How to Use Technology Effectively to Transform Your ESL Classroom

What comes to mind when you hear the word "technology"?

Did you imagine computers? Smart phones? Apps?

Or perhaps GPS? The Wii? Internet? TV?

Netflix, anyone?

All right, now picture yourself in a classroom teaching students. What does the word "technology" look like in this situation? How can it be used to create effective learning?

If you're not exactly sure, then you're in the right place, because we're going to show how you can *transform* **your ESL classroom using technology.**

There's no doubt about it, **technology integration** is currently one of the hottest buzzwords in education.

With so much focus on educators implementing technology in their classrooms, at some point we're prompted to ask a critical question: What is technology integration, really?

What is Technology Integration?

The answer to this may seem obvious, but in all actuality, the question is a valid one.

Although schools and districts are increasing their technology budgets and reportedly spending big bucks on teacher professional development, equipment and personnel, studies show that the educational arena lags behind other sectors in the quality and frequency in which technology is merged into day-to-day operations.

Despite the fact that we are living in the "age of technology," many teachers still remain uncomfortable with the idea of integrating it into classrooms. This is due to several factors, including lack of preparation and tools, negative perceptions about technology in general and a lack of buy-in regarding the effectiveness of classroom technologies.

Furthermore, even those teachers who are 100% committed to integration often aren't comfortable with doing it effectively.

In order to combat these issues with technology in education, we must clarify **what technology integration is** and is not. Simply put, technology integration is just that, the practice of integrating or interweaving technology into teaching and learning.

It is critical to add, however, that there is a significant difference between implementing technologies on a surface level and actually intertwining it in a way that produces maximum results for teachers and students. What this means is that simply directing students to complete a separate internet activity or sending them to the "technology station" alone may not be the best use of educational technology.

Oops.

Instead, there are ways that technology can be intentionally used throughout the process of teaching and learning, so that it plays an active role rather than being an afterthought. After all, today's educators have the tools to incorporate

technology into each stage of instruction: planning, lesson delivery, practice and review, and assessment and feedback.

When done thoughtfully, technology does not only drive the curriculum, but the advantages are numerous and undeniable.

Benefits of Technology Integration in English Education

Now that we understand what technology integration is, we can take a look at why we'd want to incorporate it into the ESL classroom. We'll look at the specific benefits for English language learners (ELLs) and also highlight some useful tools that maximize those benefits for our students.

1. Increases student engagement and motivation

The first, and perhaps most obvious perk, is that technology can dramatically – and oftentimes instantly – increase student engagement. Today's learners are functioning in an age where technology drives almost every aspect of their lives. Technology is exciting, fascinating and ever-evolving, and when used thoughtfully, it can transform even the most mundane lesson into one that is powerful and thought-provoking.

For English language learners, increasing motivation is especially significant. Teachers of ELLs understand the major role that motivation plays in the success of language acquisition and are continuously seeking ways to increase student engagement and excitement.

Technology is one great way to motivate learners while simultaneously offering a host of other benefits.

One great way to get your students motivated is with FluentU, a new way to learn real English with real-world videos like music videos, movie trailers, news, and inspiring talks. FluentU takes fun videos and transforms them into English learning lessons.

2. Offers mobility

Think about this: Technology is to education as mobility is to technology. (Don't worry, you'll get it by the time you're finished reading this section). As consumers, it isn't enough to have access to unlimited information, entertainment and communication tools if we are limited to where we can access these tools. The idea of on-the-go access can be a great thing for ELLs, especially considering that for most ESL students, the most authentic experiences with the language often happens outside of the classroom.

Additionally, this focus on mobility has eliminated the rule of course materials being confined to a textbook and/or classroom. Now, teachers can incorporate tools into their lessons that allow materials to be accessed on smartphones, laptops and tablets. Alerts, notifications and online communication tools keep students thinking about the material long after class if over.

3. Teaches students valuable tools for the future

It is clear that technology age has not only arrived, but it's here to stay. In the future, the most basic tasks will require a high-level of technological skill. With that understanding, it is important to make sure that our students are well-versed in technological tools, skills and language.

The best way to make sure that students can keep up with the fast-paced advancements in technology is to give them continual experiences with the tools and programs available today.

After all, the goal of teaching ESL is to give students what they need to function in a global environment by teaching a global language. With that goal in mind, it is also important to consider that besides actually learning the English language, one of most important prerequisites to success in an English-speaking workplace or learning environment is the ability to navigate technology efficiently.

4. Can be a time saver for teachers

When advantages of incorporating technology in the classroom are examined, the advantages for educators are often overlooked or undermined. However, technological tools for teachers is a hot market all by itself and for good reason. Technology can be a huge time saver for teachers and can make some of the most difficult tasks quick and easy.

So, instead of viewing technology integration as one more thing to add to your fast-growing to-do list, look at it as a beneficial tool. Make the technology work for you!

5. Promotes learner independence

One of the greatest benefits of technology integration in education is the ability it offers for independent learning. Although technology can and does not replace an effective teacher, it does give students access to some of the supports that a teacher would provide.

Text-to-speech features or interactive textbooks enable students to read and enjoy books above their actual reading level by reading and defining unknown words. Online tutorials and apps like Knowmia allow students to access teacher tutorials in the comfort of their own home.

