How to use technology in the classroom

Why use technology?

CDs and DVDs are commonly used in classrooms. With the development of digital technology, many classrooms now have access to interactive whiteboards (IWBs), computers, smartphones, and tablets. But whatever you use, it is not the technology itself that enhances a lesson, but what you do with it. While research about the effectiveness of technology in language learning is in its infancy, many people agree that technology can increase student motivation and engagement. It can also be very useful with students who have dyslexia or other special educational needs. It helps to create a closer connection between learning in the classroom and the reality of life and communication styles for our learners today.

Before you start

- Find out what technology is available in your school. Even if there is no technology in your classroom, the school may have a projector or wi-fi network you can use. Even a single tablet can be useful: it can be attached to a data projector or used for group projects, such as making a podcast.
- Check with the school's IT department about what can and cannot be accessed on the school's network. Check before the lesson that you can access any websites you would like to use.
- Make sure you know what the school policy is on using certain types of technology. For example, a school may not allow the use of mobile phones in the classroom (although this would not rule out the use of mobile phones outside the classroom).
- Find out what your colleagues are doing. Talking to other teachers in your school is a good way of getting help and advice.
- Find out what technology your students have at home before setting homework based on technology.
- Think about e-safety. Project work which involves taking photos and videoing students will normally require permission, especially if the images are uploaded onto the Internet. Check with your school director and contact the parents, if necessary.
- Avoid using technology that requires your students to buy additional software.

Tips

- As you start to think about what to do, remember to use the right kind of technology for your particular purpose. Don't start with the technology and then find a purpose for it.
- Things can go wrong; be prepared for occasional technical problems. It's always a good idea to have a back-up lesson plan that doesn't rely on technology.
- Take advantage of students who are confident users of technology. They can help you and other students, and it is an opportunity to engage them in the teaching and learning process.
- Be prepared to experiment and to learn through trial and error. Use the Internet to help you: there are plenty of online forums where teachers have created lesson plans and shared ideas on using technology. The producers of educational apps can be another source of help. They create tools for teachers to help them make the best use of their products.

Five useful websites

1 Vocaroo.com

This is one of the easiest voice recording sites to use. You can use it to set speaking tasks for homework. Go to the website, press record, speak, and share. Once the students have recorded themselves, they can email you their recording or download the content as an MP3 file.

2 Fotobabble.com

This allows students to record their voices over a photograph they have uploaded. It works on computers and smartphones. You could use it to set your students a homework task of taking a photo and recording their description of it.

3 Wordle.net

You can use this to make word clouds, which are useful for activities such as vocabulary revision and sentence construction. Search for 'using word clouds in teaching' on the Internet and you will find many useful ideas. Or try Cloudart – this is an app that allows you to make word clouds on a tablet.

4 Quizlet.com

This site allows you and your students to make vocabulary flashcards. You can make lexical sets based on vocabulary in your coursebook and then play the games on Quizlet to revise and test the vocabulary. This also works on tablets and smartphones.

5 Facebook.com

This widely-known website is increasingly being used for educational purposes. Many classes now have their own Facebook page. You can create a closed group, which is private and only accessible to the people within the group. You can then use it to share pictures and links safely. You could also use it to send reminders to students or for revision activities. It works on computers, tablets, and smartphones.

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Four things to do with an MP3 player

1 Recommend content from iTunes

This is a good source of material for students to use outside class. iTunes has many podcasts aimed at language learners, including audiobooks and exam advice.

2 Make your own audio files

Use a site such as Vocaroo to create audio vocabulary lists or dictations for students. Record yourself reading the material and send it to your students, who can do the tasks using their MP3 players.

3 Ask students to record themselves

Many mobile phones can record, as well as play MP3 files. Ask students to record themselves doing speaking exercises, so that they can evaluate themselves afterwards. This gives students the opportunity to self-correct any mistakes they notice.

4 Make podcasts

Using a site like Vocaroo, students can make podcasts. This could be anything from a radio show to an audio magazine project to fit in with a topic from your coursebook.

Four things to do with a digital camera

Almost all mobile phones now have a digital camera, so it is likely that many students will have access to some kind of digital camera.

1 Talk about photos

Ask the students to take a photo for homework. They should bring it to class (or email it to you) and discuss what the photo is about and why they took it. This creates a very simple, personalized speaking task.

2 Collect English

In most parts of the world, English words can be seen in some form or other: on shop signs, in TV adverts, on food products, etc. As a stand-alone project, or related to a vocabulary topic in your coursebook, ask your students to use their camera to 'collect' the English they see around them by taking photos of it. They can then bring their photos to class, to be discussed, made into posters, etc.

3 Make a photo dictionary

A digital camera can be used to create a photographic dictionary of words from the coursebook. Ask students to take photos of things which illustrate vocabulary covered in your coursebook, and bring the photos to class. They can be used on a student website, such as a wiki, or printed and used in the classroom as a visual dictionary.

4 Video role-play

The video function on most mobile phones and digital cameras can be used to film students doing classroom activities, such as role-plays. Videoing the role-play is motivating to students and can be used to evaluate their performance and help with error correction. The videos can be uploaded onto a student web page or the Internet, if you have permission to do so.

Four things to do with a tablet

Combining the functions of the digital camera with a mobile app on a tablet can allow for greater creativity. With the right app, the tablet becomes a powerful electronic notebook and book.

1 Annotate photographs

With an app such as Skitch, students can write directly onto photos. This makes doing activities such as number 2 (Collect English) and 3 (Make a photo dictionary) in the digital camera section much easier.

2 Comic stories

Some apps, such as Comic Life, allow you to create comic stories. This kind of app allows students to turn photos into stories. It provides an alternative to more traditional writing lessons, and produces work that the students can share online or on paper. Search for the term 'digital storytelling' on the Internet and you'll find plenty of advice and tips.

3 Screen recording

You can use tablets to make screen recordings. There are a number of apps, such as ScreenChomp and Educreations that allow you to make simple videos. They usually create a whiteboard space on the tablet which can be used to record audio or whatever is written on the whiteboard. These apps are useful for creating grammar presentations, projects, and short videos.

4 Podcasts

Tablets can also be used to make podcasts. The advantage of this is by using an app such as iMovie, students can add or create visuals. This would combine a number of the things discussed earlier, such as taking photos and recording voices to produce a multimedia podcast.

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