

## INTERVIEW

### An Interview with Pete Sharma

A well-known expert on educational technology in the ELT domain and a sought-after speaker at international conferences, Pete Sharma is Director of Pete Sharma Associates Ltd, a consultancy and training organization. Based near London, he has worked for many years in the field of business English and has been teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP). As an author, Pete has co-written several books on technology in language teaching, and multimedia content for CD-ROMs and DVD-ROMs. Pete has been a committee member of the Learning Technologies SIG of IATEFL. His latest book is entitled, *Best Practices for Blended Learning*.



ELT expert Pete Sharma in conversation with Sabina Pillai

SP: You have stated that you wear many hats. Can you please elucidate for our readership in India?

PS: Sure. The hats represent different roles I have enjoyed in my professional career. The first so-called hat is of course a teaching hat. I have taught business

English, mostly in Spain and Finland, but also in the Middle East and Far East. Nowadays I lecture in EAP, that is English for Academic Purposes.

My second hat as a teacher trainer has provided many challenges [such as] trying to understand which beliefs and attitudes inform individual teacher's practice.

I am now well established as an author, my third hat, and yet I never intended to be a writer. I always describe myself as an accidental author. I wanted a book on CD-ROM so badly that I ended up writing one myself! Thanks to Summertown Publishing for giving me that opportunity.

My fourth and final hat is [that of a] a reviewer. I write the "Reviews in Brief" column for the Bournemouth English Book Centre, which appears in the *EL Gazette*, the international journal for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers. I have loved receiving many hundreds of review books over the years and can now claim one of the largest individual libraries around!

One result of wearing so many hats is that you end up seeing things from many different perspectives: management, sales, teaching ....

SP: What are your current areas of interest in these fields?

PS: My current areas of interest lie within the field of TELL—technology-enhanced language learning. They are AR, augmented reality and VR, virtual reality. AR involves overlaying digital information onto the real world, usually through apps; VR is an immersive 360 [degree] experience usually involving putting on a headset. I also have a great interest in M-learning—mobile learning—and love my Smartphone and iPad. Obviously, the area of Blended Learning fascinates me, as does the area of vocabulary review.

SP: You have a particular interest in using technology in language teaching and many of the books you have co-authored are in this area. Could you please tell us more?

PS: The first time I saw a dictionary on CD-ROM, I was bitten by the technology bug. I saw how digital changed the way we can access content compared with analogue. All very surprising for a graduate in English literature. I now wish I had been more attentive in school in math and sciences!

The area I'm particularly interested in is the interface of technology and pedagogy. I have certainly enjoyed writing about technology in teaching over the years. My second teacher development book in this area, *The Internet and Business English*, co-written with long-term friend and colleague Barney Barrett, was "Highly Commended" in the Duke of Edinburgh ESU awards. It was a great day, collecting the certificate from Buckingham Palace. My third book,

*Blended Learning: Using Technology in and Beyond the Language Classroom* (Macmillan), was shortlisted for the Ben Warren International House Trust prize. Two of my recent publications are eBooks—on apps and writing digital materials.

SP: How would you define Blended Learning in ELT? Please tell us more about your new book.

PS: Blended Learning is a combination of traditional face-to-face classroom teaching and web-based learning. It means different things to different people and has multiple definitions. For example, there is a new term, “virtual blend”, so the face-to-face part of a course is not done in a traditional classroom but online. The complete term is “face-to-face online” such as a Skype™ call. It can be a little confusing!

My latest book is a comprehensive, practical handbook which explores the whole area of Blended Learning. The book provides definitions of BL, a brief history of the term and an exploration of what the research says. It looks at reasons why schools and teachers decide to blend and the challenges they face; lists the key elements for success and presents a practical framework for designing a BL course. It gives an overview of some of the many learning platforms available. The book is full of practical ideas.

We are so lucky that the book includes case studies from around the world, including Venezuela and Tunisia. The online support includes guides on building your own platform and creating digital materials. Having done this interview for *FORTELL*, I’m hoping that a teacher might offer a case from India!

SP: There is a great deal of talk about the emerging potential of using technology through mobile learning, AR (augmented reality) and VR (virtual reality). Do you think such current or imminent trends in language teaching will bring about better learning outcomes?

PS: In many ways, this is the \$64,000 question: “will they bring about ‘better learning outcomes’?”

Nicky Hockly, a well-known author in the field, asks the question: “... do digital technologies support language learning?” Hockly concludes “the jury is still out”, as the effectiveness (or lack of effectiveness) of a particular technology depends on a wide range of factors, such as how it is used. Measuring learning outcomes is notoriously difficult.

