

Online Expansive Reading

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Abstract

In 2020, for many educational institutions, Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) changed the fundamentals of traditional education as face-to-face classrooms migrated to online learning. Drawing on the Oxford Owl ebook library and McLuhan's tetrad of media effects, the following essay provides a brief overview which describes the online transition of an EFL Expansive reading program.

Keywords: Technology Enhanced learning, Expansive Reading, Tetrad of media Effects

Online education presents both opportunities and obstacles. Nevertheless, if uncertainty still exists around Marshall McLuhan's notions on the far-reaching scope of technology, 2020 vindicates all doubts, as educational institutions worldwide frantically sought an alternative for face-to-face classes. According to Kittaya, the failure of many Japanese institutions to digitize before 2020 worked in tandem with a teaching society that was not encouraged to invest in TEL (2020). With an international push to recognize the value of TEL, the pandemic catapulted many of Japan's educational institutions into the 21st century, heralding a need for students and teachers to develop 21st-century skills.

Japan's lack of investment in TEL, consequently, often produced students with low digital skills (Cote & Millner, 2016; Fumanari, 2017; Mehran et al., 2017). Yet, Ronchi's (2019) notion that "the gap between e-Citizens and digitally divided citizens [still exists], but [that gap] becomes smaller every day" (p. 2) carried weight in 2020, as I watched students find their way to online learning. In the months that followed the pandemic's onset, I witnessed a transformation in many of my students'. In April, students struggled to open a PDF, but by December many of those same students completed homework tasks online and moved seamlessly from Microsoft Teams to educational websites such as Oxford Owl.

Drawing on Oxford Owl's ebook library, and McLuhan's tetrad of effects, the following essay provides a brief overview of the losses and gains of transitioning an EFL Expansive Reading program from a face-to-face classroom to online learning. The first section outlines an overview of the Expansive Reading program in a face-to-face and online context, followed by a description of McLuhan's tetrad of effects and its application to the evaluation of Oxford Owl's ebook library. (<https://www.oxfordowl.co.uk/>).

Context

Transferring any type of lesson to online learning presents challenges. EFL is no exception, particularly in Japan, where EFL students often have little opportunity to practice speaking English or even hear native English speakers outside the classroom, which frequently results in student hesitancy to speak English in class. And when classroom instruction transforms from one room to the online inclusion of rooms in individual private homes, it takes more than a digital device to manifest meaningful language learning. Whether a teacher is

a veteran or a novice, online education demands a delicate balance of teaching experience and a willingness to dabble in developing some TEL skills.

Face to Face Learning

While theory can inform an approach, change in approach needs to be fueled by “principled, practical knowledge,” defined informally as “know-how combined with know-why” (Bereiter, 2014, p. 4). My curiosity in TEL grew slowly and resentfully. My interests rested firmly in Extensive Reading, an approach to second language reading in which learners read substantial amounts of easy, enjoyable books (graded readers) to build reading speed and fluency (Day and Bamford, 2012). Around 2005–2006, Extensive Reading gained popularity within my teaching circle. At the time, libraries in my teaching context didn’t stock the easily accessible graded readers, which were often necessary for beginner Japanese EFL students. More often than not, many students looked frustrated as they struggled to read texts far above their reading levels. I wanted students to have a better reading experience and read materials that would give them the confidence to speak English.

As students read without the particular goal of recycling their reading for oral communication something felt unsuitable for a student population who needed to practice speaking English. My desire to extend their language learning experience eventually manifested itself in the implementation of an *Expansive Reading* program. Expansive Reading, also an approach to second language reading, is much like Extensive Reading, but the difference is that Expansive Reading also promotes writing, speaking, and listening skills (Hill, 2011).

With its integrated approach, Expansive Reading looked like a step toward building a learning community. Before 2020, I often accompanied my classes to

the school library, and I appreciated the energy exchanged as we hunted through books and helped each other make choices. I also hauled around a green carry-on suitcase full of easy-graded reading material to each of my reading classes. My approach to Expansive Reading was a basic three-step process: (1) students chose books that were easy to read, (2) students wrote a short response about the experience of reading the book, and (3) students shared their reading experience with their classmates. Several of my initially reticent Japanese EFL students began speaking about their reading experiences in English.

