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Digital Age Pedagogy: Easily Enhance Your Teaching Practice with Technology

How many times a day do you look at your smartphone? Why do you do it? To find information? To entertain yourself? To communicate with others? Smartphone usage is ubiquitous, regardless of age, gender, economic status, and location. In my recent teaching, all of my students use their smartphones more than their laptops.

Today, more than ever before, English-language educators recognize the importance of using digital resources to teach students in a variety of modalities. Current circumstances have caused schools, universities, institutes, and colleges all over the world to rethink the way we teach and learn. Teaching with technology has suddenly evolved from a gradual shift toward incorporating digital tools into a roaring avalanche, which can overwhelm educators who have only face-to-face (f2f) teaching experience.

Although the digital divide is real, I do not address it here. This is because I have always had, during my teaching experiences in a variety of countries, affordable and widespread Internet access. Smartphones and phone applications (apps) were popular as pedagogical tools when I recently taught in Central Asia. I connected with and instructed my Kazakh students via WhatsApp, a popular free phone app that replaced the need for an expensive learning management system, although free platforms, such as Moodle, are available globally. I also used online digital software and apps that could be accessed by laptop or smartphone. The result: enthusiastic, focused students and a significant drop in paper consumption.

The need to master online teaching is becoming crucial. For decades, futurist Bryan Alexander has been tracking the use of technology for educational purposes. He predicts, given the current situation, that many universities and institutes will close due to economic losses; he also believes that to stay relevant, educators in all content areas must become fluent in using digital resources (Alexander 2020).

This article seeks to encourage teachers who are not yet tech savvy to start researching and using online software resources that link to smartphones (and laptops and tablets) in order to successfully teach English anywhere in the world, remotely or otherwise. It discusses resources in the form of websites, blogs, and digital tools to help teachers successfully transition and adapt their expertise to the current situation. These digital tools are flexible: they can be used for f2f, hybrid f2f/online, or 100 percent online teaching interactions, provided that teachers and students have access to the Internet.

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After an overview of the rise of instructional technology, the article offers advice for implementing educational technology and introduces various types of free digital tools, with explanations of what they do, why they are important, and how both teachers and students can use them. I conclude with a short list of free and relevant pedagogical websites.

OVERVIEW

Ideas for using technology for language instruction started developing in the late 1960s, when a few researchers and teachers realized that computers and technology were significant pedagogical tools (Heift, Mackey, and Smith 2019). Over ten years ago, Lord and Lomicka (2008) found that social-media chats create a positive sense of classroom community. Today, it is clear that appropriate pedagogies, technology training, and teacher attitudes toward technology positively impact L2 learners (Otto 2017).

Generation Z learners—true digital natives and the current generation entering college worldwide—are especially interested and influenced by technology and social media (Turner 2015). "Gen Z" students are constantly using technology and often expect their instructors to offer learning experiences using social media and apps they can access on their phones. The question arises: how can we, as language teachers working around the world, enhance our smartphone tech usage?

In the case of Kazakhstan, after the country gained independence, many educational initiatives were implemented, ranging from a trilingual educational policy (Fierman 2006) to the use of technology in language classrooms (Egorov, Jantassova, and Churchill 2007; Suleimen 2019). But Kazakhstan is not unique in supporting instructional technology in the language classroom. If you have access to the Internet, you, too, can employ numerous digital tools and websites to enhance your teaching practice.

WHERE TO BEGIN

If you are unsure about using technology tools in the classroom, you are not alone. As an educator working long before the age of the Internet, I, too, felt anxiety about adjusting my teaching to accommodate students in this digital age. Based on my experience, I offer the following six points of advice:

1. **Assign tech tools to your students in small teams so that they teach the class (and you) how to use each tool.** Give students a clear rubric, which advises them to repeat instructions, be patient, and monitor their peers. The rubric should guide students to break down instructions into simple, step-by-step points. Via a template, you can help them by scaffolding instructions with sentence frames in a checklist form, such as these:

- First, click on _____. (e.g., New Project)
- Second, go to the upper-right corner of the screen and click on _____. (Choose Background)
- Third, preview the _____. (Background Options)

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You may choose to support these instructions by visiting iorad.com, a free tool that walks users through a digital process by taking screenshots.

Another option is to pre-teach the requisite vocabulary and functional language so that student presenters can successfully offer clear instructions. Ask students to engage in brainstorming, using creative and critical thinking about the best ways to create instructional sentence frames for their particular tech tool.

