Technology as Both Tool and Content in the EFL Class

Chi Cheung Ruby Yang
Hong Kong Institute of Education, China

English has been an official language in Hong Kong since the colonial period and enjoys prestige in government, commerce, media, and education. Nevertheless, many students at the secondary and tertiary levels in Hong Kong still perceive English as little more than a compulsory subject of study. Teachers often describe students as passive, demotivated, and unable (or unwilling) to participate in interactive classroom activities. Of course, teachers in Hong Kong are not alone in this situation. In recent years, increasing the use of classroom technology has often been suggested as a means of making English lessons more relevant and engaging. A growing body of literature is available to advise and assist teachers in planning technology-enhanced lessons in which students view online videos, post and read comments on discussion forums, and collaborate on wiki assignments, for example.

Unfortunately, technology-based lessons cannot guarantee that students enjoy their English classes any more than new textbooks can. If the content of the lesson seems irrelevant to their lives, students are unlikely to derive maximum benefit from it. Thus, another way to use technology in the English class is to make it the subject, rather than (or in addition to) being the medium of instruction. English teachers can create opportunities for students to show, tell, share, teach, and engage with each other about their real world use of technology even in classrooms where technology is limited, dated, or non-existent.

Getting Started

To introduce technology as a topic for discussion or inquiry in a language class, consider one or both of the following:

- Use a lesson or chapter on the topic of technology from an accessible ESL or EFL textbook to introduce the topic, key vocabulary, and useful expressions. Today, technology is as common a topic in multi-skills textbooks as family, occupations, and leisure time are.
- Write these broad categories across your classroom board, spacing them out from left to right: recreation and entertainment, communication, social

media, buying and selling, news and views. Invite students to come to the board and list under each category the names of websites, programs, or applications (apps) that they use for these purposes. For example, under social media, they might list Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Line, and others. These lists can help begin a conversation about the forms of technology and the devices students routinely use. They can also serve to show the depth and breadth of student experience with technology and suggest how teachers might capitalize on this knowledge and experience in class.

Learning with and about Technology

The following tips describe ways to deliver English content using technology, supplement English lessons with technology, or build English lessons around the topic of technology in program-initiated, teacher-initiated, and student-initiated variations.

Using video

Videos, now frequently in the form of DVDs, have been used in language classes for some time, primarily to provide listening input and models of oral or conversational discourse. Today, many textbook series come with quality, engaging, authentic-like DVDs. If programs can afford the hardware and software for viewing them in class or in a self-access center, video recordings also provide important access to various dialects of English, relieving non-native-speaking teachers from being the sole model of English for their students. If textbook-related videos or DVDs are not available, teachers can turn to online video archives such as ESLvideo.com, YouTube, and TED.com for videos ranging from mini lectures on form-focused points of English for language learners to authentic content meant to inform or entertain English speakers on a wide array of subjects. Finally, in classes that lack connectivity or where teachers are unfamiliar with online resources, student-centered lessons can still bring the world of movies and videos into class with "homework" assignments such as these:

- What is your favorite movie? Why? Can you tell us the story briefly? Can you find a trailer of the movie online to show us? (If so, have the student play it with no sound and narrate it in his/her own words.)
- Do you share funny videos with friends through social media? If so, come tomorrow prepared to show your classmate a video that you have enjoyed recently.

- Have you ever learned to do something by watching an online video demonstration? If so, can you show us?

Using a learning management system

Well-funded or centrally-managed programs nowadays often make comprehensive learning systems available to their faculty. They range from free platforms such as Moodle to sophisticated commercial learning management systems (LMS). All such systems have multiple functions designed to foster student-to-student and student-to-teacher interaction outside the classroom as well as in. Examples include:

- Discussion forums where students post and comment on topics assigned by the teacher or proposed by themselves.
- Blogs or web logs which function much like paper-based journals or logs but with a wider, more-public readership.
- Wikis—web applications that allow collaborative work on a document or project in a virtual environment.

For the web-savvy teacher without institutional support, free, customizable web-based tools are available for creating one's own websites and blogs, and with each passing year, these tools become easier to use. Finally, many young students are already engaged with online communication and collaboration in social media, gaming communities, and club, hobby, or professional circles. Teachers may be surprised to learn that their seemingly passive English students manage an English language website or blog. When school or classroom technology is limited, these out-of-class experiences can still be used as English class content.

Using mobile devices

Mobile devices such as smart phones, electronic notebooks, tablets, and iPads are becoming more affordable and more available almost daily it seems. Users are not limited by access to fixed computers; they have access 24/7. The possibilities for in-class use of mobile devices for engagement, learning, and collaboration are nearly limitless. One way to break the ice with this topic is to first ask students to keep a detailed log of their mobile phone use for just one day. What sites did they visit? Did they call, text, or take pictures of friends? Did they listen to music, play games, read the news, or check on social media contacts? Did they schedule meetings, get directions, read (or write) a restaurant review, or check the arrival time for their bus or train? No matter what language they use for these interactions, they can

describe, compare, and evaluate them using English. Imagine a series of pair or triad warm-up activities built around routine use of mobile devices, for example:

- What app or website is most useful to you as an English student?
- Copy one of your recent text messages (from any language) on the board, and then "translate" it into full and standard English.
- What is your most useful app? Why? Can you show me how to use it?
- What mobile phone plan do you have? What are its strengths and weaknesses?
- How do you try to protect your data in a digital world?
- What is your opinion on these statements: Mobile devices foster or hinder communication?

Conclusion

The activities described here show that technology can be a valuable presence in English language lessons even in remote or developing regions where budgets are limited, Internet service is spotty, and teachers are intimidated by, or unfamiliar with, classroom applications of technology. Whether teachers use technology as a tool or subject of instruction will vary with local conditions and program needs, but either way, it has the potential to engage students and help them make connections between their required study of English and their real world interests and goals.

About the Author

Chi Cheung Ruby Yang is a teaching fellow at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Institute of Education. She completed her Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics at Lancaster University and obtained her B.Ed., M.Ed., and M.A. in Applied Linguistics at The University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include second language teaching and learning and issues of gender and language.