It’s important to recognize that technology is not the driving force behind learning. Rather, learning goals and a sound pedagogical approach leads the educator to choose to integrate a variety of technologies. There are also many times when educators can simply suggest some technologies to students but let the students actually choose what they want to use to demonstrate what they know.

As a teacher, I find it is far more important for me to see my students’ achievements than to prescribe a particular technology that they need to use to present what they know. I have yet to meet an educator who really wants to grade 50 PowerPoint presentations, for example, so letting students choose their way of turning in a product—digital or analog—usually leads to a much better product.

In line with the idea of students having more autonomy and educators guiding learning, there are some great technologies for promoting student voice. One of my favorites is Dotstorming (dotstorming.com). This web-based bulletin board is a combination of Padlet (padlet.com) and Tricider (tricider.com).

Padlet is a bulletin board where the teacher can post a question or a topic and students can easily—with no login necessary—add an image or video and comment to respond to the posted question or topic. Tricider similarly allows the educator to collect student ideas in text format around a topic, but it adds the feature of voting.

Dotstorming combines the ability of adding a photo or video with a comment and voting. A great way to use this is after watching a video or reading a piece of literature that is connected to the theme being studied. There are many key ideas that come from the viewing or reading. Rather than handing out slips with specific topics of discussion, teachers can ask students what they see as the most important takeaway. Then students can vote on what they and their classmates post in the Dotstorm, and the teacher can used the top four ideas chosen by student vote as the discussion threads. In doing this, the discussion is focused on what students find to be the most significant ideas and the conversation is much richer.

Another great way to give students voice and make for rich conversation is engaging them with the technologies that they are already comfortable using, even if it isn’t something that the educator uses. Most secondary students have a mobile phone or access to one. The majority of them are Instagram users. By creating a common hashtag for your class, students can go out into their world and snap a photo around a theme or vocabulary list, add a sentence in the target language using the vocabulary word, and include the class hashtag. Then in class, the educator simply pulls up instagram.com on the screen and searches for the class hashtag. This will bring up the photos from all the students in the class.

Follow this with any number of speaking activities and the conversation will be much richer than using the images from an old picture file or the textbook. One word of caution: Do a search for the hashtag you want to use prior to assigning it. You want to make sure that it is something original enough that you are not grabbing photos from elsewhere that will clutter your activity.

As educators we have little, if any, free time, and so I believe in milking activities and content for all that I can. Consider using the photos that students take for Instagram in an additional activity that brings those same images into Dotstorming for yet another conversation that goes a little deeper.
BYOD K–12 Toolkit
www.k12blueprint.com/toolkits/byod

“Bring Your Own Device” (BYOD) is becoming increasingly common in schools. In its ideal state, it can help resource-strapped educators increase access to technology in their classrooms without the cost of purchasing in-house devices or software licenses for individual students. However, there can be a downside to giving students access to their personal phones and tablets during the school day. The BYOD K-12 Toolkit, sponsored by Intel® Education, is an online toolkit designed to help educators navigate their way through the decision process and logistics for bringing student-owned technology into the classroom. The site includes free access to infographics, articles, presentations, and more.

My Language Exchange
www.mylanguageexchange.com

The My Language Exchange site offers students learning a second language the opportunity to connect with native speakers in their target language for practice conversation and more. The site’s features include the opportunity to play word games, connect with pen pals, as well as plan a full immersion experience group homestay exchange with site partner Friendship Force International. Rather than simply connecting individuals, the site offers hosted online language exchange by providing voice chat rooms, an online dictionary, and lesson plans from a teacher specializing in language exchange practice.

Looking for OERs? Try thisislanguage.com

BY SHANNON CARR  French teacher, L.C. Bird High School, Chesterfield County, VA

“It was like a teacher that you could take home,” said Claire, a student about the program we had piloted. Claire was echoing many of our students who had tried thisislanguage.com, a subscription-based audio and video program. Another of my French students, Collin, said, “[It] enhanced language learning for me by providing a site where I could learn, and listen to French, and study, around the clock rather than just in the classroom.”

The program provides authentic listening activities in French, Spanish, and German. It was founded by George Van den Bergh, a former language teacher, who was frustrated by the lack of authentic listening resources available to educators. He decided to create his own by interviewing native speakers of these three languages, thus creating audio that is more natural, spontaneous, and authentic in nature than traditional scripted recordings. Van de Bergh’s interest in teacher input and feedback is a highlight of the program.

