In this episode Jayme is joined by Dr. Kathy Harris. Dr. Harris teaches teacher education courses in the department of applied linguistics at Portland State University and as a member of the literacy, language and technology research group. Dr. Harris conducts trainings and creates professional development materials for the adult ESL teachers and national projects including ELLU and ESL pro. And also teaches adult ESL including digital literacy and ESL to adult learners with limited or interrupted formal education.

Let's join them now.

Jayme

Kathy, I’m so happy to welcome you to Oxford adult ESL conversations and I’m really looking forward to our time talking about digital literacy.

Kathy

Thanks Jayme. I’m really glad to be here. How about if we just start off with the idea that integrating technology and language instruction is not new. Would you agree with that?

Jayme

Yeah, I would agree with that. And I looked it up just to see when computer assisted language learning started and I see that it is officially identified as starting in 1984, which is kind of interesting. Now we won’t go there but what really interests me is that in the last five years or so, the focus has really shifted from teacher using technology to learners using technology.

Kathy

You know what I think is that in the early days in the 80s, we were really thinking about how we can make classrooms more engaging. And everybody was excited about technology and how technology would help us be less teacher-fronted. We could use polling technology to have student voices be more prominent and use technology in that way to make classrooms more engaging. But I think lately, I think you’re right. I think lately what’s happening is that teacher ESL teachers and English language teachers, we really pay attention to what our students need to be able to do in the world. And that’s where the switch is happening I think is because we are seeing wow, our students need to be able to do all these things in the world that involve technology. So, we had better start doing things in the classroom that helped them do those things whether that is continuing with their education, or communicating with their employer, or participating in their community action, or just be involved in their community, or communicating with your children’s school, all of these things are things our students need to do. And I think that’s really where the shift is happening because teacher’s English language teachers are very attuned to what their students need to be able to do. And I think that’s the shift that you’re seeing and I think you’re right, that is a shift.

Jayme

When we look at what those things are that learners need to be able to do, they fall someone into three areas I think. And I’m of course I’m quoting your work but it seems to me that it falls into digital skills and digital literacy which includes digital skills and the problem-solving in technology rich environments. Can you talk a little bit about those areas and maybe you know is there a Venn diagram that those work in with English language acquisition?

Kathy

I think I frame that a little differently. I’m not sure I see it in a Venn diagram so much as in circles within circles. And let me see if I can explain it a little bit. Digital literacy includes foundational skills like how I use a touchscreen, how do I open a file, how do I attach something to an email etc. But it also is how do we use technology to create and communicate information, how do we find and evaluate information in a variety of sort online sources and how do we solve problems in in digital environments. If you think about that English language both oral and written are in every aspect of it. And the ability to use the tools to access the internet and to use the tools whatever kind of tool it is whether it’s a computer, whether it’s a tablet, whether it’s a smartphone or whatever it is the new devices are going to be, we have to do all of those things to do all of the other things. So, I guess I would say I would see circles within circles within circles. They are all mixed together.
Jayme

So, highly integrated are you saying that in other words?

Kathy

Highly integrated.

Jayme

What I think if I were processing it so I'm hearing you say that the reading and the writing is very integral to being able to access the information.

Kathy

I think what we're doing right now is a great example. How increasingly information is being transmitted and received both directions through oral modalities, is one of the things that technology allows for. So, people get a lot of information through things like podcasts these days. That so listening comprehension and skills involving listening comprehension are really important. But also, one of the things in digital literacy we pay attention to is how can we help our students have their voice. And they can record podcasts, they can record audio files that they attach to their blogs online, they can have a voice in their communities through technology. So, it's listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar vocabulary and all the language skills that we work on there's English language teachers.

Jayme

And I know that that's connected to the college career readiness standards with the standard on integrating media and technology. And I know you've done a lot of work with digital stories which would certainly cover that as well.

Kathy

Well I definitely see digital literacies are woven throughout the career and college readiness standards and the ELP standards. And I was thinking a little bit about that. Both in reading and listening there is the need to find and evaluate information in digital literacy. That's an aspect of digital literacy, right? And then throughout those standards. So, determining meeting, determining author's point of view and purpose that aligns exactly with what digital literacy is in terms of finding and evaluate information. And I think the focus in the standards on diverse media and formats. As an English language teacher, I think about that from a comprehension point of view. So, we use just like you and I were just saying how we use digital technologies in listen and our language skills and listening and reading, and then but we're also using them for producing in speaking and writing in ways that focus on diverse media and formats. But I would add that was something we don’t often talk about but what is increasingly part of what we do, it’s collaborating on using digital tools. Collaboration both in written and oral form is part of everyday life and is going to be increasingly a part of everyday life. That's in the standards and that’s also part of digital literacy using technology both oral and written formats for collaborating which I think is fascinating. As we go into the future that's one of the things as language educators we really need to think about carefully. I think that it's an exciting aspect of it. It really connects to the autonomy as well because the learners are collaborating and one of your pieces you have a suggestion that learners might collaborate in the classroom. I’ve been promoting using Google Drive as a way for learners to collaborate on writing. And those are absolutely career and college-ready skills. They’re both for looking at going on in education as well as career skills, those are absolutely required. Writing is done collaboratively. It is rarely an individual task. And things like Google Docs and are part of how that works in the environment outside of our classrooms. So, I think it’s really important we help students learn how to do that and isn’t it a wonderful opportunity to have that time to hit two different important skill areas. For me that’s what I find so exciting is that the students I think are highly motivated to learn a digital skill. And then we layer on the digital literacy that goes along with that skill but they’re still really also learning very important English language skills as well obviously with you know good writing techniques using the tools too. That's one of the things that I think is so terrific is teaching them how to access what they need to write more effectively and more accurately.

