Ask not what you can do with technology, but what technology can do for you. One thing the right tools allow me to do is offer personalized, flexible, and ubiquitous learning opportunities that extend well beyond the classroom walls, just as Spanish does. There are many ways in which technology can help students engage meaningfully and purposefully with the language. These are just a few of my favorite tech-enhanced ways to foster interpretive, presentational, and interpersonal communication.

Interpretive Communication
I cannot remember life before screencasting! Recording your screen and audio can be used for so many things that it may actually be easier to list what you cannot do with it.

One of my favorite uses of screencasting is to create “video readings”: I write the text on a slide, and I record myself reading it aloud. On a practical level, the “video readings” discourage students from relying on online translators to understand written texts (i.e., learners cannot copy-paste or use the Google Translate browser extension). On a pedagogical level, the “video readings” are a great way to deliver bimodal input (i.e., written and aural at the same time), which helps students see how words are spelled and hear their pronunciation. Unlike reading aloud in the classroom, each student is able to pause, rewatch, or change the speed as needed. By writing the text myself, I am able to tailor the input to the level of the students and make the content directly relevant to them. For example, one of the “video readings” I created was about local organizations that offer assistance for refugees and immigrants in our community.

I also use screencasting to create video lessons in Spanish incorporating authentic resources, such as class schedules, social media posts, and screenshots of websites, where students see the language used in context. These video lessons are meant to serve as the “audio-visual textbook” for the course: students take notes as they watch, thus making it a more active and autonomous learning experience. As a way to capture incidental vocabulary learning, students add weekly entries to a collaborative electronic glossary in our Moodle site, where they list words or idioms they learned that week, along with their translation, an example using that word or phrase in Spanish, and an image.

What new technology tools do you recommend—and how can teachers use them in their classrooms?

This issue’s tip comes from Florencia Henshaw, Director of Advanced Spanish at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and recipient of the 2021 ACTFL/Cengage/IALLT Postsecondary Award for Excellence in World Language Instruction Using Technology.
My go-to tool for screencasting and video editing is Camtasia (techsmith.com/video-editor.html), which has a lot of fun annotation and highlighting options, but there are many other alternatives such as Screencast-o-matic (screencast-o-matic.com), Loom (loom.com), Screencastify (screencastify.com), etc. The easiest and fastest alternative is Panopto Express (panopto.com) because it does not require installing anything or even creating an account. And if all else fails, recording on Zoom (zoom.us) is always an option.

Another tool that I use for interpretive communication is Flipgrid (info.flipgrid.com). You read that right: Flipgrid for interpretive communication! Although it is more commonly used for presentational speaking, my favorite activity with Flipgrid is asynchronous Q&A. Each student posts a video with a question for the instructor related to the topic of that week, and the instructor records videos responding to the questions in Spanish. Then, students submit a report in English summarizing what they learned, and that is why I consider it an interpretive activity: The bulk of it is about understanding what the instructor said. In their reports, students also need to list new words or expressions they learned from the responses, as well as follow-up questions to learn more about the information shared. Not only is it a great way to personalize content because students choose what to ask, but also it fosters instructor-student connections, which can be challenging in asynchronous online courses. An alternative to instructor interviews is to have students post questions for guest speakers, which can include former students, members of the local community, and other speakers of the target language.

Presentational Communication
Screencasting is also a great tool to support presentational projects. For example, students create a presentation on a Spanish-speaking activist of their choice, review language-learning apps, or pitch their idea for a new holiday. Students embed their videos in forums within the Moodle course site, where classmates write comments responding to the content. Unlike the typical instructions to simply respond to at least two classmates, students are asked to address something specific in their replies. For instance, after watching one of their classmates’ presentations describing a trip itinerary for the instructor, students need to indicate which parts of the trip their instructor will probably like and not like (e.g., “I think Prof. Henshaw is going to like skiing in the mountains, but she is not going to like swimming with sharks”); the instructor later confirms whether they were right.

I also incorporate spontaneous presentational speaking assignments on Extempore (extemporeapp.com) as a way to prepare students for synchronous interpersonal communication. Students read or listen to questions related to the current unit, and the video recording starts automatically, capturing unrehearsed responses. Extempore assignments help learners become more comfortable practicing circumlocution strategies, as well as expressing themselves orally in the target language to the best of their abilities, which over time contributes to improved proficiency.
Interpersonal Communication

My absolute favorite tech-enhanced way to foster interpersonal communication is through video conferencing platforms that connect learners with speakers of the target language around the world. I have piloted many of them, and TalkAbroad (talkabroad.com) always comes out on top. It is available for college and high school students learning Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Arabic, or Japanese. A close second is Language Amigo (languageamigo.com), currently available only for Spanish. It is slightly more affordable than TalkAbroad but does not have as many conversation partners. Even though these platforms are not free, the benefits outweigh the costs, and paying ensures a safe and reliable experience that free platforms cannot offer.

In one of the online courses that I have designed, students complete six individual conversations with two different conversation partners of their choice (three conversations with each person) and create a presentation sharing what they have learned. Through this experience, students learn about different cultural products, practices, and perspectives related to the course topics, and they gain a greater sense of how Spanish allows them to participate in a global community. Being able to have 30-minute conversations in Spanish also boosts students’ confidence, which is crucial to fostering lifelong learning. In fact, many students end up establishing connections with their conversation partners on social media, and they stay in touch long after the course has ended.

The platforms and sites listed here are by no means “must-have” tools for every language educator. Your goals and context are the most important of the many factors to consider when selecting tech tools. After all, instruction should be supported by our tools, not subservient to them.

LISTEN UP! Language-Related Podcasts

Unpacking Language Pedagogy (anchor.fm/unpackinglanguagepedagogy). A podcast and YouTube channel that features summaries and discussion of articles, terminology, and a wide variety of topics related to language teaching. From research studies to book chapters, Dr. Florencia Henshaw provides her take on the latest in language pedagogy.

The CI Diaries (podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ci-diaries/id1616895714). This podcast for language teachers is hosted by Kristy Placido and Carrie Toth. Episodes focus on building language proficiency through acquisition-driven instruction. It is also available on YouTube.