

# Technology *in* Action

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## Selecting English Language Acquisition Technology

English language acquisition technology (ELAT) shows promise in helping English language learners with learning disabilities learn English. Find out what teachers should consider when selecting an ELAT.

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### La Escena (The Scene)

*Ms. Flores, a first grade teacher, greets her students as they enter her classroom in a South Texas elementary school. Ms. Pecina, the mother of one of Ms. Flores' students, approaches. She says, "Good morning, Ms. Flores. Mucho gusto en conocerla (it's nice to meet you)." Ms. Pecina proceeds to kiss the teacher on both cheeks.*

This brief vignette from the U.S.-Mexican border illustrates how culture and language can be interrelated experiences. Residents here, and in other localities throughout the country, are fortunate to live where cultural and language diversity is the norm. However, the co-mingling of cultures and languages can prove challenging for English language learners with

learning disabilities (ELL/LD) as they learn English.

Improving language acquisition is a key to academic success for students who are ELL/LD, and many teachers are finding that English language acquisition technology (ELAT) shows promise in supporting these students. The software allows students to practice English grammar while learning English.

The purpose of this *Technology in Action* is to provide several considerations that educators can use when selecting an ELAT. They are:

- Differentiating an ELAT from translation software.
- Understanding the benefits of an ELAT.
- Selecting effective ELAT features.

## Differentiating an ELAT from Translation Software

Translation software is self-explanatory: It translates words from one language to another (e.g., Spanish to English, English to French, etc.).

### Example of an ELAT

Ms. Flores is preparing for her next period class in which she has a new student, Leticia, who has recently emigrated from Mexico. Leticia is presently in the third grade and speaks very little English. Ms. Flores has decided to use an ELAT to introduce Leticia to basic concepts such as numbers, colors, family relations, household items, common signs, and body parts. Ms. Flores begins by showing Leticia how to open the ELAT at Level One. A quadrant appears with a number in each square. A woman's voice is heard saying, "four." Ms. Flores demonstrates to Leticia how to move the pointer to the number four, and she clicks on it. Applause and a ringing bell are heard. The next screen appears. This time Ms. Flores encourages Leticia to try. The voice says, "two." Leticia carefully moves the pointer and clicks on the correct number. Applause and a ringing bell are heard.

For other examples, visit:

[www.meritsoftware.com/news/display.php?pid=24](http://www.meritsoftware.com/news/display.php?pid=24)

[www.rosettastone.com/en/](http://www.rosettastone.com/en/)

Translation software is a compensatory approach that allows students to use technology to bypass their limitations and identify the second language equivalent for the needed word or phrase.

An ELAT, on the other hand, is considered a remedial approach that uses technology to directly address skill deficits. An ELAT uses technology to address the student's particular English deficit and teach replacement skills.

While translation software is important and can be a useful tool, it does not provide the concrete, multiple formats for learning a second language that many students with ELL/LD need (Turkington & Harris, 2006). For example, many translation technologies do not provide functional translations. Consider this example:

*I appreciate that the school sends communication home in Spanish. However, sometimes it can be confusing. For example, yesterday I received a letter about my daughter's kindergarten class. Kindergarten was translated into Spanish as "jardin de la infancia." But, this does not make sense in Spanish. In Spanish, it literally means "garden of children."*

The word "kindergarten" is German; it means "children's garden." "Garden of children" has no functional meaning in the Hispanic culture or language.

The flip side can be true as well. For

example "Ay Papi" and "Ay Mami" are common terms of endearment that parents say to their young children in some parts of the country. The literal translations from Spanish to English are "Hey Dad" and "Hey Mom." Yet, "Hey Dad" and "Hey Mom" have no functional meaning in English when parents are talking to their children.

## Understanding the Benefits of an ELAT

Effective language skills are based on more than literal translations. When teaching a second language, it is important to put the new language into the cultural context with which the student is familiar. An effective ELAT provides scenarios of functional language utilizing images, videos, vignettes, pictures, and audio that students can readily identify. Although there is limited research on the use of an ELAT with students with ELL/LD (McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, & Leos, 2005), the use, especially the use of a computer-based software version, appears to benefit the language acquisition of students who are ELL/LD (Roblyer, 2006). ELATs allow teachers and students flexibility to control options and customize the learning environment.

A second benefit of using an ELAT is that it does not reinforce code-switching. Code-switching is defined as changing languages during a conversation (Cummins, 1984). Students

with ELL/LD have difficulty acquiring English as a second language when the people around them code-switch. An ELAT provides clearly defined boundaries that indicate when it is appropriate to use English and when it is appropriate to use Spanish to respond to a prompt.