Jayme

Right, absolutely. So, we get two first, three first, four first.

Kathy

Yes, that's technology people find it engaging. I would say people find it also frightening but that's part of the deal. We get the in engaging and then we work together to get over the frightening part if that could be true in so many other areas of our lives.
Jayme

You know the other thing that I wanted to check in with you about is the research because research is a very big part of both of the college career readiness standards and the English language proficiency standards. What would be the role I’m we help learners with research both from a digital skill on a digital literacy standpoint?

Kathy

Where I approach the thinking about that is really what the CCR. CCR standards say is students need the ability to gather relevant information from multiple sources and address the credibility of the information, right? Well, digital literacy, there’s an aspect of digital literacy called finding and evaluate information. These are basically the same thing, right, finding an event information. So, one of the things that I encourage teachers to do and this is in some of the materials the ESL pro materials that that we worked. On one of the ways I encourage people to start integrating digital literacy into their ESL instruction English language instruction is I encourage them to pick one kind of task and to do that tasks in every unit. So, it becomes familiar. So, you can leverage routine students know what to expect. The teachers know what to expect to get better at it over time. And one of those activities that people can do that. I think is really helpful it is integrating a search activity. And so, the idea that you start really small but then each of the topics that you do or each of the lessons or units that a teacher has, there is a small search activity embedded as part of that that uses the same language you’re already doing in the lesson or the same information that you’re already doing in the lesson the same grammar points, the same vocabulary. But now you’re saying okay, we’ll use that same information to do a search .and then you do a search and then the next time and another topic, or another unit you’re doing a different search that maybe has an additional element. And so, in the ESL pro online course there’s a whole course on how you teach searching an online search.

Jayme

That’s so useful.

Kathy

Right.so that is it will put the book put the link to the ESL pro materials somewhere near the podcast. So that that listeners can pick that. I think it’s really helpful to do it throughout and every unit has a search and then it gets stronger and better and people get better and better at it. They get over the hump of the frightening stuff and then they get to get to the information stuff which is what does this information say, how do I evaluate its credibility, how do I know what information I can use. So that’s I think something that happens well over time that both teachers and students get better at with practice starting small baby steps.

Jayme

That’s such a good lesson for us anytime we’re trying to incorporate something new.

Kathy

Yeah, baby steps is great.

Jayme

So, I’d like to check in with you because you’ve given us the information about the searching. But let’s say that I am one of the frightened few and I’m just starting to integrate digital skills and digital literacy, is there something that I can do before the search that will prepare me and my learners for this type of focus in my lessons?

Kathy

Speaking to you as someone just starting off on integrating digital literacy into your classes, I would say not to start with searches. Take smaller step, take something that you yourself can feel comfortable with and where I encourage people to start is either with a Google form or a presentation. So, these are things that are language rich because that leverages what we already know right as teachers we know how to teach language. I think Patsy talked about it well in her podcast with you. That’s our superpower. We know how to scaffold language learning. To take something like a Google Form or making a presentation as the digital skill to integrate and pick something like that that a teacher that you could know really well how to do. And the idea is the same every lesson or every unit you would make a Google Form which is very easy you can learn to do it in five minutes . Make a Google Form that your students fill out that uses the same language that you’re already using in your lesson. And you do a form for every lesson or every unit. The teacher gets better at it, the students get better at it, they can become more complex. At the end the students might even learn how to make Google Forms because it’s a very useful digital skill. And along with that comes overcoming the fear of how I use this device, how do I get online because it starts very small.
So that’s what I advocate for new teacher, teachers new to integrating digital literacy is to take something like that. What I’ve done with literacy level learners is work with presentations wherein every unit my students do a vocabulary presentation. Now the literacy learners what they do is they just make a three-slide presentation where they have the word, they have their L1 or first language translation and then they have an image. And they get better and better at making presentations because they’re doing it multiple times. It works really well and students feel really good about being able to show their presentation to the class.

