

This is the accepted version of the publication Kohnke, L., & Moorhouse, B. L. (2022). 'There's an App for That!' Writing Technology Reviews for Academic Journals. *RELC Journal*, 53(1), 261–265. Copyright © 2020 (The Author(s)). DOI:10.1177/0033688220945419.

## **'There's an app for that!' Writing Technology Reviews for Academic Journals**

### **Abstract**

Technology reviews are becoming an increasingly common genre within English language teaching and learning journals. This is due to the proliferation of technologies and their affordance in language learning. Although journals provide editorial guidelines for how to write technology reviews, they can be quite general. This short article offers some practical considerations and ideas, and includes published technology review as an example in the appendix showing the rhetorical moves for writing technology reviews in the field of English language teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** Writing a technology review, technology review genre, format of technology review, critical technology review, academic technology review

### **Introduction**

Technology reviews, unlike book reviews, are a relatively new genre. They have become more common in academic journals due to the exponential increase in educational technology and their utility in the classroom. A technology review is a description and analysis of a technology that has application for teaching and learning. A review should focus on how the technology enhances teaching and learning and not only describe its technical affordance or functionality. Although journals provide editorial guidelines for how to write reviews, they can be quite general (e.g., word count, brief article scope) and there are many possible technology review formats, leaving the potential writer unsure what to include and how to structure the review. This short article provides some practical considerations and ideas for writing technology reviews in the field of English language teaching and learning.

### **What can be reviewed?**

Technology reviews cover a large and growing amount of resources and media. These can include apps, websites, digital media, digital online resources, downloadable software, and other technology tools that can be leveraged for learning. (See Table 1 for example technologies and reviews.)

For English language teaching and learning journals, the technology reviewed should have the potential to enhance language teaching and learning. While some technologies are specifically designed for language learning, such as Duolingo (see Teske's (2017) review), many other technologies have multiple features and utilities. If a technology is not specifically designed for language classrooms, the review must focus on how the technology can be leveraged for English language education, such as Moorhouse and Kohnke's (2020) review of Mentimeter.

| Type of technology       | Specific technology                         | Example review   |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| Apps                     | Student Response System                     | GoSoapBox (Kohnke, 2019)   |
| Apps                     | Learning Management System                  | Seesaw (Moorhouse, 2019)   |
| Digital media            | National Public Radio                       | National Public Radio (Mehdizadeh, 2020)                             |
| Digital online resources | Publisher's digital supplementary resources | Macmillan Education Everywhere Software Programme (MEE) (Fung, 2017) |
| Website                  | Vocabulary learning site                    | Vocabulary.com (Nishioka, 2020)                                      |
| Website                  | Video pronunciation website                 | Youghlish (Miller, 2019)   |

**Table 1.** Examples of published technology reviews.

### Why should you write a technology review?

Writing a technology review is a common way an academic can share knowledge and new technological innovations with the wider community. As teachers and learners increasingly become dependent on technology to manage and facilitate learning, such reviews are an excellent way practitioners and scholars can contribute to the field. Reviews provide an avenue to disseminate in-depth insights into a specific technology. If you are a novice writer, a review can help you become familiar with academic writing and the peer-review process. Writing a review can be a gateway to publishing full-length articles in the future.

### Which journals publish technology reviews?

As the use of tech is a growing area of interest, an increasing number of journals are publishing technology reviews (also known as Media reviews), including *TESOL Journal*, *TESL-EJ*, *CALICO*, and the current publication, the *RELC Journal*. For novices, you might want to write reviews for established non-referred journals and magazines, such as *English Teaching Professional*, *Modern English Teacher*, and *Humanizing Language Teaching*. Once you have set your eyes on a specific journal, familiarise yourself with it by reading a couple of recent technology reviews within it and research the journal requirements. These requirements can be found on the “Manuscript Submission Guidelines” pages of the journal’s website. Make sure that your technology review matches the requirements.

### What should you include in a technology review?

In this section, we suggest what to include in your technology review and how you might organise it. We provide examples of the wording to help you get the right balance of evaluation and critique.

