

The Do's and Don'ts of Using Technology in Your Classroom

by Daragh McMunn

Teaching today is facing challenges that it has never experienced before. The world has evolved into an extremely fast-paced society, and nobody seems to have time or patience for anything. Unfortunately, this same situation is reflected in our classrooms. Studies have suggested that, on average, students can focus and keep their attention on one topic for 10-15 minutes. This means that our classes also need to evolve and become faster, more dynamic, and have a variety of activities. So how can we achieve all of this? One readily available solution is starting to use more technology in our lessons.

During my time teaching in Mexico, I had the privilege of working in an ADS (Apple Distinguished School) and the honour of becoming an ADE (Apple Distinguished Educator), but like many educators who use technology in the classroom, the majority of what I learned and practised was self-taught. Unfortunately, today there is still a lack of formal training in this field, especially for ESL teachers. A study by the OECD in 2018 showed that in the US, only 45% of teachers described themselves as "well-prepared" for using technology in their classrooms, while in Europe, the UK rated the highest, with 50% of teachers describing themselves as the same. This relates to what I have found in my personal experience. I am an ESL teacher who started using technology in their classroom around eight years ago and has never looked back. The journey could have been more straightforward, and like learning any new skill, it takes patience and practice. Nevertheless, implementing technology has taken my classes to another level and truly enhanced my students' learning process. In this article, I will give some of the best tips I have learned over the years.

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Part of my professional experience includes giving training on the implementation of technology, and a common question that teachers often asked me was, "How can I bring technology into my classroom?" The answer is more straightforward than you may think. First, it's important to recognize that the technology is already in our classrooms. Most students will come to class with a smartphone, tablet, or laptop and be comfortable users of the technology, so the real question is, "How can we start to integrate technology properly in our classrooms?"

If you are an educator interested in implementing technology in your classroom, here are some of the things I discovered from my experiences, both good and bad! Let's start with the things you should definitely do. The tips are complemented by some of my favourite apps and other online platforms that I have used in teaching, found at the end of the article.

Research and Explore

Your first step is an obvious one but an essential one! You need to know the technological tool that you want to use. Whether it's an app, an online platform, or a new device you will introduce, make sure you have explored it first. You don't need to be an expert on it, but you need to know what it can do and its limitations. You should also consider if the tool has the same functions depending on your students' devices; this is especially true for some apps. One of the biggest failures with technology in the classroom is that sometimes as teachers, we have amazing ideas; however, if we don't try them out first and identify possible issues, it can lead to difficulties in the classroom. Make sure that before you use the tool, all your students can use it and have access to it. Finally, downloading apps or exploring the technology at the end of one class so it's ready and students are at least familiar with it for the next class can save lots of time.

Be Flexible

Due to so many different apps and other tools being available, you need to be flexible. First, consider your learning objective, and once that is accomplished, that is what your main goal should be. For example, if you want your learners to create a video using some lexis or grammar you have been working with, don't be limited to just one app. They may have another app other than the one you suggested, and once they are comfortable using it, let them use it. Always stay focused on the learning objective of your class, and remember that the technology is there to help your learners achieve it. Using technology should not be the goal of your class. It is only a tool you use to help achieve and improve classroom learning. Nevertheless, it is true that, especially with younger learners, some limitations are needed because too many options can be overly complicated for them.

Further Your Professional Development

Although there may not be an abundance of formal training courses to attend, you can still do a lot of self-paced training. This is another major plus of using technology in education. Technology producers strive to be successful in education, and teachers are their best promoters. Many have their own courses online with accreditations that look great on your CV. You can become an Apple Teacher, a Microsoft Educator, or an ambassador for many apps, all from the comfort of your own home. Many of the courses are free, help you develop the skills you and your students need, and may boost your career growth possibilities. There are also many platforms (websites & apps) that allow you to publish materials online for other teachers and students to use. You can build up followers and users, which can help develop your teaching portfolio.

As we all know, some of our best learning comes from our mistakes. However, being more prepared and aware of some of the pitfalls can help a lot. Considering that, let's look at some things we should avoid doing.

Don't Think You Are the Expert

Technology is developing rapidly; therefore, only a few can genuinely classify themselves as experts. Apps and other platforms are constantly releasing updates, and new ones are entering the market. With technology, today's expert can often be tomorrow's novice. Some of your students might be a lot more tech-savvy than you, which can be a good thing. When I started using technology in my classroom, I was given a tablet with very little training and had zero experience. However, I learned so much from my students. So don't be afraid to be the teacher and simultaneously the student. If a student can show you how to do something, openly accept the advice. Likewise, talk to your colleagues and see if and how they use technology. Social media is also full of groups of educators who are openly sharing their ideas and advice.