**Jayme**

And you could certainly expand on that right so that higher-level learners would just add more slides for the different meanings, different ways of knowing.

**Kathy**

Oh absolutely. So, for higher-level students they could add all the different kinds of things that we would have them do and say flashcard activities. So, they could have the word they could have the first language translation, they might have a sentence that uses it, they might have the parts of speech, they could also put a classic dictionary definition. So, all the different things that we want them to do. Absolutely this would work really well in a multi-level class, students could make the presentation at their level.

**Jayme**

What about collaboration?

**Kathy**

So, I think this could be beautiful to sort of infuse collaboration into this. I would start first with students collaborating on a presentation. So, a higher-level student and a lower level student would work on it together because in the zone of proximal development if we’re learning in a Vygotsky way student can do together in a collaborative group thing that more than they can do on their own. So, if they first work on a presentation together with a lower-level student is picking the image and putting the image in and the higher-level student is figuring out the part of speech and an example sentence then having done that. They both will be more capable of going off and doing it on their own. So, I think that would be a great way to use collaboration in a multi-level class having both technology and having the ability to work together. So, collaboration and technology but they’re collaborating digitally because they’re both working on the same.

**Jayme**

Oh, I think that’s so exciting. I’m telling you I’m going to go out and find class.

**Kathy**

And recently I did something called a paper slide show. That’s where this it’s not PowerPoint but it’s students making their slides on paper but then recording them on their phone. So that’s another way if you don’t have access to PowerPoint in your classroom, you can do something similar with only a few cellphones in the class.

**Jayme**

That’s awesome. I really have enjoyed doing that that that’s something that Roxanna Hurtado from Miami Dade taught me to do. Shifting gears just a little bit the PAC report really calls out the need for problem-solving and technology rich environments. And I know that that’s really at the heart of why we’re doing this because as you mentioned those technology rich environments aren’t just in the workplace in academic settings. But they’re in the community they’re in parenting they’re there in every aspect of our lives at this point. But I get really concerned about the access our learners have to the technology that would help them address those skills in technology rich environments. And what if they don’t have access and what solutions have you seen programs and instructors develop to work around that?

**Kathy**

There’s a couple of different things is what the research is showing us, this comes from the Pew, Charitable Trusts is that cellphone ownership is very, very high. The problem is people who only have access to the Internet through cell phones, have a super disadvantage in all the things that we’re talking about in digital literacy acquisition. But nevertheless, chances are good that the students have a smartphone access. So what programs need to do is to help students find access to robust Wi-Fi whether that be at the coffee shops, at the library which is the library is a great source for robust Wi-Fi. And in our programs, we need robust wireless in our programs. I talk about when we think about access which is what you’re talking about. And that is that we want to be able to use in our classes.
Things that don’t depend on a particular type of device. So, to use things that are device independent. So, things that like Google Forms or presentations that can be done on a phone, a tablet or a computer and that way we remove the need to have access to a particular device and students can do it wherever they need. The other thing is more advocacy and that is the sense that we can help our students find inexpensive wireless, or inexpensive broadband access. The government put together a website called everyone.on.org where people can find inexpensive broadband access in their can. And that really is what we need. Everybody needs to have broadband access in their home, in the places of that they live. And that’s one way to do it. An example is $10 a month for 10 gigs because we want to get past this idea that people have cell phone only access to the Internet. Which means that they have interrupted service, they often go over their data caps in which it’s very expensive that becomes very expensive and they lose service because of cost. An advocacy piece to all of this is telling our learners about ways to get inexpensive broadband access. So that their kids can do their homework on the Internet and not on their telephone using cell phone service.

Jayme
And what a great way to use complex text reading the everyone up websites.

Kathy
That’s right.

Jayme
They’re on a complex text. I mean being able to go through the small print on those things is definitely a complex text. And really just understanding their data plans. I mean there’s so much in this process that is so rich for the learners and relevant I guess again you know the point of relevance and Adult Learning it can’t be.

Kathy
This is an example as you’re saying not just complex text but authentic materials, right? These are more fit example the authentic materials that are also complex text. That are part of their relevant and they’re authentic for our students, and that’s what digital literacy is about. It’s about what is it our students need to be able to do to do the things they need and want to do because today in today’s world many of those things if not most of those things must occur in a digital environment. Isn’t that true and what a strong sense of disability we have when everything shuts down. When my internet isn’t on I feel like I’ve lost connection with my work life, with my community life. It’s very pervasive.

Jayme
It’s so true.

Kathy
Yeah. We have touched on your idea for the vocabulary for beginning literacy and beginning ESL. But I’m wondering in addition to that approach I’ve certainly have felt a little pushback when I’ve gone into the beginning level classes or classes where learners have very limited literacy skills in their first language. And teachers are feeling maybe a little loath to approach digital literacy because they feel that they should be focusing on print literacy first.

