Suzann Collins' *The Hunger Games*

Technology-Enhanced Literature Projects to Support Learner Autonomy

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Abstract   Learner Autonomy has become one of the main aims of foreign language learning since Henri Holec's highly influential publication *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* (1981) in which he highlighted the fact that learners take over responsibility for all aspects of their own learning. Since the Internet has become a more interactive and collaborative medium (Web 2.0) which, in contrast to its 1.0 predecessor, allows users to generate their own content or mash-up information, the importance of the so-called 'participatory web' for developing learner autonomy has been emphasised. However, many teachers and learners feel overwhelmed by the sheer end-less number of education technology tools available, the opportunities they offer as well as the diversity in technology and autonomy research. This paper aims at discussing the role of technol-ogy in the context of learner autonomy by investigating the use of different technologies in litera-ture projects. Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, the first part of *The Hunger Game*'s trilogy, set in the fictional dystopian world of Panem, will be taken as an example of how successfully to employ technology in language learning to support learner autonomy.

Contents   1. Introduction. — 2. Dystopian Literature in the EFL Classroom. — 3. Suzann Col-lins' *The Hunger Games*. — 4. Developing Learner Autonomy with Technology. — 5. Examples of Classroom Practice. — 5.1. Facebook. — 5.2. Twitter. — 5.3. WebQuests. — 6. Conclusions.

1 Introduction

Foreign language learning in today's media-dominated and digital society goes far beyond the acquisition of a foreign language in its traditional sense. Whereas for a long time, the focus of language learning was on the learners' grammatical competence, this scope has been widened with the communicative turn and the rise of communicative competence in the late 1970s and early 1980s (see e.g. Richards 2006). Apart from the ability of being able actively to participate in authentic target language communica-tion, foreign language learning has since then incorporated a wide range of additional competences and skills for life-long learning. These include, among others, the so-called new literacies which incorporate a wide range of individual literacies taking account of our increasingly digital, visual and hypermedia world (for a discussion of new literacies see e.g. Coiro 2003, pp. 458-464, Leu et al. 2007, pp. 37-68). Additionally, a number of global

issues (Freudenstein 1999; Volkmann 2012, p. 394) have also constantly been brought up. However, these are not to be understood as a collection of individual themes or topics summarised under this heading but rather as critical-reflexive competences which enable learners to develop an awareness of the complex interdependencies in an increasingly globalised world. The autonomy of the learner, and, inextricably linked to this, the autonomy of the teacher (see e.g. Little 1995, pp. 175-181) «informed by general constructivist theories of learning, on the one hand, and – when it comes to language learning – by findings of second language acquisition research, on the other» (Legenhausen 2012, p. 21) have become prerequisites and – at the same time – aims of foreign language learning. The wide range of technological possibilities is often envisioned to encourage learners to learn – or rather acquire – a foreign language in «an active and social environment» (Eisenmann et al. 2013, p. 42) and in collaboration with others by making use of authentic materials in and outside the classroom (see e.g. Thomas et al. 2013). However, the widespread belief that technology ipso facto leads to an increase in autonomy and therefore to more successful language learning, needs to be contested. The question how technology education tools can support learners and teachers in becoming more autonomous is neither answered nor sufficiently backed up by research. This article aims to discuss the role of technology in developing learner autonomy and to illustrate it by giving practical examples taken from a literature project conducted at the University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany, in summer 2013. It will be argued that technology can support learners in becoming more autonomous by engaging them in authentic and collaborative target language communication.

2 Dystopian Literature in the EFL Classroom

Since the publication of Thomas Moore's *Utopia*[1] (1516), utopian literature has been a most popular genre. Set in faraway places or times, it criticises current conditions by drafting ideas for a perfect world.[2] A dystopian society, on the other hand, can be defined as «an imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad, typically a totalitarian or environmentally degraded one» (http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/dystopia?q=dystopia). Very often, an at first glance unblemished society turns out to have a strict social hierarchy in which a rich upper class iso-

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[1] *Utopia* is an obvious criticism of the social and political conditions in England, and Europe, in the fifteenth century.