#### *Section 1: Introduction*

This section should describe the problem or issue in your context of English language education and how the technology addresses it. Perhaps the technology improves engagement, bolsters knowledge retention, encourages individual learning, facilitates peer collaboration, or provides benefits for teachers. This section is the foundation for the body of the article, so it must clearly state the main purposes and uses of the technology and indicate its users (e.g., primary, secondary, or tertiary students/teachers). It is a good practice to end the introduction section with a summary of the article content. Here are some example phrases:

- *[The technology] allows teachers and learners to capitalise on and extend the benefits of ...*
- *Often in the language classroom, teachers can have difficulty ..., [the technology] can help address this difficulty by ...*
- *Effective language learning requires .... To facilitate ..., [the technology] ...*
- *The technology review provides...*

### *Section 2: Utilising the technology for language teaching*

In this section, you should expand on the pedagogical soundness and appropriateness of the technology in your teaching context. This evaluation can be achieved by discussing if the technology is interactive, collaborative, facilitative or instructional. Highlight why this technology supports second language acquisition (e.g., writing, reading, listening, speaking) and if it can be tailored to learner differences and strategies. While this section discusses the technical affordances, it must focus on how the technology enhances language learning and teaching, and it must have a theoretical base from TESOL/applied linguistics. You could consider utilising the following example phrases:

- *... particularly useful for learners to notice a mismatch between their language production and the target form ...*
- *Teachers can highlight cohesive devices in an essay, explain grammatical concepts ...*

It is helpful to readers if you include images (screenshots) that guide their attention with descriptive language regarding key features. Remember to capture high-quality images with the highest screen resolution possible.

### *Section 3: Challenges in using the technology for language teaching*

A technology review should entail a critique and overview of the technology. Consider if teachers and students need any technical skills and outline any features that are more challenging to use (e.g., group discussions, recordings, speech recognition) and any potential security issues when using the technology. You could consider using the following example comments:

- *Although [the technology] has clear potential in the language classroom, it does present challenges. These include ...*
- *[The technology] has several limitations. For example, ...*
- *In addition, potential security issues exist, such as ...*

### *Section 4: Conclusion*

Finally, summarise why the technology is important and outline the key benefits for language teaching and learning. Highlight the platform compatibility (PC/Mac, mobile), price (single user, class licence) and where readers can find more information about the product and its features. The following are some suggested phrases:

- *This review has shown the potential [the technology] has for language learning. The key benefits include ...*
- *[The technology] is available on .... There are several versions available. The free version ...*

- *For more information on [the technology] and its features, visit ...*

There is no perfect structure for a technology review, and the sections suggested above are what we have found helpful in writing our technology reviews. Appendix 1 shows an example of a review published in *RELC Journal* (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020) with comments in the margin explaining what the reviewers are writing in each part of the review. This review and comments should not be considered a formula or prescription but an illustration of one way to write a technology review.

### **A final note from the authors**

It can be challenging to get full-length research articles published in prestigious journals. For novice writers, technology reviews can be a way to contribute to the field while also gaining invaluable experiences with the journal review process. Both authors have found their academic writing performance develop through writing technology reviews, and writing them becomes easier with experience. Most of all, remember to familiarise yourself with the journal guidelines and read a couple of published technology reviews before you begin writing. That way, you will ensure your submission includes the right content, style and tone the target journal desires. I hope you find writing technology reviews as rewarding as we have!

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## Appendix I. Analysis of Tech Review from Kohnke and Moorhouse (2020)

| Review   | Analysis  |
|--|---|
| <p><b><u>Introduction</u></b></p> <p>Events caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have required second language (L2) educators to move away from face-to-face (F2F) lessons and adopt online teaching. Educators have utilised a range of online synchronous meeting tools (SMTs) to facilitate student learning. One of the popular, immersive and easy-to-use SMTs these days is Zoom. It includes several features, such as annotation tools, polls, breakout rooms and video and screen sharing. These functions facilitate communicative language learning through the use of authentic language instruction in interactive synchronous classes.</p> <p>Today's language learners are used to the incorporation of technology into the learning experience and expect opportunities to engage and interact (Kessler, 2018). Studies have established that students can gain from increased motivation, linguistic output, participation and interaction using synchronous online teaching (Helm, 2015). However, teachers may not be fully prepared to teach online in real-time as it requires new digital competencies (Starkey, 2020). One such competency is utilising and maximising SMTs, such as Zoom. This tech review explores some of the challenges English language educators experience with synchronous online teaching and suggests ways Zoom can help address them.</p> <p><b><u>Utilising Zoom for Online Synchronous Language Teaching</u></b></p> <p>In F2F lessons, educators often observe paralinguistic cues to gauge students' interest, understanding and engagement. These cues also aid student communication and comprehension. Zoom allows students to indicate through non-verbal icons when they have a question, show agreement or indicate if they want the teacher to speed up, slow down or take a break (see Figure 1). These icons can provide useful information regarding students' attentiveness, excitement, agreement or confusion with the language content being presented. Nonverbal functions also allow the teacher to provide corrective feedback (Wang and Loewen, 2016). If the students have a query beyond those represented by 'icons', they can use the written chat function to ask a question privately or to the whole class. This can be particularly useful for learners who are afraid to show their confusion to the whole class or are nervous about their oral English. These modes of</p> | <p>State reason for the review.</p> <p>Introduce the technology and provide a broad overview of the features in relation to language learning.</p> <p>Provide reasons to use the technology from literature and/or context.</p> <p>Brief summary of the article content.</p> <p>Provide a reason to use the technology.</p> <p>Introduce a related key feature.</p> <p>Illustrate the feature in relation to language learning.</p> |

