, make groups of three, four, or five people, it's done - instantly... This most basic furniture technology, that few schools use, also allows the instructor to make regular visits to groups, monitoring and providing instant feedback about speaking or writing issues, as well as many other benefits".*

He maintains that crucially, *"this is where technology in its most basic form meets proven methodologies and approaches... The chairs support communicative language teaching (CLT) and its created or adopted approaches that include 'total language immersion', 'authentic learning', 'student centred learning', 'role-play', 'experiential learning', and of course all forms of practice for the development of speech and pronunciation"*.



Continuing, Mr Clifford introduced an exceptional audio playout system called 'OcenAudio', developed by graduates from Brazil State University, and made freely available as a download. The software allows language instructors to loop and speed-change audio in real time, while keeping the original voice pitch. Audio extraction is the highlight, allowing instructors to quickly select, copy and export new or challenging phrases as a separate mp3 file. In the next stage of learning, a student can study the exported phrases, playing them back in real-time or, again, speed-change them to allow for focused study.

Mr Clifford said, *"Our use of the OcenAudio playout system allows learners in our Immersive Training Studio to carefully focus and aurally zoom-in on parts of words, phrases, and ultimately trains them to speak with perfect intonation, pitch, accent, and timing... OcenAudio's technical features support the proven methodologies of 'focused listening' for phonological awareness, 'selective rote learning' for exercising muscle memory, and 'simulated learning' to make everything as real as possible... No A.I will ever 'listen' or 'feel' these things for a student!"*

For normal or 'final' playout, Mr Clifford recommends another free piece of software, 'Light Alloy'. This is a simple, stable and streamlined audio player made by a Belarusian software developer. Its interface is totally customizable, allowing its playlist font to be increased so that students in a large training room can monitor the files played. This is one of many simple but important options and customisations that, *"make a world of difference to whether a piece of technology is either great or terrible"*, according to Mr Clifford.



The final tool or piece of technology that Mr Clifford introduced at the conference was 'Pronunciation Coach' from the U.K developer 'icSpeech'. For more than 30 years, the company has been a quiet achiever in designing language education software, and specializes in pronunciation. Its new 3D offering is a remarkable achievement, allowing the instructor to show language learners exact tongue, jaw, and lip positions, representing all the sounds in the English language. The software can pronounce any sound, word or sentence in high fidelity male and female voices. In terms of methodology and approach, the software has been heavily influenced by best practices in 'simulated learning'.

At the conference, Mr Clifford summarized the title and focus of his presentation by saying -

"most instructors are stuck trying to imagine group work, because classroom chairs are ridiculously bolted to the ground, or far too heavy and noisy to move around every 10 to 12 minutes... Most institutions are still failing to follow proven methodologies, approaches, and best practices".

"Most classrooms are using silly little bluetooth speakers that students cannot hear... If a bigger speaker has been purchased, almost always some inexperienced technician or instructor has turned up the bass, so that it is blasting the student with a sound that is really uncomfortable, unlike any real human sound, and more like a rock concert... At other times, I have even seen the addition of fake echo, so that the talking voice sounds like a KTV singer... Classrooms need surround sound, at least four speakers, and no bass, no echo... The old proven method of 'quality aural input - means quality oral output' is so true, but also so neglected in training classrooms... Again, institutions are failing to make changes that would support proven methodologies and approaches".

"About OcenAudio: most instructors are too afraid or complacent to move away from the bloated Windows or media library players... This means that they are stuck playing audio in a way that does not allow for careful or critical listening on the part of students... They are failing to use other free and readily available technologies that - again - support methodologies, approaches, best practices... "

Summarizing Pronunciation Coach, Mr Clifford offered a slightly different perspective: *"The 1990s I.T. bubble of 'interactive multimedia' and even the later 'V.R.' bubble have influenced the Pronunciation Coach software that we use... It is brilliant, and one of the few things to come out of any I.T bubble, into real-life language training classrooms... But it works, because - as I have said many times -- the technology supports or follows proven teaching methodologies and approaches".*

Mr Clifford noted, *"while A.I is doing some very interesting things in the area of language translation and interpretation, I am yet to see it make any contribution to what is actually happening, or supposed to happen, in real-life language training environments"*.

In his final remark to the conference, Mr Clifford said that -

"technologists are well known to fall into the condition commonly known as 'technological determinism'... This condition entails a lot of idealism... In my experience, we need to be very wary about idealists and their most passionate ideals... On many occasions, they have been responsible for the most wonderful evolutions and sometimes revolutions that have greatly advanced and benefited humanity... But equally, with a tendency for over-simplification, over-excitement, and obsession, idealists have also been responsible for many of humanity's greatest catastrophes".

In December, Time magazine announced its 'person of the year' for 2025. Rather than giving the award to a single person, the magazine awarded eight people, as being 'the architects of A.I'. Most of these people, including Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk, are not engineers, and have had no part in actually creating A.I. or any major technology. In the following days, the New York Times, Reuters and other major media outlets ran stories about the hype around A.I, and that there is a very real danger it could cause the biggest global financial meltdown humanity has faced, only on the basis that not enough people decided to use it.

Link to Clifford's presentation slide-show used during his presentation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDd5HavwzP8>



TAJIK INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES NAMED
AFTER SOTIM ULUGZODA



CERTIFICATE OF PARTICIPATION

IS AWARDED TO

GLEN CLIFFORD

for participating the International Scientific and Practical conference “ The process of learning Foreign languages in
the modern information space: Innovation, problems and prospects”

with the report on the topic “THE NEW I.T WE NEVER REALLY USED”

Rector, professor



Gulnazarzoda J. B.

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