[2] While Moore's *Utopia* is eponymous for the genre, Plato's *The Republic* (around 380 BCE) is largely considered to be one of the first pieces of utopian writing.

lates itself from the majority which vegetates away in poverty and starvation. Additionally, the state philosophy is designed to secure the political system and prevent social disorder by embracing a total surveillance of its subjects. Among other aspects, it is their sometimes shocking connection to reality which makes (non-)utopian pieces of literature so worthwhile for language learning. Students will come to grasp the fact that

> [d]ystopian novels often have a closer connection to reality than their utopian counterparts. This is because they are based on the principle of extrapolation: the author identifies a questionable element in his or her own culture, then projects it in exaggerated form into the future, in order to emphasize the danger that is implicit in the trend [MALONEY 2011, p. 19].

Thus, dystopian literature can encourage learners critically to scrutinise or criticise their own lives or the society they live in. Moylan adds to this:

> Dystopia's foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic. Its very textual machinery invites the creation of alternative worlds in which the historical spacetime of the author can be re-presented in a way that foregrounds the articulation of its economic, political, and cultural dimensions. […] [D]ystopian critique can enable its writers and readers to find their way within – and sometimes against and beyond – the conditions that mask the very causes of the harsh realities in which they live [Moylan 2000, p. xii, as quoted in Hempel et al. 2013, p. 173].

Furthermore, dystopian literature shows the role of individual responsibility. By thematising topics such as the role of technology in society, political expropriation in times of (political) instability, the restriction of civil rights for the safety of citizens, or particular groups of citizens, the degradation of the environment or the overall degeneration of the quality of life connected to it (summarised under the terms Ecopedagogy and Ecodidactics), dystopian fiction invites learners to engage with global cultural, social, political and environmental issues, debates and contexts.

3 Suzann Collins' *The Hunger Games*

The novel is set in Panem, most likely an allusion to the Roman *panem et circences*, a technologically advanced plutocratic society ruled by President Coriolanus Snow. It is situated in the territory of the former United States of America destroyed in an unknown apocalyptic catastrophe. During the course of the novel we learn that while the Capitol is located

somewhere in the area of the former Rocky Mountains, District 12 is in what was known as the Appalachia. While the inhabitants of the Capitol live in an advanced technological society with force fields, solar batteries and magnetic levitation, most of the other districts live in extreme poverty and without any advanced technology. The raison d'être of the 12 districts is to provide the Capitol with services and goods, e.g. the textile industry is located in District 8 and District 11 is known as the agricultural heart of Panem. While it is thought that District 13 was destroyed during the Capitol's defeat of the rebellion, it has actually gone underground and, due to its atomic weapons, it is left in peace by the Capitol and thus does not participate in the Hunger Games. While not much knowledge has survived about the early history of Panem, it is well-known that after the Dark Days, a rebellion of the formerly thirteen districts against the oppressive government of the Capitol led to the institution of the so-called Hunger Games, an annual event in which two tributes from each district, after a week of training in the Capitol, have to fight to death in the arena. Each year's victor is permitted to return to their home district and live in comfort with their family for their remaining days. *Hunger Games*, the first book of the trilogy, tells the story from the perspective of Katniss Everdeen, who, when her younger sister Primrose is chosen for the Hunger Games, volunteers to take her place. Together with the other tribute from her district, Peeta Mellark, who saved her family from starvation years ago, she is sent to the Capitol. After many turns, Katniss becomes the audience's favourite tribute thus undermining the power of the Capitol. When Katniss and Peeta are the last two participants in the Hunger Games, they decide to commit double suicide by eating nightlock berries instead of fighting each other to death. Finally, the Capitol declares them both winners of the Hunger Games and they return to District 12.

4 Developing Learner Autonomy with Technology

Over the last decade or so, we have witnessed incredible developments in the technology sector which continue to progress still at an even faster rate. These developments have led to the assumption that technology needs to play a role in education and that institutionalised learning needs to prepare learners for the demands technology poses on them in an increasingly digital society. However, using technological tools and the Internet in foreign language learning should be done with a purpose and not simply because it is there – often referred to as the 'Everest Syndrome' which Maddux defines as

> the belief that computers should be brought into schools simply because they are there […]. This has led to many ill-advised educational practices

and has contributed to the backlash in the U.S. against the use of computers in schools. The Everest Syndrome is the consequence of thinking myopically only about how computers can be used, and failing to think critically about how they should be used in schools [Maddux 2005, p. 20].

