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## Training Using Technology in the Adult ESL Classroom

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### Abstract

In this article I discuss two reasons for the slow adoption of technology as an instructional tool in adult English as a Second Language (ESL) education. I outline recent facts about the relationships between today's adult ESL learners and technology, and then construct a background of theoretical support in favor of integrating technology in adult ESL classes. In addition, I investigate how the use of technology can make ESL instructors' work more organized and time-effective.

### Introduction

The public education system no longer considers the integration of technology as a debatable issue in the classroom. Many schools have started to use computers and mobile devices in the classroom to enhance the academic performance of students (Lynch, 2013). However, the introduction of current and emerging forms of technology in adult English as a Second Language (ESL) education has not been widely embraced (Lotherington & Jenson, 2011). One important obstacle to integrating technology into English language instruction is ESL educators' concern for the perceived complexities of its integration into their classrooms (Brown, 2007; Parrish, 2004). Other barriers stem from the assumptions by ESL program managers and instructors that their learners are too old to learn technology, or they do not own or have access to computers or Internet connectivity (K. Gamble, personal interview, July 5, 2013).

In 2008, Ono and Zavodny found that immigrants - those most likely to enroll in ESL courses - were less likely to have access to and use a computer and the Internet. However, more recent surveys indicate that the digital divide has been narrowing in the United States. According to research done by the Pew Internet

Project and reported by Zickuhr and Smith (2012), between June 2000 and August 2011 the overall percentage of Internet users in the U.S. made an astounding jump from 47 percent to 78 percent. In addition, of the 22 percent of adults in America who did not use the Internet, 12 percent reported they do not have a computer. Furthermore, the Pew results revealed that of those who own smartphones, it is young adults, minorities, those with no college experience, and those with lower household income levels who are more likely to report themselves as smartphone Internet users. In fact, compared with Whites, people of other races and ethnicities reported greater use of smartphones for accessing the Internet, sending or receiving email, downloading computer applications, playing games and music, accessing social networking sites, and doing online banking (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). As for the age factor, Spada and Lightbown (2013) point out that older learners "are more efficient than younger learners" and "by using their metalinguistic knowledge, memory strategies, and problem-solving skills, they make the most of second or foreign language instruction" (p. 93). Indeed, one must remember that adult ESL learners also may have the knowledge and skills necessary to make the most of technology if provided in their second-language classrooms.

These considerations create a more tech-savvy image than is generally assumed of the minority, low-income, or undereducated individuals who make up a majority of the adult ESL population. The question is, will this updated image of ESL adult learners lead their ESL program managers and instructors to abandon outdated fears and assumptions and, instead, embark in a new direction in adult ESL education: one that takes advantage of the technologies many of their students may be familiar with already?

To encourage a new direction for ESL managers and instructors, this paper examines how learners may benefit from an integration of technology in the adult ESL classroom. In addition, several digital tools are described, along with suggestions for integrating them as instructional aids. Finally, some practical examples of how technology can make life easier for the busy adult ESL teacher are briefly presented.

### **How Technology Benefits Adult ESL Learners**

It is important for ESL instructors to consider several questions regarding the benefits of bringing technology into the classroom. Some questions surround how technology affects learner motivation, engagement, and involvement. Other questions bear on the instructional benefits that technology brings into the classroom, and whether it provides learners with, “skills they can develop, strengthen, and/or use at the workplace, in their communities, with their children, and beyond” (Parrish, 2004, p. 242). To answer these questions, the writer has turned to theoretical frameworks from adult education and language learning as support for an integration of technology in the adult ESL classroom.

#### **Will technology enhance motivation?**

According to a survey study, the main motivations for adult participation in educational pursuits are job-related (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Today, technology is ubiquitous in society and the job market favors those who are skilled with it (McCain, 2009). Therefore, when we increase ESL learners’ familiarity with technology and they develop tech

skills, it can help to support their motivation to learn English. Indeed, using technology in the classroom develops both job-related and communication-related skills at the same time.

#### **Will technology engage students in learning?**

We all learn more when we are engaged in learning. Dewey (1938) focused attention on the notion of experiential education as a means of engaging learners and promoting active inquiry in the classroom. More recently, educators and researchers have examined the importance of connecting instruction to learners’ needs and experiences outside of the classroom to promote engagement and, thus, learning (Condelli, Wrigley, & Yoon, 2009). Technology can bring the real world into the ESL classroom via multimedia supports, and in this way it strengthens the connections between the English language and the experiences and needs of the learners.

