

Reclaiming our Attention in a Digital Age

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I've been involved in initial and in-service teacher training since 1990. I run courses on general ELT methodology, language development for teachers, group dynamics, the creative teacher, group facilitation, global issues, and the teacher as educator. I'm a NILE associate and regularly hold international seminars and workshops for practising teachers.

Nicholas Carr warns that one of the biggest risks we are facing today is losing control over our attention. He claims that the digital tools we use in our day-to-day lives compete for our attention – and increasingly they shape and regulate the way we think and relate to one another, as well (2010).

While this might sound dystopian, it is something that some of us involved in education are starting to worry about. As a teacher educator, the shifting trends in the way our learners pay attention has been a nagging concern for me and for many of my colleagues in higher education. Conversations with fellow professionals in Hungary and abroad working in both primary and secondary schools have reinforced that my concerns are shared by teachers in a wide range of contexts.

The ubiquitous use of smart phones is undermining our ability to pay attention and to maintain focus, and this is especially apparent with the younger generations. Carr's 2010 book, *'The shallows: what the Internet is doing to our brains'* cites extensive research to highlight the dangers of our screen-centred lives.

Pertinent to this article, the book argues that the accelerating pace of focus-switching that the online world has brought about is compromising our ability for sustained attention. Without sustained attention, **memory consolidation** is impaired and higher order thinking skills - which form the basis of creative and critical thinking - are endangered (Carr, 2010).

At the same time, the plethora of online resources, ELT apps and websites and more recently the use of AI have greatly enriched our profession. Using online tools that our learners are familiar with can bring language learning closer to their everyday reality and boost motivation. In addition, many of our students will be working in an online environment when they complete their studies and move on to the world of work. We can't just put our heads in the sand and ignore all the possibilities offered by online learning. However, we need to be aware that using the online space for language learning adds to our learner's screen-saturated lives. For me, the key is to use online resources sparingly and intentionally.

The aim of this article, then, is to build awareness of the impact that our digital lives are having on our ability to focus. The premise is that with greater awareness we can regain agency over *how* we use one of our most valuable resources: our attention.

The A-Z section includes some key terms related to attention and learning. In the main body of this article, you will find these highlighted in bold and italics.

From captured attention to self-interruption

As a starting point, the distinction between **directed** and **captured attention** is a helpful one. William James, the father of modern psychology, referred to these states as being in *passive* and *active* attention mode (1890). When we look at our phones with a specific goal in mind, e.g. checking a message, we are in *directed* attention mode. However, it is by now commonplace that the Internet and in particular social media sites are designed to capture our attention. Being

exposed to rapidly shifting images, headlines, notifications etc. we can find ourselves scrolling minutes or even hours after we had checked that important message. Without us ever taking a conscious decision, we have slipped into *captured* attention mode.

It is by now also common knowledge that every time our phone provides us with a new bit of information, we are rewarded with a subtle *dopamine rush*. This is what makes it hard for us to be self-disciplined and enables the algorithms to hold us captive. Traces of these ‘feel good’ moments in the brain can lure us into developing the habit of picking up our phone even when we have no specific goal in mind (Carr, 2010).

One of the dangers of increasing the time spent in captured attention mode online is that this will have an impact on our offline lives, particularly our face-to-face interactions. Research has shown that people who spend an excessive amount of time online and get used to constant interruptions, tend to *self-interrupt* more when they are offline (Mark, 2023).

As a result, they might find it hard to follow a conversation – especially if it is slow-paced – and might end up interrupting their partner with a comment which is irrelevant, or might switch off altogether (Turkle, 2015). Over time, the tendency to switch off during a conversation or while reading a book can get worse, and we can get into the habit of paying *continuous partial attention* (Stone, 2009) to a lecture, a conversation, or a book we are reading. This is not a completely new phenomenon; mind wandering has always existed. However, excessive internet usage has made it worse.

What we gain and what we stand to lose

Paradoxically, smart phones and access to the internet give young people greater agency over their lives, while at the same time diminishing agency over their mental states.

Considering the positives, young people can track their spending and look after money better, check reviews and find affordable accommodation when travelling, verify claims made by ads, find the fastest and most economical route to their destination – just to name a few. One of my university students has recently shared with me that she started reading again being inspired by the book reviews on BookTok. This is an example of the ways in which social media can have a positive, motivational effect – apart from the many dangers it also poses.

At the same time, due to the principles of neuroplasticity, adapting to this new medium can lower our capacity for *attentiveness*. Many of the tasks we perform online require us to use our attention in a superficial way. We search, scroll, notice, click, but there is little thinking or deliberating required. Neuroscientist Gloria Mark referred to this mental process as paying *rote attention*, as opposed to paying focused attention. One key difference is that during focused attention we make an effort, and there is usually a degree of challenge involved (2023).

Being in rote attention mode becomes a problem when it is our default. Nicholas Carr also warns that according to recent research we can lose our ability for deep thinking (2010). Our brain is malleable and if we only use it in superficial ways, there is the danger of losing the capacity for using it in ways which require a greater cognitive effort. In addition, constant scrolling, clicking and screen-switching can take a toll on our mental health, as well.