In the context of this paper, the question would have to be slightly reformulated and rather be one of how computers, or in this case technology in general, can support learners and teachers in developing autonomy. However, connected to this is another common misconception, namely the belief that the idea of learner autonomy in education is as new as technology itself. Little adds to this by saying that

> [a]lthough much that has been written on the subject in recent years might seem to indicate the contrary, there is nothing new or mysterious about leaner autonomy. In formal education contexts, genuinely successful learners have always been autonomous. Thus our enterprise is not to promote new kinds of learning, but by pursuing learner autonomy as an explicit goal to help more learners to succeed [Little 1995, p. 195].

Meanwhile, Little's request has been at least partly fulfilled as leaner autonomy is explicitly and implicitly mentioned in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* and national curricula are constantly being reformed accordingly. The aim of learner autonomy in the CEFR and other official documents is largely based on Henri Holec's definition of learner autonomy as

> the ability to take charge of one's own learning, to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of the learning which means […] to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e.:
> • Determining the objectives;
> • Defining the contents and progressions;
> • Selecting methods and techniques to be used;
> • Monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.);
> • Evaluating what has been acquired [Holec 1981, p. 3].

In other words, learners play an active role in all steps of the learning. This is not to be equated with learning without the teacher but requires a shift of power from the teacher to the learners creating an environment in which the teacher becomes a co-learner and co-constructer of knowledge. This, quite obviously, entails that the knowledge learners bring to the classroom, e.g. words of English they already know (see Dam 2013), has to be valued. Of course, the knowledge learners bring to the classroom is

not restricted to what they can understand or express in the foreign language but also includes (technological) tools they know as well as other expert knowledge in other fields. It is only in this way that foreign language learning can take place in an environment in which learners are not passive consumers of 'school knowledge' (Barnes 1976; see also Little 1995; Dam 2013) presented by the teacher but active co-constructors of knowledge, using knowledge for their own purposes, what Barnes calls 'action knowledge' (1976, p. 81). «The medium of communication in the autonomy classroom through which, individually and collaboratively, they plan, execute, monitor and evaluate their own learning» (Little 2013, as quoted in Dam 2013) in the target language (see also Dam 2013). This understanding of target language use is supported by the Common European Framework of Reference in which «the conceptualization of language learning as a variety of language use invites us to go beyond the view of learner autonomy as reflective self-management to one in which the user/learner's agency is challenged through the target language» (Little 2012). As regards the relationship between autonomy and technology Reinders and White point out:

> The areas of autonomy and technology in language education have a potentially very close but in practice often also uneasy relationship. In a narrow sense, technology is a tool that helps learners and educators to achieve certain educational goals. Autonomy can be one of those goals. But it can also in itself be an instrument towards the achievement of other educational goals [Reinders, White 2011, p. 1].

One of the premises of modern foreign language education is that language learning should involve authentic materials, understood as any material which has not been designed for language learning (see Nunan 1989) and that the communication evolving from these materials should be correspondingly authentic, i.e. «language produced by a real speaker/writer for a real audience, conveying a real message» (Gilmore 2007, p. 98; for the different meanings of authenticity see e.g. Widdowson 1990; Rüschoff 2003, pp. 6-9; Gilmore 2007) and be consistent with the original communicative purpose of the authentic text. Technology tools allow «learners to use real-world materials that are relevant to their (and not just their teachers') individual interests» (Reinders, Hubbard 2013, p. 364), make these materials available to others directly involved in the learning process or simply sharing a common interest. Due to the hyper- and multimedia character of the internet (pp. 358-375), these materials can easily be connected with other materials in different forms of media (e.g. video clips or audio files) thus moving «beyond the boundaries of the materials» (p. 364). Closely connected to the premise of authenticity is the call for interaction in the target language (see Dam 2013; Little 2013). «Computer-mediated

communication through email, chat and social networking sites allows learners easily to connect with other learners, native speakers and teachers» (Reinders, Hubbard 2013, p. 364) thus transferring what is learned inside the classroom to the outside world and apply it in a wide variety of contexts. To sum up, «technology can play a role in the development of learner autonomy by supporting learners in a number of ways» (p. 361) as it allows learners to access authentic materials learners can choose from according to their personal interests and learning styles and provides opportunities for authentic input and output.