You should not be surprised by the excitement and patience your students will display. After all, a core concept for motivating students is to offer them relevant activities. Additionally, using the discovery method gives your students the agency and motivation to perform well. If some students are hesitant, pair them up with the more confident ones, or create groups and assign roles that allow each participant to engage and contribute: the presenter, the scribe, the fact checker, the timekeeper, and so on.

2. **Start with tools that interest you personally.** This will motivate you to learn the tools and put them to use. Two caveats: first, there are an overwhelming number of teaching tools available, with the majority of them offering free (as opposed to premium) versions. Take the time to find preferred tools by trying them out or asking colleagues which tools they prefer. In any case, consider first what your learning objective is, and then make sure you align it with the tool correctly; using technology just "for fun" is wasting your time and your students' time. Be aware that if you consider a tool to be potentially useful, you may have to invest time in mastering it yourself.

   The second caveat is that many of these innovative tools have numerous facsimiles. For example, some whiteboards are equally powerful (Miller 2020c), while others are not. For instance, Google's free interactive whiteboard, jamboard.google.com, has fewer bells and whistles than others, but it does offer service in 42 languages.

3. **Do not expect to fully understand everything about the tool right away.** Experiment with the tool. Take your time. Gradually, you will gain understanding about how you can best employ it. I am still learning new ways to integrate two tools I regularly use, Flipgrid and H5P, into my courses; despite being intuitive, these tools have many uses, and the creators are constantly adding options and resources. In general, high-quality tech tools offer free videos, newsletters, and a service team that responds promptly and politely, no matter where the user may be located. Support-service teams do not care whether you are using free or paid versions. In fact, they often send free training and advice so that users will get the most out of the tool and tell others about it. Many have online handbooks, and some of these come in various languages. And don't forget to search for and watch free tutorials on YouTube; experienced *techies*—experts in technology—post excellent resources on how to use these tools.

4. **Participate in webinars that support the use of instructional technology in the classroom.** FutureLearn (2020) lists several free online courses to help English teachers apply their skills in an online environment (there are often fee-based options for extended courses and/or a formal certificate). The U.S. Department of State offers webinars and

other resources at americanenglish.state.gov. Another free resource for learning to teach online is Remote Learning 101 (Miller 2020b), which offers tips applicable to English teaching at any level of instruction. Miller (2020a) also hosts a free digital summit every year, including free certificates, podcasts, and videos on YouTube. The videos and courses are subtitled, with the playback speed easily adjusted for those who use English as a second or other language.

5. **Read about instructional technology trends.** I particularly like the helpful digital advice from Ridgeway and Ridgeway (2019). If you prefer video to text, Dotto (2020) provides a video resource with clear instructions on using Zoom as well as other tech tools.

6. **Create your own support group or "techie meet-up" within your school or university—or find techies on Twitter or other social media.** A few years ago, as a faculty member in the United States, I was lucky enough to regularly consult with our university's information technology design and development team. Sometimes, just meeting with them and expressing my frustration at being stuck trying to learn was enough to motivate me to keep practicing and discovering how to use a specific tech tool. I received emotional as well as technological support from the team, along with tips about other tools I might want to incorporate into my repertoire.

VERSATILE, EASY-TO-USE, AND FREE SOFTWARE RESOURCES

As I write this, Zoom is the most popular online meeting room in the world. Teachers are using it to present their lessons remotely. This article does not go into detail regarding Zoom usage, but I recommend that you review the resources and support links at Zoom.com (you can choose from multiple languages at the bottom of the homepage).

Following are eight of my favorite versatile, easy-to-use, and free software resources:

1. Padlet.com

Padlet, a flexible, colorful online whiteboard with infinite space, is one of the easier tools to use and understand. You create an account, and with the free version you have access to up to nine boards (if you need more, you can pay a subscription fee or delete older boards). You have many choices for the board background and how information is presented and can post information in the form of text, video, and images. As moderator, you control who posts and whether the posts are public or confined to class members only. If you wish, you can allow students to comment and add ratings or emojis to the posts. Padlet easily runs on any smartphone.

I use Padlet in a variety of ways. During class, in f2f or remote interactions, I may ask a question to check comprehension, and students respond on Padlet. This reinforces writing skills and lets me know that everyone has participated. I also employ Padlet in f2f interactions or in chat rooms using Zoom or Skype to support students by using peer-editing and small-group work. If students are grouped to write on climate change, for example, their group posts links on Padlet; other groups must vet those links as reliable or not before the group can move on to drafting an outline. I use Padlet the same way when students present me with writing samples; this also aids organization because everything students produce is preserved on Padlet.