Jayme
Do you have any strong feelings about that? What kind of hoped you have?

Kathy
Thank you for asking that question because working with literacy learners with limited or interrupted formal education is one of the things that I like to do the most. And I think digital literacy and technology in general has the most to offer. I would say first of all that technology integration and digital literacy integration is great for learners of limited literacy. You just think about how much the Internet is based on image, how many of the devices that we use have a touchscreen. It’s almost liberating to literacy learners because they don’t have to go through the medium of text and print to get to meaning, so first of all what I tell teachers I work with on this topic is don’t wait to bring digital literacy and technology into the classroom. Absolutely don’t wait. It’s a bridge for students and it will help them while they are learning with English literacy. The second thing that I think is really a key and this is key to lots of things in low-level English as a second language and that is routine. If you establish a classroom routine, for example stations. And one of the stations is using technology whether that be phones or laptops or whatever it is or devices in the classroom and students know that part of the stations that they will work through is using that technology.
Jayme
So, I would say that for lower level literacy learners go immediately to technology.

Kathy
Oh, what a wonderful statement.

Jayme
I really love to end the conversation because I’m really enjoying it but I think we have to close. I would like for you to if you don’t mind, if there’s one thing that you could have listeners take away from our conversation what would that be?

Kathy
The one thing that I would say I think has a take a listener takes away is that technology is always changing. Its frequent, right that you log on to something and the buttons are on different places. So, the what that means is that we are all learners with technology and we always will be because it’s a changing landscape all the time. And what that means for us as language teachers is that we have the freedom to step off the stage and not be the sage on the stage but the guide on the side. We don’t have to be the one who knows in fact we can’t be the one who knows when it comes to technology. It enables us, it pushes us, it frees us to be collaborative learners will along with our students .and I think that’s powerful. I think having confidence that we don’t be that we aren’t the ones who know all the time in fact we can’t be we won’t be. The different students in our classes are going to know different things and the teacher we will know different things that collaboratively we can figure the technology out. So, we can’t be the one who knows. So that is I think the best thing I could tell someone is we’re all learners with technology and embrace that.

Jayme
I certainly do. Recently I did a workshop and I had a digital tool planned. I was going to use clickers which is really not about teaching students anything they hold up a card and my cell phone reads it but what it does allow us to do is see the data based on what the card says. So, it’s a surveying tool basically that the data populates on the screen behind us and we can have a lot of conversations .and it failed and failed miserably the it just wasn’t working. So, I had a plan B. I had my answer cards you know regular colorful little ABCD answer cards that they could use so that we could see that and it didn’t go on the screen and it wasn’t fancyBut it worked. What do you think about always having a plan B or a low-tech no-tech plan?

Kathy
Well you know I think it’s a good idea. Because one of the things about technology that I would agree with you absolutely is it fails about half the time. This idea that we’re all learners is that teachers and teachers can embrace that. This idea that it’s not going to always go the way you expect it to go and what you do about that models what your students are going to do about that. So, you muddle through okay, is it going to work you could muddle through and kind of model the different things that you might do to solve the problem. Then if it’s not solvable then okay how can we accomplish the same goal using non-technology means. And then you bring in Plan B. So that’s one of the things that teachers talk about is why they don’t want to use technology is because it does fail so much of the time. I agree with you Jayme. You have to have a plan B, a way to accomplish your objectives using non-technology means. But using the failure of technology as a way to model what you do when technology fails because it does so much of it.

Jayme
Well that’s nice very metacognitive.

Kathy
Yeah very because that’s part of digital literacy is doing with the fact that it doesn’t always work.
Jayme
And as we’ve been talking has anything else occurred to you or giving you an aha moment or one more thing you want to say before we say bye.

Kathy
Well the only thing I guess I’d say is how much I enjoy talking with you and what that reminds me of is how important it is for teachers to talk to each other about the challenges that they face and the joys that they experience as language teachers. Teachers talking to each other on a regular basis is one of the things that I think is gold in the language education business. We need to talk to each other about the things going on in our classrooms and in our programs. And that’s I guess another sort of aha moment that that talking with you and my enjoyment in our conversation has reminded me. We need to talk to each other and that needs to be part of our professional lives.

Jayme
And in keeping with our topic you and I are having this conversation online. So, there are no boundaries for us to be having these conversations you know I work at night, you work in the daytime, we can zoom. There are so many options available to us for making these connections. It’s a very easy thing sometime.

Kathy
Yeah, these technologies enable us to work together in ways we haven’t been able to before.

Jayme
Well thank you so much Kathy for being a part of Oxford adult ESL conversations and it’s been applied enjoyed it.

Kathy
Thanks so much, Jayme.

Announcer
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