5 Examples of Classroom Practice

Facebook and other social media provide a number of starting points for learning inside and outside the classroom (for mobile learning see e.g. Dudeney 2007, pp. 156-158). Apart from the advantages mentioned above, one advantage of introducing social media into the language classroom is their 'multi-character'. The social media deliver information in different modalities (visual or auditive) and codes (sound, text, pictures or moving pictures) other than unimodal and codal media and invite learners actively to use these synchronous and asynchronous channels of communication in a world in which multiple literacies are a prerequisite for successful communication. Additionally, «[r]esearch has shown that it is advisable to use a learning environment that is already in use» (Stanley 2013, p. 26) and it should also not be ignored that social media «have become important to many of our learners' lives, and teachers may find that some of their learners are already using the target language to communicate with others on these sides» (p. 122). However, the fact that our learners are frequent users of social media does not imply that they know how to use them responsibly and efficiently; especially when it comes to using them in a foreign language or for learning purposes, something which will hopefully become evident in the following.

5.1 Facebook

Here is an example of how Facebook can promote the development of learner autonomy. As email addresses already connected with Facebook do not work, the teacher can ask students to create a different email account. Once they have registered they will set the Facebook language to English in the account settings. In the case here reported, students created a Facebook profile for one of the book characters. They were asked to fill out the profile information using the details from the book already existing Hunger Games Wiki. Furthermore, they were asked to find a
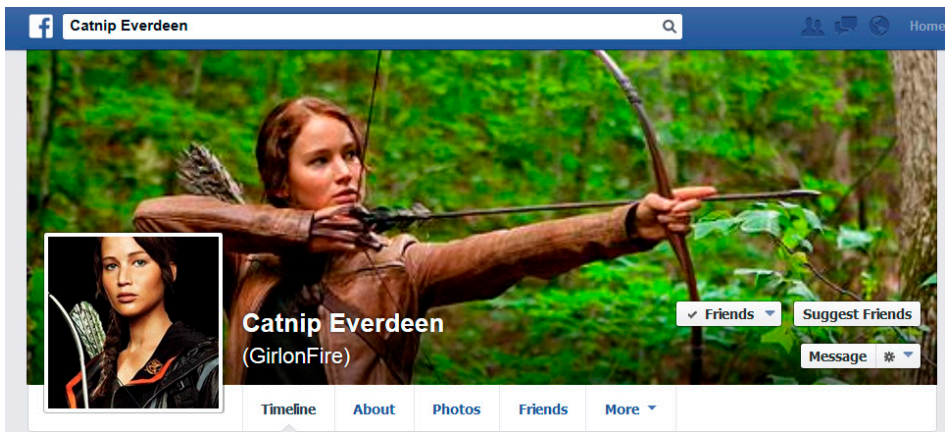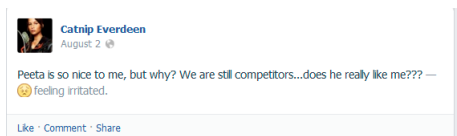
Fig. 1. Facebook profile Katniss Everdeen.

profile picture and cover photo. They were free to post and add whatever they found relevant, such as location updates, e.g. from District 12 to the Capitol. Apart from things concerning the lives of their characters students were free to include met-information such as videos, interesting articles, or links to either film or book websites as long as it was written and commented on from the perspective of the selected character. Students were asked to befriend other characters from the book and to 'share', 'like' or 'comment' on each other's posts. In the example in Figure 1, Katniss Everdeen is the Facebook character.

Here, profile picture and cover photo show different interpretations of Katniss. While the cover photo shows her in a forest of District 12 hunting, the profile pictures depicts her as the figure of the revolution against the capital wearing a mockingjay on her jacket; the symbol of the revolution.