#### **Will technology incentivize learning?**

One of Stephen Krashen’s (1982) five language learning hypotheses, the Affective Filter Hypothesis, concerns the importance of lowering learner stress and anxiety to improve learning conditions. Making lessons fun is one way to lower learners’ affective filters and incentivizes learning (Rossiter, 2003). According to Jane McGonigal (2010), more than 500 million people all over the world play computer and video games for at least one hour a day, which means those people are spending 3 billion hours a week playing videogames. ESL educators can take advantage of the proven incentivizing value of game mechanics with a wide range of online and software ESL games that make participating in class more fun, thus creating better affective conditions and increasing incentives for learning.

#### **Will technology enhance authentic language use?**

At the core of language learning is the interactive nature of language. Vygotsky’s (1934), Krashen’s (1985), and Long’s (1996) language acquisition and learning models are based upon the essential role of language input and communicative interaction.

Technology, as a medium for communicative interactivity, expands the opportunities for learners' "genuine, meaningful communication" (Brown, 2007, p. 54) in the target language. The computer, Internet, and cell phone, by nature, provide more opportunities for authentic input and interaction, and can contribute to ESL learners' communicative ability, which is a primary target in English language learning.

### **Will technology accommodate diverse learning styles?**

Research concerned with individual differences supports the concept of different styles of thinking and learning (Gardner, 1999). Combining theories of Gardner's multiple intelligences with technology can have "a great impact on student achievement" and "helps in the process of differentiating instruction" (McCoog, 2007, p. 27) by recognizing students' individuality and providing a range of learning conditions for different learning styles.

### **Will technology promote educational equity?**

ESL students can be viewed as marginalized students (Schrader, 2003). Being unable to communicate fluently in English, ESL students may believe that information technology is beyond their reach. From a multicultural perspective, basic computer skills and familiarity with the Internet should be integral to all adult literacy training, including ESL. As Paul Gorski (2001) points out, "A multicultural education approach to understanding and eliminating the digital divide critiques technology-related inequities in the context of larger educational and societal inequities." (para. 9). Classroom initiation and access to technology, and especially access to the Internet, offers English language learners an extensive range of information and resources in the learner's target language (Silc, 1998). As well, introducing students to self-study websites empowers them to take charge of their own learning. Indeed, teaching adult ESL learners to make use of digital communication tools helps to empower marginalized adults and enables them to make their voices heard. In summary, I propose that beyond simply teaching

English or just how to use technology, integration of technology into ESL classrooms assists in English language acquisition, increasing communication skills, and strengthening professional skills. At the same time, technology integration enhances ESL learner motivation, expands opportunities for authentic interaction, increases learner engagement and participation, supports individuals' learning styles, and promotes educational equity.

### **Technologies to Support Instruction**

Garrett (1991) suggests that technology should be employed to assist or to support the methods, approaches, and philosophies that the educator would normally use, and learning outcomes should dictate what technology is appropriate, not the other way around. Indeed, technology should support or enhance student achievement of the learning objectives. With these guidelines in mind, this report offers a brief list of technologies available to ESL classrooms and suggests how these technologies can be used to enhance English language learning and to promote the professional development of adult ESL learners.

### **Laptop, Desktop, or Tablet Computer and Portable Projector**

With a laptop, desktop, or tablet computer and a portable projector, the instructor can share anything that appears on a computer screen with a classroom of students. For example, ESL teacher-generated documents such as grammar explanations, practice exercises, and quizzes can be viewed in the classroom and completed by the group. Student-generated word processing activities, such as editing for errors, sentence completion, writing sentences and paragraphs, or sequencing stories or dialogue can be performed with the cut and paste function (Siskin, 2005). Digital displays can be a source of comprehensible input and this setup can provide students with different learning styles, additional demonstrations or concrete examples of concepts being taught in the classroom. Multimedia CDs, DVDs, and

the Web provide a nearly endless source of sound, pictures, video, animation, and multimedia that can help situate learning within a meaningful context and provide nonverbal clues to help learners understand what they hear (Parrish, 2004). Finally, ESL instructors can create PowerPoint presentations that can be used to review, practice, or test language usage and can be saved and used again (Fisher, 2003).