OK, that’s a research perspective. However, a common sense perspective says that if you can learn anywhere, anytime, and if you can be in control of the exposure you get to the language being learnt, and if such learning through AR and VR

motivates ... well, surely it's a better time to learn languages than in the pre-digital era. That's what I believe.

SP: Is blended learning superior to the traditional methods of teaching and learning? How would we address issues of access, infrastructure and expertise in non-elite environments?

PS: Is Blended Learning superior? Rather than "BL is superior", I prefer to rephrase the question as: "Does BL have the potential to be effective?" It's about harnessing the best elements of classroom learning (like a great teacher) with the best elements of online (like studying when and where you like and not just when the timetable demands) and working towards a math equation:  $1 + 1$  is more than 2. It could be better, but equally it could fail as it merely bolts together two modes—face-to-face plus online—without any underlying pedagogical principles.

We should always be cautious on hearing phrases like "superior" or "the best method", because there cannot really be one method which is better than all others. Language learners are different and what makes one student tick may not make another tick.

Access, infrastructure and expertise are complex issues. Access is often limited and yet some of the most creative and innovative teaching and learning is done in difficult circumstances, like in refugee camps and no-tech contexts. I know so little about the local context of most learners in India for example, despite a few visits to the sub-continent (where I was born by the way) and would love to learn more. One thing is clear—expertise. India has a high level of expertise in technology. However, I believe there may be many instances of outdated, teacher-centred approaches. There certainly were when I visited Bangladesh. Rote-chanting due to large classes for example. I cannot be prescriptive, as an outsider to the local context, but the world of educational technologies is fast-moving and it makes sense to strive to keep up with it.

SP: Would technology in the classroom displace the importance of the teacher? What would happen to the agency of the teacher? Her motivation to excel as a teacher?

PS: Teaching is not only about teaching well. It is about creating optimum conditions for language learning. Most teachers know their role is no longer the "sage on the stage", but the "guide on the side". If a teacher has the student's interests as central, they should have no real problems fearing for their importance. Students need help and guidance in navigating the internet and using the raft of tools at their disposal. Excellent teaching provides for excellent learning, and unlocking potential.

SP: Would such technology prove to be intimidating for the average teacher? How different is it from mainstream technology? Would it become burdensome for a teacher to be computer savvy to be able to operate a programme written by a third party?

PS: Many aspects of using technology may at first sight prove intimidating for a language teacher. However, with a little bit of effort, most obstacles fall away as much of technology has become increasingly user-friendly. You can usually work out how to use an iPad intuitively, out of the box. There are many crossovers between mainstream technologies and educational technology. We often feel comfortable using tech in our lives—sending emails and using smartphones. It's a small step into the classroom. Let us not forget Sugata Mitra and his “hole in the wall” project where Indian kids taught themselves how to use a computer. Many fears in the area are, if we're being honest, more to do with the fact that kids know more about (say) Snapchat than the teachers. The children might not know the term “augmented reality”, but when they superimpose a dinosaur onto a scene in Snapchat, that's what they're using! So no, it's not too onerous to learn enough to operate successfully in our profession.

SP: Would such technology based learning, which perforce is objective by nature, dehumanize learning and deprive it of all the ideology that underlines it?

PS: Yes, this is a possible danger and some might argue that this kind of “dehumanization” already happens to some extent. Learning systems gather data with a view to determine learning paths and personalize learning. Translation tools help, allowing two people who do speak each others' language to communicate, but with an absence of cultural understanding. It is up to us in teaching to be critical of developments like AI (artificial intelligence) and R.A.L.L. (robot-assisted language learning), and sceptical of pedagogically unsound developments in technology. If students do practise chatting with a bot, the overall aim is to communicate with people in real life.

SP: How would we overcome the “one size does not fit all” syndrome, when using standardized technology based lessons? Is digital technology an effective tool for students of all abilities? Does digital technology help accommodate students' personal learning styles?

PS: I agree one size does not fit all. There should not necessarily be a standardized technology lesson. I give my students a choice of which way they would like to review their new words—maybe in an analogue way with a Vocabulary notebook, (yes! I co-wrote the Vocabulary notebook) or by using one of many apps: Quizlet, Anki, Memrise ...

Technology can really help provide differentiation, with students choosing their own pathways through the material, choosing how many times to listen to a video, whether to access subtitles or not.

With the teachers help, technology can really help students' by allowing them to identify their own personal learning styles. The teacher can steer them towards good practice through strategy training.

SP: How do you perceive educational technology synergizing with ELT in the classroom? Do digital technologies support language learning? How do teachers use digital technology for assessment? Does it make it easier or more cumbersome?