Particularly, the language that learners use in posts or comments can be employed to enter into a discussion of social media slang, e.g. formal and

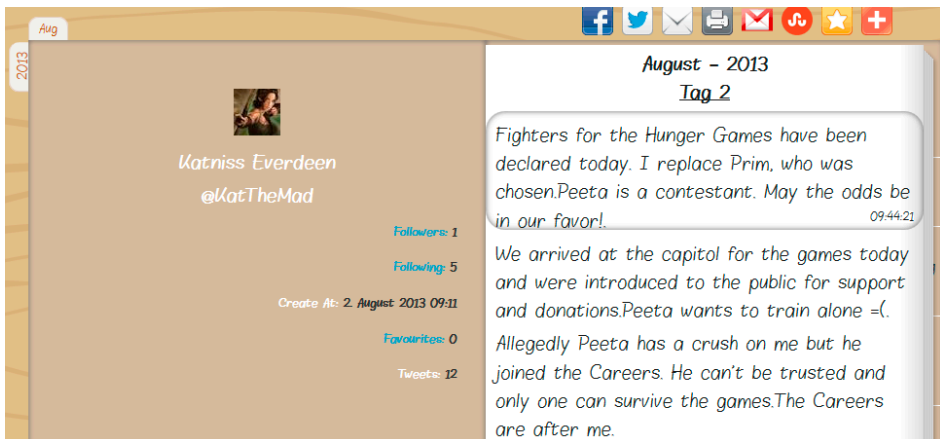Figs. 2 and 3.
Posts on Katniss Everdeen's Facebook wall.

Fig. 4: A diary entry generated on Twitario from Twitter posts.

informal language, the use of abbreviations, acronyms or icons. When we communicate in the social media sphere, a lot of the context that we would have in face-to-face communication gets lost making it particularly difficult when using sarcasm or irony. Thus, social media etiquette, also referred to as netiquette, is important, particularly as Facebook allows learners to communicate synchronously (e.g. chats) as well as asynchronously (messages) and combines these, e.g. by moving unread chat messages in the message folder.

5.2 Twitter

There are numerous ways in which Twitter can promote the development of learner autonomy (for a more detailed discussion see e.g. Mork 2009, pp. 41-56). Among others, it can function as an online diary or logbook (for the use of logbooks in the autonomy classroom see Dam 2006; Lacey, 2014) where students document their progresses in learning or simply what they are doing or have done. As a hypermedium, Twitter allows users to add simple texts but also graphics, video or sound files. Using Twitario students can see their tweets in chronological order in a 'real diary'. If necessary, the diary entries can be exported as a PDF or an ebook (ePub) or to other social networking sites such as Tumbler or Blogger.

  With a simple mouse click the pages can be turned and further information about individual diary entries such as the exact time of the entry can be displayed. If not used as a diary or record of learning, it

can be used for writing 'twiction', also known as 'tweetfic' defined by the Urban Dictionary as «usually 140 character long complete stories, but can also refer to serialized longer stories written as a stream of tweets» (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=twiction&defid=3636875) as can be seen in the example in Figure 5 in which learners were asked to create a Twitter account for any of the Hunger Games characters. Similar to simple Facebook posts, learners can now either put online individual tweets or rewrite Hunger Games in a stream of tweets something which «forces users to be concise and to get right to the point» (Mork 2009, p. 43) (see Fig. 2). In the example in Figure 5, the student chose to call her Katniss Everdeen @KatTheMad which was her interpretation of the protagonist's character in the first book. Such nicknames can lead to discussions (in class or with virtual Twitter followers) about whether Katniss has really gone mad during the games and why (is it because she volunteered as a tribute to save her sister Primrose or because she did not kill Peeta in the end but rather preferred to commit double suicide?).

The profile picture chosen for Katniss also reflects an individual interpretation of the character depicting her as a hunter with a bow and arrow.

These ways of using Twitter enable students to enter into meaningful and collaborative discourse in the target language with peers,

Fig. 5. *The Hunger Games* narrated in a stream of tweets.

Fig. 6. Fake Twitter profile of Katniss Everdeen.

Fig. 7. Example of a WebQuest page.

the teachers and other users of Twitter. Especially the discourse with other Twitter users offers them the opportunity to come into contact with native speakers and build up networks for target language use [Eisenmann et al., 2013, p. 51].

