Normalisation Revisited:  
The Effective Use of Technology in Language Education

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ABSTRACT

This article revisits the issue of the normalisation of technology in language education, defined as the stage at which a technology is used in language education without our being consciously aware of its role as a technology, as an effective element in the language learning process (Bax, 2003). It draws on the literature relating to the history of sociotechnical innovation (Bijker, 1997) to develop the theoretical basis of the concept and examines normalisation in the light of a neo-Vygotskian conceptual framework, in order to establish a set of central principles by which to understand and interpret the normalisation process. It then considers the implications for the language teacher and other change agents, with proposals for how to introduce new technologies into language education settings with maximum impact.

Keywords: CALL, Diffusion, Innovation, Integration, Language Education, Normalisation, Sociotechnical Change, Technology, Technology Practice

INTRODUCTION

The concept of the ‘normalisation’ of technology in language education was advanced some years ago (Bax, 2003) to refer to the stage when a pedagogical technology such as a textbook or pen has become in effect invisible, so seamlessly is it employed in our everyday practice in the service of language learning. In that earlier account it was hypothesised that at this point of ‘normalisation’ a technology becomes maximally useful, having typically passed through a number of intermediate stages until it finds its proper role in our practice. In this state the innovation is of such ‘normal’ value to its users as part of the teaching and learning process that we cease even to see it as a technology, as in the case of shoes and cutlery in everyday life, or the pen or textbook in classroom contexts.

The hypothesis implicit in the concept of normalisation in language education can be set out more formally as follows:

A technology has reached its fullest possible effectiveness in language education when it has arrived at the stage of ‘normalisation’, namely when it is used without our being consciously aware of its role as a technology, as a valuable element in the language learning process.

In this sense pens and textbooks in language teaching are fully normalised. By contrast, it was argued that computers have not, by and
large, yet reached the stage of normalisation in
language classrooms around the world.

Since 2003 this concept of normalisation
has been cited and addressed in a variety of
discussions concerning the role of technology
in language education (Jung, 2005; Levy &
Stockwell, 2006; Hansson, 2008; Allford &
Pachler, 2007; Lamy & Hampel, 2007; Spencer-
Oatey, 2007; Davies, Walker, Rendall, & Hewer,
2009). The concept is seen by those who cite
the original article as potentially useful for
educators seeking a better understanding of their
relationship with technologies, for example:

“we believe that working towards normalization
is a useful, practical strategy. Language teach-
ers are very much working within a complex
system of opportunity and constraint. Normal-
ization then becomes a process of understanding
the infrastructure, the support networks, and the
materials, and working effectively within them”

Other writers also cite the original article
but apply the concept to related technolo-
gies such as Interactive Whiteboards (Cutrim
Schmid, 2008), distance learning and autonomy
(O’Dowd, 2007), and to a more general analysis
of methodologies in English language teaching
(Farmer, 2006).

Although the range and extent of such
discussions of the concept suggest that it has
a value to the profession, it is arguably time to
reconsider it, for a number of reasons. In the
first place it has always suffered from a lack
of detailed theoretical grounding. Although
in the original formulation it was noted that a
fuller understanding of normalisation, and the
progress of any technology towards it, was
predicated on a broadly sociocultural view of the
factors involved, the precise ways in which the
concept aligned itself with sociocultural theory
were never fully elaborated. In short, the concept
of normalisation could benefit from a more
substantial elaboration of its theoretical base.

A second reason for revisiting the concept
is that elements of recent discussions concerning
normalisation merit clarification or revision.
For instance, normalisation in some discus-
sions is assumed to be an unalloyed benefit,
and indeed there are clear traces in my original
article of such an assumption. This suggestion
has however been rightly challenged (Hubbard
& Levy, 2006), and in view of the fact that the
normalisation of a technology can arguably at
times have negative consequences, it would
seem apposite to revisit this aspect, as well as
others, of the original formulation.

This article therefore seeks to re-examine
the concept of the normalisation of technology
in language education. In doing so it aims also
to contribute to a larger goal, namely that of
establishing a more substantial theoretical ba-
sis on whose foundations we can improve our
understanding of how technology comes into
language education and operates within it. To
this end I proceed in the first part of the article
by examining aspects of theory in general, with
particular reference to sociotechnical theory and
sociocultural theory within a neo-Vygotskian
framework, and then in the light of that discus-
sion I turn to consider how these perspectives
can help the practising teacher, administrator,
or other change agent seeking to implement
technologies and normalise their use to the best
pedagogical advantage in language teaching
and learning.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
FOR NORMALISATION –
SOCIOTECHNICAL CHANGE

If we look at popular accounts of the role of
technology in education we see that they tend
to be highly polarised, frequently exhibiting
excessive ‘awe’ at the supposedly limitless
potential of a new device or technical innovation
(Bax, 2003). To take one example, Richardson
describes the facility to employ RSS (Real
Simple Syndication) feeds into webpages as
Investigating Optimal Computer-Mediated Cultural Instruction to Foster Intercultural Sensitivity in Online Peer Discussions

www.igi-global.com/chapter/investigating-optimal-computer-mediated-cultural-instruction-to-foster-intercultural-sensitivity-in-online-peer-discussions/113889?camid=4v1a