## Selecting Effective ELAT Features

When selecting an ELAT for a student with ELL/LD, teachers should look for the same features that they would in any software:

- Providing an effective instructional foundation.
- Building on students' prior knowledge.

### Providing an Effective Instructional Foundation

Technology should always be individualized for the student. When selecting an ELAT, teachers should ask the following questions:

- Does it include a method of assessment so that baseline data regarding the student's current level of language functioning can be obtained easily?
- Does it provide a means to target specific teaching objectives related to the baseline data obtained?
- Does it provide a way to track the student's progress?

An ELAT also should follow a sound theoretical and well-researched method of instructional delivery (Cummins, 1984). For example:

- **Tracking time on task** (Donovan & Cross, 2002). The ELAT should include a component that records the amount of time a student spends using the software to complete a lesson.
- **Tracking materials that students have used** (Elias, Fiedlander, & Tobias, 2001). The ELAT should have built in student supports (e.g., pronunciation tools). It also should have a feature that allows teachers to see which tools the student is using. Knowing which tools a student uses helps teachers identify student strengths and needs. For example, a student who uses a pronunciation tool, but not a dictionary tool, may need to spend more time practicing expressive, oral communication skills and less time reviewing vocabulary skills.
- **Determining error patterns** (Sutherland et al., 2004). The ELAT should provide a visual representation (e.g., graph) of the skills on which the student is working, as well as skills that the student has mastered.
- **Suggesting ways to tailor instruction for students who have difficulty in certain areas** (Tondeur, Van Braak, & Valcke, 2007). The ELAT should offer suggestions for addressing identified areas of student needs.
- **Monitoring test scores** (Sutherland et al., 2004). The ELAT should provide a mechanism for tracking end-of-lesson test scores.

Teachers should look for an ELAT that allows them to create their own lesson plans. In this way, teachers can individualize the content and skill-based exercises to meet the specific needs of each student.

### Translation Software

Consider selecting translation technology that provides audio pronunciation of the English word. Examples include:

- *Word Magic* (software) ([www.wordmagicsoft.com](http://www.wordmagicsoft.com))
- *Franklin Travel Translator* (hand-held device) ([www.franklin.com](http://www.franklin.com))
- *Babel Fish* (web-based at <http://babelfish.altavista.com/>)
- *Google Language Tools* ([www.google.com/language\\_tools?hl=en](http://www.google.com/language_tools?hl=en))

### Building on Students' Prior Knowledge

Teachers should look for an ELAT that provides multiple points of entry for students and reinforces what they already know. This is critical for language acquisition because one hallmark of becoming fluent in a language is the ability to use words across different functional areas (Skinner, 1957).

In addition to prior knowledge about the English language, it also is important to consider prior knowledge of the American culture. For example, in a classroom discussion about family responsibilities as they relate to preparing meals, the teacher described the steps required to make a traditional hamburger—fry a ground beef patty, put it on a bun, and add a condiment. However, in Mexican culture, hamburgers are

made with a slice of ham and a ground beef patty. Failing to include the ham slice could be confusing to a recent immigrant from Mexico, particularly one who is ELL/LD.

It also is important to ensure that assessment tools incorporate pictures, symbols, and situations that are familiar to the student (Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005). Take particular care to ensure that items used in assessments are culturally relevant.

The text box, *Functional Features of an ELAT*, outlines what an effective ELAT should contain. The

more functional features the ELAT has the better it is for helping students acquire English as a second language.

### Conclusion

When evaluating or recommending an ELAT, it is important to look at the abilities and needs of the student and then select the ELAT that meets those abilities and needs. While students with ELL/LD share many characteristics, each student also is an individual. What works for one student may not work equally as well for another.

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Functional Features of an ELAT	
Functional Features	Descriptions
<b>Request</b>	Students are able to practice requesting or asking.
<b>Tacts</b>	Students are given an opportunity to label anything that they come into contact with in their environment (e.g., an object they see, a sound they hear, an aroma they smell, a texture they feel, or a flavor they taste).
<b>Repeat</b>	Students are allowed to practice repeating words and phrases.
<b>Respond to receptive identification</b>	Students are asked, for example, to touch the red object on the computer screen.
<b>Identify items by their feature, function, and class</b>	Students are provided the opportunity to identify objects by their features (e.g., touch the big one), function (e.g., touch the one you drink from), and class (e.g., touch the one that is an animal).
<b>Gesture</b>	Students are provided with examples of gestures that are culturally specific.
<b>Read</b>	Students are given opportunities to practice reading passages and answering questions.
<b>Write</b>	Students are given opportunities to practice writing.

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