Last but not least, Twitter can also be used as a class forum to communicate with classmates or the teacher and use it for announcements or reminders and to share links or other materials relevant for the whole class. This is particularly easy and safe via TweetWorks, a site for public and private use, where new Twitter groups can be created or existing groups can be joined. Once registered, TweetWorks can be connected with an existing Twitter account which means that TweetWorks posts automatically appear in your Twitter timeline.[3]

5.3 WebQuests

Dodge (1997, p. 1) defines a WebQuest as «an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the Internet». Students engage in different tasks and as Eisenmann et al. point out:

[T]eamwork is required to accomplish the complex task of a webquest in groups. Learners take on different roles within the task, sharing the work – for example, one student focuses on research, another concen-

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[3] http://www.twi5.com/ is a good website which documents all Twitter apps that are being created. There is also a TweetWorks iPhone application available; a demo video can be watched here: https://tweetworks.wordpress.com/.

Fig. 8. Example of a WebQuest task for *The Hunger Games*.

trates on writing the presentation. They need to make sure that they finish the task on time, work together with different students and profit from each other's competences [Eisenmann et al. 2013, p. 44].

WebQuests are normally divided into six steps: (1) Introduction, (2) Task, (3) Process, (4) Resources, (5) Evaluation and (6) Conclusion/Presentation (see Dodge 1997; Moser 2008; Eisenmann et al. 2012, pp. 145-158; Eisenmann et al. 2013, pp. 43-45).

While during the introduction stage, students are introduced to the topic, the second step is to present the task to the students. During stage three students try to accomplish their tasks with the support of the resources (links to websites, articles, films or audio files) provided in the resources section. When completing the WebQuest students constantly evaluate their own learning, e.g. are they making progress, are all members of the group contributing to the WebQuest or are additional resources required). Finally, the students present their results to the whole class and can publish their presentations.

WebQuests provide many opportunities for differentiation (see e.g. Eisenmann et al. 2012 for differentiation with WebQuests) and are thus very suitable for heterogeneous groups in which learners have a varying capacity of acting autonomously. While less autonomous students can closely follow the six steps of the WebQuests, more advanced students can rather use WebQuests as a scaffold for their project. Of course, learners can also design WebQuests for other students.[4]

6 Conclusions

Learners are autonomous before entering formal education. They have already discovered the world for themselves and have acquired many things before they start attending school. The still growing number of technological tools available – only some of which specifically designed for language learning purposes – does not mean that learners will be able to retain their autonomy or even increase it. Yet, technology gives learners and teachers the opportunity to renegotiate power relations in the classroom and to try out «practices that encourage students to express their own preferred identities, participate actively, explore and exploit opportunities, make choices and decisions, negotiate, share experiences with one another, and evaluate these experiences» (Ushioda 2011, p. 230).

However, learner autonomy does not simply entail the capacity and willingness of the learners to take control of their own learning but also the readiness of teachers to see themselves as «co-producers of classroom language lessons» (Little 1995, p. 178). This collaboration can only work if learners know what is expected of them by all parties involved in the learning, e.g. the teachers, local authorities and the state. In this context, the curriculum is an important instrument of dominance, which «contains everything students need to learn» (Ludwig 2013; see also Seeman, et al. 2000, pp. 59-70) and teachers need to teach. It is only then that learners can be encouraged to bring their previous, knowledge and experiences to the classroom. The shift from input to output orientation, the introduction of core curricula and, related to that, of fundamental learning objectives, competencies and achievement standards in an increasing number of countries offer numerous opportunities of learner involvement. Furthermore, the opening up of the curriculum to new English cultures and literatures (see Eisenmann et al. 2010) and other popular spaces should encourage teachers and learners to go beyond the core countries' literatures. Suzann Collin's *The Hunger Games* is an example of such a text. It can raise the

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4 http://webquest.org/ provides infinite resources such as WebQuest templates, freely available sample WebQuests and resources for many topics suitable for EFL learners.

learners' awareness of current ecological and political problems as global issues. Approaching such a text by using technology supports learners in participating in a process of authentic and active social learning which is in no way confined to the classroom, and in contributing their knowledge and skills to the learning process. Finally, «the impression that technology is irrelevant to foreign language learning manifests in a reality in which teacher training tends to focus on content and pedagogy alone. What is needed is a focus on the intersection between content, pedagogy and technology» (Dudeney et al. 2011, p. 110).

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