

## Chapter 3

# 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.*

### 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’

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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, & Hower, 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 teachers are very much working within a complex system of opportunity and constraint. Normalization then becomes a process of understanding the infrastructure, the support networks, and the materials, and working effectively within them"* (Levy & Stockwell, 2006, p. 234).

Other writers also cite the original article but apply the concept to related technologies 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 discussions 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 basis 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 discussion I turn to consider how these discussions can help the practising teacher,

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