Fast-forward to Spring 2020, my carefully created, cozy little reading community needed to go online. And to this day, there are no trips to the library, and my green carry-on remains shut. At the time, I gingerly approached the process of bringing it all online.

Online Learning

While many online EFL reading materials exist, executing a fully online Expansive Reading program meant learning to use new tools while creating a process that considered student reading levels, digital literacy levels, and the efficiency of the chosen online tools. According to Koltay, “information is available in unimaginably large amounts and variety. In addition to quantity, it is available through multiple media and is of uncertain quality. The only way to deal with these issues is to employ more digital tools” (2011, p. 211). Equipped with a wide range of free ebooks from Oxford Owl and some tools (apps) from Microsoft Teams, a five-step online process now replaced the original 3-step face-to-face Expansive Reading program. (1) Students chose easy ebooks to read on Oxford Owl, which came equipped with an audio feature so students could now listen while reading. (2) Students wrote short responses about the

experience of reading the book. (3) Students took screenshots of their book covers. (4) In class, using the MS Teams channel feature in small groups, students shared their reading experience with their classmates. (5) Finally, using the forms application (available on MS Teams) students wrote about the books they had heard about from their classmates. The initial online administrative duties and getting students from Teams to Oxford Owl required some setup time, and, of course, students needed some help to get used to online learning. However, it wasn't long before most students engaged in the process, and it felt like the students were sustaining the Expansive Reading program.

Websites like the Oxford Owl turned on another light in an online learning community. Still, it was not without concern of what could be lost, and as McLuhan reminds us, “when new technologies impose themselves on societies long habituated to older technologies, anxieties of all kinds result” (McLuhan & Moos, 2014, p. 125). Undoubtedly, in 2020 anxiety ran high in the teaching profession as practitioners faced new working conditions accompanied by new technological approaches to curriculum. And anyone standing even on the tiniest bit of principle knows that mouse clicking multiple-choice does not always render a profitable learning experience. Finding and evaluating online learning tools or websites takes time. While having the power to select curriculum technology can be helpful, investigating the educational value of technology can be overwhelming. Possessing resources to evaluate the pedagogical value of TEL is paramount and can be found within McLuhan's *tetrad of effects*.

McLuhan's Tetrad of Effects

Evaluating technology's effects on pedagogy and society dominated the

lifework of Marshal McLuhan. Based on four questions, a fundamental concept of McLuhan's, the tetrad of effects, provides a pedagogical tool to gauge the effects of technology on society (McLuhan & McLuhan, 2007). Using the tetrad of effects, the next section of this essay will evaluate Oxford Owl's eLibrary within the tetrads questions:

- What does the technology **enhance**?
- What does the technology make **obsolete**?
- What does the technology **retrieve** that had been obsolesced earlier?
- What does the technology **reverse** or flip into when pushed to extremes?

According to the tetrad, Oxford Owl's variety of free ebooks **obsolesces** trips to the library and the face-to-face sharing of books. The ebook's audio option **retrieves** the concept of being read to and the days of radio broadcasted storytime. The audio features allow students to read while listening. Reading while listening puts word and sound together, modeling pronunciation, intonation, and expression, and automatically **enhances** the EFL student's opportunities to hear native or native-like English speakers. By listening to the audio companion of a text, while reading, Hill argues that meaning can be more apparent as recordings allow students to experience the speaker's emotions (2009). As the tetrad suggests, technology can have a **reverse** effect when pushed to the extremes, and potentially Oxford Owl might influence students to let listening override the desire to read.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been to describe the transition of an Expansive Reading program from face-to-face learning to online learning within McLuhan's tetrad to recognize the benefits and losses that may accompany

TEL. The online transition outlined in this essay happened because it had to. The author, a teacher of 25 years, initially despised TEL and rued the day when the ebook would overtake the paper-bound edition. However, the tetrad validated the usefulness of the Oxford Owl's ebook library, and as mentioned earlier, the 2020 pandemic brought technology to the frontlines of education and if doubt still exists, COVID 19 has had the final word. In this new normal which magnifies the need for intertwining technology and education more than ever before, McLuhan's tetrad can assist educational practitioners in evaluating the boons and banes of TEL. This paper offers a tiny window into the scope of ideas that McLuhan put forth in his efforts to encourage society to build a digitally responsible community. It is hoped that more work will be published on the exploration of McLuhan's ideas and its relation to Technology-Enhanced Learning.

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