participation can aid students in developing their communicative competencies (Swain, 1985), as they need to select the most appropriate method to get their message across to the teacher and class. Depending on classroom discipline, ‘student-to-student’ and ‘send to all’ chats can be disabled while still maintaining a non-verbal private link between students and the teacher.

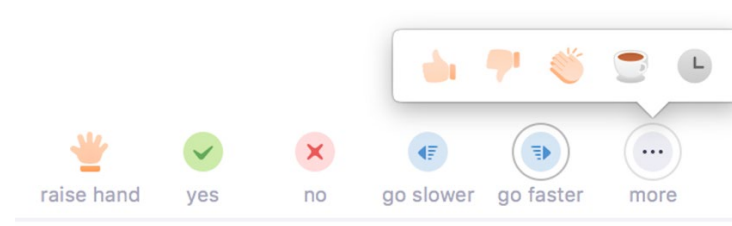


Figure 1: Non-verbal feedback icons

Most SMTs allow for lecture-style sessions where the teacher provides monologues with little student interaction. This is mainly due to synchronous group work being harder to integrate and monitor on most platforms. Through using Zoom’s ‘breakout room’ function, teachers can create opportunities for students to use language productively, produce meaning-focussed output and engage in student-to-student interaction. Meaning-focussed output and student-to-student interaction are crucial to successful language learning (Nation, 2007). For example, students can be placed in small groups or pairs within a session, to conduct spoken language practices, discussions and role-plays. In addition, when combined with other tools such as Google Forms and Google Docs, students can co-construct texts and complete language exercises in groups. This negotiation of meaning is ‘an important factor for successful L2 acquisition’ (Ellis, 1990: 16), as students are pushed to process language output (Swain, 1985). Teachers can assign students different roles to ensure they remain focussed, with someone nominated to share their product with the whole class. If students want additional time to complete group tasks, this can be indicated using the clock icon. Teachers can broadcast messages to the rooms, enter the rooms to monitor tasks and bring students back into the main meeting.

Teachers may struggle to keep learners engaged during a longer live online session. To address this, Zoom allows the teacher to integrate polls and surveys that can be used to engage learners and gather answers, perceptions and ideas from the class (Figure 2). These tools can be used for formative assessment - serving as entry and exit tickets to gauge what students already know about

Provide additional benefits of the feature and link to literature.

Figure/Screenshot to visualize the feature.

Introduce and give example of an additional feature.

Explain the benefits of the feature with links to literature.

Illustrate how the feature can be used with students.

Identify a possible challenge.  
Give an example of how to address the challenge.



the content, or for the teacher to check students' understanding before moving on. In addition, they can be useful for conducting language-focused exercises with right or wrong answers, as the answer can be directly displayed, giving feedback to students and teachers on their understanding, and can be a catalyst for elaboration on linguistic features (Schmidt, 1990).

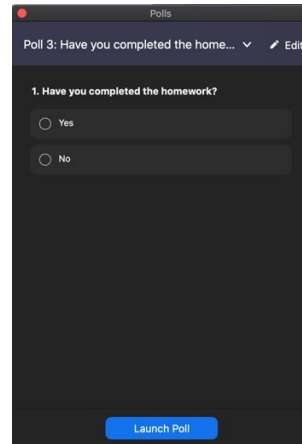


Figure 2: Poll Function

Zoom allows teachers and students to share browser screens synchronously (Figure 3), so teachers can incorporate student response systems, such as Mentimeter and GoSoapBox, to leverage the interactive environment and facilitate active learning (Moorhouse and Kohnke, 2020; Kohnke, 2019). For example, teachers could elicit vocabulary using a word cloud. Teachers can also play videos and audio files for meaning-focussed input and receptive listening practice activities.

Give a further example with links to literature.

Figure/Screenshot to visualize the feature.

Discuss compatibility with other technologies.

Provide suggestions for language skills.



Figure/Screenshot to visualize the feature.