What’s more, recent research in neuroscience claims that what people perceive as multi-tasking is actually task-switching. In addition, there seems to be a correlation between the speed and length of switching our attention and the level of stress in our bodies. When engaged in task-switching for longer periods of time, people’s blood pressure rises, their cortisol levels go up,

and their heart-rate variability goes down (Mark, 2023). These are all physiological markers in the body which indicate that people are stressed. It is important to note that there are individual differences here, some of us are more resilient to task-switching stress, but the overall tendency is that what we perceive as online multi-tasking raises stress levels. Both studies based on self-reporting as well as ones carried out by measuring physiological markers bear this out (Mark, 2023).

Jonathan Haidt has also warned of the dangers of excessive smart phone use. In his groundbreaking book, *The anxious generation*, he refers to several research studies and makes the claim that prolonged stress levels induced by excessive internet use can lead to anxiety and are fuelling an epidemic of mental health issues (2024).

Classroom implications: accommodate or challenge?

Our students live in an ever-accelerating world of constant stimulations. Is our role to accommodate and bring stimulating on-line tasks to the classroom, or is it to challenge them with activities which require them to slow down and exert more of a cognitive effort?

We have to find our own response to this dilemma, one that suits our own teaching style, the context we are working in, and one that our students find engaging. However, we need to make sure that the approach we adapt meets both short-term aims, as well as having long-term benefits. Here are a couple of pointers to consider when thinking about ways of helping our learners reclaim agency over their attention:

1. Some activities encourage learners to **redirect their attention**. Living in a world of constant screen and content switching, this is a beneficial skill. Here are some simple questions which can help our students develop this skill: *What did we do last time? What is the main question that we are discussing? What were the new words for you today? Can you remember the first activity we did at the start of the lesson? What are you taking away from today's lesson?*
2. When providing our learners with new input, it is useful to consider what will give the new structures, words etc. **salience**. The more these items stand out, the more memorable they are to our learners, and the easier it will be to remember them. As the lives of our learners are becoming increasingly dominated by online activity and a plethora of images, the use of word cards, posters with a simple and clear design, or a single image might have increased salience.
3. It can be helpful for our learners to understand that the more they use AI, the less they draw on their own cognitive abilities. The term **cognitive offloading** captures this phenomenon well. The shopping list example is a good one to initially understand what happens: the list makes remembering unnecessary. While making lists is a helpful way of creating space in our heads for focused work, offloading the creative or critical thinking required for a task to AI deprives us of the opportunity to developing valuable skills. Asking students to reflect on the following questions can be helpful here: *What are my goals with taking this course? What can I learn by carrying out this task? What part of this task can I 'offload' to AI while still putting in an effort and developing my own skills?*
4. Carrying out activities which increase students' **interoception** can help to raise awareness of the toll that constant phone use can have on their well-being. Starting the

class with a moment of silence or some simple breathing exercises can help our learners move their attention inwards and focus on their current physical, emotional, mental state.

5. Following on from the previous point, it can be helpful for learners to have a better understanding of the way their attention works. While some of the terms in the A-Z of this article are a bit concept-heavy, the ideas themselves might be worth exploring with them. In addition, the **zoom-lens model** of attention can encourage them to consciously relax their focus when feeling stressed out. At the same time, **the triple focus** model can help them to understand that we can wilfully change the direction of our attention.

Finally, with our attention being under siege, we might want to teach sustained focus as an all-important skill and the basis for foreign language learning. I hope this article has provided a starting point for thinking about ways of doing this.

An A-Z of attention & learning

attentiveness

Paying close attention to your immediate surroundings and to the activity you are involved in. For example, truly listening and focusing on the people around you. Both a character trait and a state of mind.

captured attention

The psychologist William James referred to it as *passive* attention. A loss of agency over what we pay attention to and for how long.

cognitive offloading

Reducing the mental processing requirements of a task. For example, when you make a shopping list you ‘offload’ the task of remembering what to buy.

continuous partial attention (CPA)

A term coined by Linda Stone to capture the state that our technology-enabled addiction to a constant flow of information creates.

directed attention

Paying attention to something or someone intentionally. William James called it *active* attention.

dopamine rush

A surge of ‘feel-good’ hormones in the body. It is part of the brain’s reward system. It plays a key role in getting us to repeat an activity and in developing addictions.

interoception

Sensing internal signals from the body, e.g. hunger, thirst, stress, increased heartbeat, or a low-grade headache. It is important to distinguish *sensations* from *narratives* – the stories that our mind weaves around bodily sensations.

memory consolidation

A process which stabilises newly learnt information and enables it to move from working memory to long-term memory.

redirecting attention

Consciously bringing attention back to what you were focusing on before you lost track.

rote attention

A term coined by Gloria Mark referring to a state of giving something attention without being challenged. Usually fleeting and requires only surface-level engagement. Like rote memorisation, it does not require forming associations or making links.

salience

Prominence, being noticeable, standing out. The more salience language input, e.g. new vocabulary has for the learner, the easier it will be to remember it.

self-interruption

A kind of self-sabotage, being interrupted by intrusive thoughts, worries etc. when trying to focus on a task at hand.

triple focus

A model put forward by Daniel Goleman and Peter Senge which identifies three distinct directions for attention: *inner focus* (towards our own feelings, thoughts, sensations), *other focus* (towards others, also called the empathy position), and *outer focus* (taking in the larger context).

zoom-lens model of attention

The model shows that the scope of our attention can shift from a narrow focus to a wide-angle one. The latter is sometimes referred to as *panoramic view* and is associated with a soft, relaxed focus.

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