### **Interactive White Board**

Today, many classrooms are equipped with interactive whiteboards, sometimes called “smart boards.” Interactive whiteboards are interactive displays that connect to a computer and projector. They are used in many classrooms as a replacement for the traditional blackboard or whiteboard. The interactive equipment, by nature, encourages students to interact with language on the display in different ways. For example, in an ESL classroom a student can be asked to use an interactive pen to highlight, and thus identify, a given grammar structure or part of speech in any text. There also is a click-and-drag function that allows learners to manipulate words and phrases. For instance, a student can move adjectives from a list and insert them in a sentence to practice adjective order. A smart board also is equipped with a virtual keyboard, which can be used to train ESL learners to type letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs, while checking spelling and punctuation. After a learner has produced written work on the smart board, it can be filed and then retrieved later. This is a less daunting initiation to word processing for adult ESL learners than training on a computer. It teaches important skills for today’s job market, such as saving files, and categorizing and organizing documents. There are many ESL memory games and customizable game templates that can be played on the smart board, such as those found at ESL Games World ([www.eslgamesworld.com](http://www.eslgamesworld.com)).

### **Websites**

Numerous websites specifically for ESL teachers and learners can be found. For instance, the University of Iowa’s phonetics website, [www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/phonetics](http://www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/phonetics), has a

pronunciation practice web page of American English sounds. This website enhances pronunciation lessons with a moving image of the human mouth as it pronounces a sound and with a video of a real person pronouncing the same sound. Free video sources such as YouTube, [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com), can provide visual support for authentic language input and can be used to explore various topics, which increases student engagement. For example, students can watch a video, complete a comprehension quiz, and then initiate a discussion or debate. There also are websites that offer ESL vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation exercises, such as [www.manythings.org](http://www.manythings.org), [www.esl-lounge.com](http://www.esl-lounge.com), and [www.eslpartyland](http://www.eslpartyland) that can be used in class. Finally, Wordle at [www.wordle.net](http://www.wordle.net) is another very useful and versatile website. This site generates a word cloud based on the frequency of key words in a text, which can be used for a variety of purposes. For instance, the instructor can create word clouds by entering portions of a text; then learners can view them to review previously studied texts, predict what a new text is about, reconstruct dialogues, and stimulate prior knowledge (Peachey, 2008).

### **Smartphone**

The smartphone is an excellent digital tool for ESL learning because most learners are already familiar with it and it is always available to them. Texting the instructor or another student, following instructions to take pictures or make a video, calling to obtain information, leaving a voicemail message, and interviewing a partner are some of the language activities that teachers can assign their smartphone-equipped ESL students to do in or outside of class (McVeigh, 2013). The retrievable writing and speaking samples can provide the teacher and the learner with information regarding learners’ authentic mistakes. Furthermore, both the language and technology skills used for tasks are transferable to real life situations. Finally, using the learners’ smartphones in language practice tasks constitutes a valuable means of assisting ESL learners to connect, both culturally and socially, with fellow immigrants, classmates, and new acquaintances.

## Tech Tools for the Technophobic or Busy ESL Teacher

For the “technophobic” adult ESL educator who would like to “dip a toe” in technology, Lisa Blackburn (2013, personal communication) suggests that the instructor start by choosing one task and finding a technology-based solution for it. Such tasks and solutions include creating an attendance file with Excel spreadsheet software or tracking grades with an educational web-based software such as Engrade. Learning to use Word or Google Docs word processing and document software can help educators keep and organize files, such as worksheets and quizzes, so they can be located, edited as needed, and reused, thus saving both storage space and time. Softwares also can be used to make templates for anything from lesson plans to assessment rubrics for repeated use. Web addresses of educational websites or web pages can be embedded directly into lesson plans so that the instructor can locate and use online resources with one click on the computer or smart board. Finally, by using paperless resources, the educator saves the time he or she would normally spend making copies for students’ classroom use.

### Conclusion

The use of technology in public K-12 education classrooms is widespread, and adult and language learning theories would support the integration of technology in adult ESL classrooms. All ESL learners are not necessarily technology-illiterate, and therefore it is apt that their instructors “dip a toe” in technology by experimenting with various educational tools, such as the computer, the Internet, smart boards, and smartphones. Although technology does present its challenges, avoiding it “...because of our own fears” (Parrish, 2004, p. 243) limits both students’ and educators’ access to tools that can make English language learning more relevant to learners’ lives and bring a sense of living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to our classrooms.

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