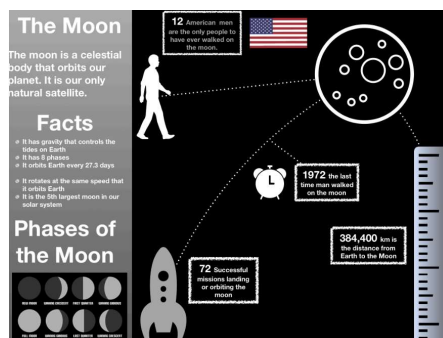
Don't Be Afraid

One of the significant issues teachers have is the fear factor. They think it will be too confusing, it will take too much time, or it won't work. If that is you, the problem is that you are in your comfort zone! It is true that, at first, it can take a bit of time to get everyone comfortable and up to speed with the technology. In addition, like anything, technology, at times, can fail, and yes, if you are not careful, it can be a distraction. However, technology is used everywhere today in society, and when it is used correctly in the classroom, it can make your classes become more: time efficient, engaging, creative, student-led, and motivating. A study done by Dillion and Murray (2021) found that some of the benefits of using technology included increased student engagement, motivation, and greater autonomy. Another advantage is you can teach language and digital literacy skills simultaneously, both of which will have an extremely positive impact on your students' lives.

Don't Let It Be a Distraction

It is a big fear, and it can be true that technology can be a distraction in class. Teachers think that the moment they allow their students to use their tablets, smartphones, or other technology in the classroom, they will lose their class. Sometimes we think that technology will take focus from us, and we stop being the centre of the class. However, we shouldn't be the centre of the class; the students should. We should teach our target language or skills and step back and allow our students to explore and develop them. That's when authentic learning takes place. Bearing that in mind, there must be many teaching moments in a class, so it's essential to set clear technology expectations. When it's time to listen and focus, technology should be off or away and not a distraction. I would start by using the technology for specific tasks and putting it away in-between. Also, set time limits for tasks with technology. Set short web quests where students have a short period to investigate and share some information that they found online in five minutes or create a video where they practice the pronunciation and meaning of some new vocabulary in ten minutes. Allow learners to suggest the time limit together, but stick to it. When times up, times up!

In conclusion, like any new teaching tool you wish to introduce to your classroom, there will be pros and cons. You will need to be patient and prepared to become the student too. However, from my point of view, the advantages heavily outweigh the disadvantages. There are virtually no workspaces that are not using technology to some degree in the world today, so why should your classroom be any different? Your class won't change, only improve. You will give your students many different ways to demonstrate their learning. You will develop their digital literacy skills while improving their language skills. These are two skills vital for today's world and two that go perfectly hand in hand. Best of all, you don't need to spend a fortune! With a little bit of investigation, you will find the perfect tool for your students' needs without spending a cent! For those reasons and more, today is the day to start or continue your plan to use technology in your classroom.



Infographics made with Keynote

Pic by Author

Finally, here are some of my go-to apps and platforms for different activities. They are user-friendly and perfect tools to get started with in your classroom. All of these are available for free.

Videos



Flip: Available as an app or online platform. It can be like your own private class YouTube. Make videos and share them with zero fuss. Also, find ready-made ideas to use. This app is also ideal if you like the flipped classroom approach.



Clips: Only available as an app. It's incredibly creative and easy to use. You keep adding small video clips or photos to create videos. It has a wide range of filters, stickers, and live dictation, which is great for pronunciation practice.

Posters and Presentations



Keynote: A great app for making presentations, posters, infographics and more. It has lots of templates to choose from and is easy to edit, and you can even make GIFs or simple animations. Unfortunately, it's only available on iOS; **Google Slides** is a great alternative.



Canva: Available as an app or online. It has a fantastic selection of templates for presentations, posters, CVs, and more. Very creative and user-friendly. It has many paid pro features, but they are free for teachers.

Portfolios/Sharing



Wakelet: Available as an app or online. You can use it as a class or teaching portfolio, or if you want your students to research a specific topic, you can give resources to investigate. Add links, images, PDFs, and more really quickly.



Seesaw: Available as an app or online. Great for a class portfolio and sharing work. Add drawings, videos, photos, notes, and so much more. There are even ready-made lessons for you to share with your students.

References:

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About the Author:

Daragh is an ELT teacher with over ten years of classroom experience. He recently returned from Mexico to study a Masters in TESOL at UCD. He became ADE in 2019 due to his track record of using technology to enhance the learning process within his class. He is an educator who believes in creativity and the power of technology in learning. He is also a content creator who has published 1000s of digital learning material around the Americas.

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