Like many other divisions, mine is moving away from the traditional textbook in favor of Open Educational Resources (OERs). This means that we, as teachers, need to regularly locate and evaluate new resources. When the school division introduced us to thisislanguage.com, through a summer training, I saw how much it could address our need for technological and listening resources, while effectively contributing to literacy in the world language classroom.

The program is particularly useful because the 4,000 videos of native speakers relate to common subjects of study. For example, some of the video topics are: “Introducing Yourself,” “Describe your daily routine,” and “Tell me a bit about your family.” The search feature allows users to search in multiple languages for specific topics and words, and each video is ranked according to difficulty. The design of the program increases literacy by helping students become more comfortable with authentic accents. Having those models of authentic speaking to accompany what we teach helps lay a solid foundation for student production of language in the classroom.

Teachers can use thisislanguage.com in various ways. I have shown the videos to students through an LCD projector while using the printable worksheets provided by the website. I was also able to assign videos to students for them to work on independently. To accompany the videos, there are vocabulary, comprehension, jigsaw, and gap-fill activities. In addition to videos and activities, the program also offers grammar activities in Spanish, German, French, and Latin. I’ve assigned one or more of these to provide a warm-up for students in class, and I have also created my own activities using videos that related to our units of study. I find that the videos create great ways to introduce and reinforce topics.

A free 14-day trial is available at thisislanguage.com. School pricing for a 12-month subscription ranges from $500 for 1 language to $860 for 3 languages; plus $4/student account.
Nearpod’s Virtual Field Trips

Nearpod Inc., a startup that makes education programming used in schools across the United States, has partnered with 360cities to launch Virtual Field Trips for K–12 classrooms. The Nearpod app, which has been available to educators for a number of years, offers interactive mobile presentations that teachers create and customize themselves. Virtual Field Trips can now be accessed in the Nearpod app through a new Field Trips feature, using virtual reality technology to allow students to experience immersive, 360-degree images.

Each Virtual Field Trip is aimed at a specific grade-level range. Field trips include The Great Wall of China; Louis XIV (which takes students on a tour of the Palace at Versailles); and Ghosts of the Coliseum. Virtual Field Trips are available at no extra cost when you have a Nearpod account.

Google’s Expeditions Pioneer Program

Another program that is bringing virtual reality into classrooms around the world is Google’s Expeditions Program. Expeditions is a virtual reality platform built for the classroom and currently offers 150 immersive virtual reality “journeys.” Using virtual reality panoramas, students can “visit” locales from the bottom of the ocean to space. Teachers use a tablet to guide up to 50 students wearing virtual reality viewers through the experience.

Participation in the program is free, but slots are limited. Schools can register their interest through the program website and selected schools are provided a complete Expeditions kit and instructions on how Expeditions works.

Learning Tools for OneNote

The Learning Tools for OneNote is an add-in to Microsoft’s popular OneNote note-taking and sharing program. Although originally designed to help students with dyslexia, the add-in features can help students at any level improve their reading and writing skills. Also, since they are integrated into the OneNote program students may already be using, accessing the enhanced features are seamless.

Learning Tools features include:

- Enhanced dictation to help with writing text
- Focus mode to hold students’ attention and improve reading speed
- Immersive reading for improved comprehension
- Thoughtful font spacing and short lines to help reading speed by addressing “visual crowding”
- Syllabification to improve word recognition

LISTEN UP!
Language-Related Podcasts

News in Slow
www.linguistica360.com
Offered in French, Italian, and Spanish, the weekly News in Slow episodes can prove useful for learners of all levels. The programs discuss the Weekly News, as well as grammar and expressions, at a slower-than-average speaking pace. Access to basic content is available on the News in Slow website. Subscriptions are required to use the mobile app and to access a number of premium features, including:

- Flashcards
- Interactive news transcripts
- Transcripts of grammar podcast
- Transcripts of idiomatic expressions podcast
- Bonus lessons
- Pronunciation practice
- Interactive exercises

Deutsche Welle
tinyurl.com/dw-podcasts
Germany’s international broadcaster Deutsche Welle has a robust website that is available in 30 languages. In addition to a wide range of current events stories on the site, there are also options for live TV, as well as a robust podcast section with several dozen podcasts covering a wide range of topics from news to traveling in Germany. Podcasts are available streaming from the site, via RSS feed subscription or from iTunes.

Audiria
www.audiria.com
Audiria offers daily podcasts in Spanish, which are searchable by topic and category. Each podcast also includes a text file so that learners can test their listening and their reading skills and double check their listening comprehension. Content is organized by difficulty level and is available at no charge. Users can choose to register with the site to track their learning.