PS: There are many tech tools which can be used appropriately in class, learner response systems, for example. Similarly, there are many tools best used between lessons, such as speak-to-text apps and much of technology can be used inside or outside the classroom. As Jones wrote many years ago, "it's not so much the program, more what you do with it". There's no doubt in my mind that many digital technologies support language learning. Who wants to ditch the word processor (which helps re-draft writing) and return to the age of the typewriter? Having said that, we must remain with our pedagogical feet firmly on the ground and not get carried away with the grander claims of what big data, artificial intelligence and other developments can "do for you".

Regarding assessment, digital technology has really made a huge difference. It is far easier and quicker to use a computer-based placement test. Adaptive learning has improved such tests enormously. A low-level student does not have to sit in silence until the end of the test as they did in previous, one-size fits all testing. Rather, they are accurately placed by the computer's ability to generate the next, appropriate question based on the student's previous answer. However, we must remember that language learning has a humanistic side which is hard to measure, and includes a free-speaking element which involves confidence, eye contact and para-linguistic features, not easily assessable by a machine.

SP: What would be the implications for ELT pedagogy in the classroom as there would be less teaching and more of facilitating by the teacher? Could digital technology reduce the number of teachers employed in the future?

PS: It was once said that "Any teacher who is replaced by a computer ... deserves to be!" We know that automation is here to stay; that robots will "rise" and many repetitive jobs will disappear. Teachers should get busy being creative. Technology is less unlikely to replace the creative teacher. Teachers and technology working hand-in-glove? Now yes, that's a different story. Voice-recognition bots and

Amazon's Alexa can be involved in exchanges with learners, but they do not replace the creative teacher. Even the robots helping classes in Korea are only able to deal with predictable interchanges, and not the infinite variety of responses which the human mind is capable of.

SP: How does technology deliver quality in education? Would audio-visual content enhance learning or distract the learner?

PS: Technology can enhance the teaching and learning which takes place on a good, quality course. It can provide a robust, reliable learning platform for the housing of digital material. It allows distance learning through the delivery of webinars, and tools which can be used in providing online lessons. Apps can also encourage autonomous learning. Much of publisher produced digital content may include superb graphics and video and crystal clear audio recordings, but evaluation includes not only the materials themselves but how they are used. For example, poorly shot amateur footage on YouTube taken of an exciting incident can lead to great fluency practice.

Whether or not audio-visual material is a distraction is an interesting issue. Designers should ensure that in publisher produced material, there are few distractions for the learner following their path within digital material. Learners now need to develop new digital literacies and have to learn how to deal with hyperlinks on a web-page, and how to manage the multi-modalities on offer when navigating digital materials.

SP: What are the main challenges to developing digital content for ELT?

PS: There are many challenges for developing digital content. When you write an interactive exercise for a publisher, you envisage an idealized situation, such as a typical intermediate group. Unfortunately, such a group doesn't exist. Hence the materials may not be deemed valid by local teachers, who may prefer to develop materials themselves suited to their local context, whether that is in Riyadh, Rio, Shanghai or Bangalore.

Much of the development of digital content nowadays involves the use of algorithms to generate responses from the software, or ASR (automated speech recognition), both of which are usually viewed negatively by sentient teachers who may see their role as being usurped by an inferior pedagogue—the software as the tutor. Digital developers are good at design, but may never have taught a language lesson and one of the main challenges of creating digital content is creating pedagogically valid material.

SP: Are there any downsides to the digital wave in ELT? If so, how do we tackle

them?

PS: There are many downsides. One is cyber-bullying. Another is plagiarism. Health issues are connected with using a VR headset, currently due to latency or delay as the software is running too slowly. The above-mentioned trend in AI may generate many benefits, but currently it suffers from being at an experimental phase and viewed (rightly) with suspicion by many language teachers. The rise of fake news is another unwelcome trend.

There are many things we can do. One is to encourage our students to adhere to good online etiquette, to help them understand the deeper concept of plagiarism, which can be difficult in certain cultures, and to develop critical thinking skills. Clearly, the role of the teacher has changed from just being a language teacher, to steering our young learners towards global citizenship and developing their digital literacies so they can fully participate in this new, exciting but daunting technological world.

SP: Thank you, Pete! I am sure readers of *FORTELL* will have plenty to reflect on from your insightful answers. We look forward to seeing you in India one of these days.

*Sabina Pillai, a former civil servant, teaches at Shaheed Bhagat Singh (E) College, Delhi University. She was awarded the IATEFL Cambridge Teacher Training Scholarship in 2014. Her published books include, 'Spoken English for my World' (Oxford University Press), 'English for Successful Communication' (Oxford University Press) and 'Soft Skills and Employability Skills' (Cambridge University Press).*

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