To substitute a physical classroom whiteboard, Zoom includes a number of annotation tools through its ‘screen share’ and ‘whiteboard’ function (e.g. text box, freeform draw/pen, stamps, shapes and highlighter; see Figure 4) that teachers can use to support student understanding. These are particularly helpful for learners to notice the mismatch between their language production and the target form (Schmidt, 1990; Swain, 1995). For example, the teacher can highlight cohesive devices in an essay, explain a grammatical concept or ask students to use the stamp feature to indicate parts of speech or underline stress in two-syllable words. These tools can be used in a whole-class setting and ‘breakout rooms’ by both students and teachers, promote participation, language production and reduce anxiety.

Continue to introduce features and their utility for language teaching and learning with links to literature.

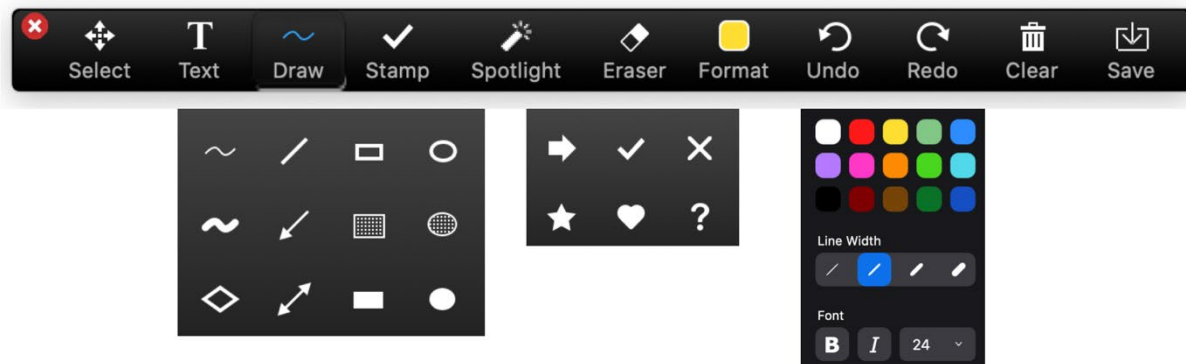


Figure 4: Annotation tools

The built-in recording and transcription functions allow teachers to record the entire or short sections of a session, e.g., grammar presentations, assessment reviews or homework instructions for students who miss a class or want to review the lesson later. Students can be encouraged to take greater ownership of their language learning by reviewing the audio, video or chat recordings after the session.

### **Challenges in using Zoom**

Both authors have used Zoom for several months due to the cancellation of F2F classes. While it has pedagogical benefits for language classrooms and teacher education, we have found, as with other SMTs, that it has limitations when contrasted to F2F lessons. For example, group discussions tend to take longer and are more challenging to monitor; students tend to be less willing to self-nominate themselves to respond to questions or provide opinions due to the lack of paralinguistic cues; with larger classes, it can be hard to observe learners' engagement (Moorhouse, 2020); and students can get 'screen fatigue', making shorter sessions optimal. In addition, potential security issues exist, such as 'zoombombing', when someone intentionally hacks into a live session. To maximise security, use per-meeting ID, require a password, enable the 'waiting room' and disable options for participants to join before the host. Features to manage behaviour include muting all participants' mics, disabling the 'share screen' function for participants and removing participants.

Figure/Screenshot to visualize the feature.

Continue to introduce features and their utility for language teaching and learning with links to literature.

State how long you have used the technology.

Mention a possible pedagogical challenge / weakness.

Mention a possible security challenge/ weakness.

Explain how to combat the challenge / weakness.

## **Conclusion**

When F2F teaching is not possible due to health emergencies or geographical distances between teachers and students, Zoom has enormous potential for second language acquisition, providing educators with a useful tool for formatively assessing learning, facilitating small group interactions, engaging learners and extending learning beyond the ‘traditional’ classroom. It can take time to become accustomed to all of the features of Zoom, especially ‘share screen’, so it is worth trialling it with colleagues before the first session with a class. However, we have found that students quickly adapt to Zoom, and by utilising its multiple features, online delivery sessions can become interactive and dialogic.

There are several versions available. The free version allows for 40-minute meetings and has limited features. There are several paid subscription versions which include features, such as, unlimited meeting length, hosting larger numbers of participants, cloud storage and assigning additional hosts. For more information on Zoom and its features, see <https://zoom.us/>.

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Summarise the main features of the technology and benefits for language teaching and/or learning

Provide details of the subscription options and state where readers can find additional information about the technology.

End with references. Refer to the selected journal’s referencing style.

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