6. Provides students access to target culture

When learning a language, experience with the target culture helps to develop context and makes learning the language more meaningful. Thanks to technology, students can benefit from experiences to which they otherwise may not have access. Whether they are visiting social media sites, reading or listening to the news or participating in online discussions, these experiences are rich and meaningful.

Useful Technology Tools for the ESL Classroom

To help you get started with – or to further – your technology integration, here are a selection of valuable and convenient tools to use in your ESL classroom.

Content-specific tools

Comic Maker

Marvel.com has a comic maker that allows students to create their own characters and write their own comics. Comics are a great way to get in some entertaining reading and writing practice.

FluentU

FluentU immerses learners in English through videos and real-world interactions. It is especially helpful in that it gives students quality independent practice and offers valuable exposure in a way that is fun and appealing, yet effective.

Storybird

Storybird is another cool app that allows students to build stories using pictures and images. What an enjoyable way

to motivate students of all ages to practice their reading and writing skills!

Startracker

Content area ESL teachers can look for tools that promote excitement about concepts and topics. Startracker is an augmented reality app that allows students to see what planets or constellations are visible from their homes. It's an exciting app, even for non-educators!

Current Events

News ELA

News ELA is a fantastic tool to increase reading comprehension with current events. Each article is available in five different levels, so your entire class can read the same content, but at a level that's best for each individual.

News in Levels

News in Levels is designed specifically for English learners, and it includes relevant videos with each article. It is also great in that readers can comment via Facebook on the articles for some insightful dialogue.

Digital Textbooks and e-Readers

Digital textbooks are almost always less expensive than traditional textbooks, and since they can be accessed on smartphones, they are amazingly mobile. Many digital textbooks have built-in features that allow students to digitally interact with the text, find out more information about a topic, or even virtually explore key places.

Kindle Reader

Kindle Reader is a popular e-Reader that allows readers to highlight a particular word, hear it pronounced and see/hear a definition. These features give learners a great deal of independence and allow them to access texts about their interests, texts that could be above their reading level.

Presentation Tools

At some point during your course, give students the opportunity to practice age-appropriate skills in editing, word-processing and internet research.

Prezi

Older students can be given the opportunity to showcase what they've learned through Powerpoint or Prezi presentations. Prezi is an easy-to-use tool that creates stunning and engaging presentations.

Windows Movie Maker

Students could also make and upload videos using a camera or movie-making software like Windows Movie Maker.

Teacher Tools

Edmodo

Looking for a way to stay connected with your students? Edmodo allows teachers and students to easily share files, links and media, and allows for seamless two-way communication.

Engrade

Tools like Engrade transform traditional paper gradebooks and offer a host of features that would not be possible with your traditional gradebook.

ShowMe

Have a student that was absent for particular lesson or needs review on a certain subject? Don't fret. Building a library of videos using the ShowMe app (or browsing videos made by other teachers), allows teachers to give students quality, authentic lessons without sacrificing precious instructional time. You can also use ShowMe to flip your classroom, giving you more time to role play and simulate authentic conversations and experiences with your class.

Virtual Field Trips

Virtual field trips are both fun and informative, and many provide such an interactive experience that students get the feeling of actually being present.

National Zoo in Washington D.C.
Students can tour the USA's national zoo from the comfort of your classroom! This would be a creative way to practice/teach animal names.

Statue of Liberty
This virtual tour of the Statue of Liberty is complete with panoramic views, on-screen quick facts, audio, the ability to zoom-in and magnify certain elements, park ranger clips – and more!

White House
Have you ever wondered what's inside the White House? Here you can take a tour of the East and West Wings, Residence and South Lawn.

Google Earth can also be used in conjunction with any virtual field trip so that students can get a street view of the place they are visiting!

Considerations for Technology Integration

Despite all its benefits, technology can be misused – even in the educational arena. However, as educators, we shouldn't limit our students' experiences simply due to this fear.

Rather than avoid technology integration, there are actions we can take up front to equip our students with the tools they need to be both productive and responsible.

One place to start is by reviewing your responsible use policy in detail with your students. If you have a school-wide policy, feel free to include any additional guidelines that you deem fit, and make them a part of your classroom policy. Talk as much as possible about why it is important to use technology responsibly and discuss some potential repercussions for failing to do so.

If you teach minors, be sure to provide parents and students a copy of the policy in their native language, and don't forget to have them sign a responsible use agreement that signifies their understanding and agreement to the terms (here are some sample responsible use agreements).

It's also wise to let parents know about at-home assignments that will require technology use, and share ideas and tips on ways they can monitor their children.

One of the biggest reported barriers to technology integration is a lack of resources within the school or among the students. Although this can greatly limit what tools and activities you can incorporate in your class, it certainly doesn't have to be a deal breaker.

You can have a tech lending library where students can check out materials and return them daily, or you can direct students to the school or community technology center. There are also several organizations that provide technology resources free or at low cost to educators and educational institutions. I know of several teachers that have received iPads, Smartboards and other devices *completely free* through sites Donors Choose!

You can also focus on integration activities that don't require devices for every student. For instance, online manipulatives like these can be accessed on a single laptop, and a simple projector makes the the laptop screen viewable by the entire class!

The key to successful technology integration in your ESL class is to first understand how it will benefit your students, and to then find resources that support learning. Just adopting a few ideas or instructional practices at a time can go a long way.

There's no doubt about it, when done correctly, technology can certainly work for you and your students, enrich learning and make your life much easier in the process!

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