My students also use Padlet to share group work with one another. When giving presentations, they set up padlets and then ask pop questions to make sure their audience pays attention. This helps me as well because students are given participation points for listening and asking questions, and I can easily keep track. It also keeps students engaged and off their phones when their peers present.

Thus, as a resource, Padlet is versatile. It can be used for summative assessment, gathering information and brainstorming, monitoring engagement, peer editing, and other tasks and assignments.

2. Flipgrid.com

Flipgrid is a free video platform that can be used in many ways and is well liked by my students. It can be loaded onto a smartphone, desktop computer, or laptop, as long as a camera feature is present. You decide whether to have your grid public or private, and you can determine the length of time for videos—from 30 seconds to five minutes. A major benefit of using Flipgrid is that all videos are stored along a single grid and are easily edited and commented upon, with privacy protected.

I often use Flipgrid for introductions at the beginning of a course to have students tell me something about themselves and what they want from the course. I also use Flipgrid to ask students to check in, practice pronunciation exercises by reciting poems and tongue twisters, and complete prewriting assignments before they create a first draft. Students often use Flipgrid at the end of presentations, asking their audience to give oral assessments using a rubric I provide.

The company has created a remote learning guide in various languages, ready-to-use activities and assessments, and a blog addressed to global educators (Flipgrid 2020).

3. H5P.org

Using H5P, one of my favorite tools, anyone can edit a video by creating pop-ups and inserting images and video links. This tool differentiates the classroom and creates an even playing field. For example, if students watch a video and do not recognize a word or image, they can click on a link or pop-up, stop the video, and/or replay the video. This gives students at all levels, and those who learn in different ways and at different speeds, a chance to independently practice comprehension skills.

I task my students to use H5P this way:

> Make a video on your phone or laptop and post it on YouTube. Next, import the video into H5P. Then, using H5P, create a series of questions: true/false, multiple-choice, or short-answer.

This sounds complex, but it becomes less so if you listen to the H5P tutorial (H5P 2020b); see Johnson (2019) for instructions on uploading a video to YouTube. H5P also has a forum with a wide variety of informative posts from users. My students and I were able to comprehend the basics within one 50-minute class session. If you want to skip the initial activity of students creating their own videos, use the copyright-free videos posted on YouTube (search for "video library no copyright"). Most of my Kazakh students, however, were keen to create their own footage. You can view a sample online lesson I created for a seventh-grade teacher at Sartor (2020a).

The importance of using tools like H5P cannot be underemphasized. Today's students learn more via video than text; by offering them learning via video, you as a teacher can assess without standing in front of them and monitoring, and you can allow students to create and present content to their peers. Students may self-assess and learn at their own speed because they can watch the video repeatedly. And, as mentioned, there are other types of assessments that you can create with text by using H5P—fill-in-the-blanks, drag-and-drop matching exercises, and online flash cards (H5P 2020a).

4. Kahoot.com

Kahoot!, another free assessment tool, offers engaging ways for students to review materials and/or test their comprehension, either alone or in teams. You can create your own questions, polls, and puzzles, or access the platform's bank of content. Kahoot! gamifies learning by creating engaging quizzes that require responses in a limited time. This platform does not require f2f attendance in one location to play. Similar applications,

The resources [here] represent only the tip of the instructional-technology iceberg.

with free versions, include Quizlet.com and Peardeck.com. I have also found a free smartphone app to assess English learners at Cambridge Assessment (2020).

5. GooseChase.com

GooseChase helps teachers create scavenger hunts, which are a great idea because students use their smartphones and organize into interactive, cooperative groups for a friendly, competitive hunt. This tool gets students out of their seats and moving around. The game requires students to take pictures of their group with each object they find and place each photo on GooseChase. You can monitor the activity and choose the objects and sites to ensure safety and a reasonable end time. I have created hunts that required students to ask other people for objects, which is an excellent way for them to practice using functional language. This activity can be used to reinforce pre-taught vocabulary and demonstrate the value of learning specific lexical items. The recreational version is free and adequate for most teachers, but you are limited to three teams and one live game at a time. For a sample made by a Spanish teacher, see Slusarek (2016).

6. Visuwords.com

Visuwords is a free site that helps students learn vocabulary. This tool is a massive mind map of words and roots that can be clicked to help students make morphological and semantic connections concerning vocabulary. I use it as an online reference tool for high-intermediate and advanced learners; the sheer number of lexical items can overwhelm beginners. Visuwords classifies specific lexicon and offers different versions, according to parts of speech, as well as derivatives and semantic connections. In effect, it serves as a colorful interactive dictionary.

7. Vocabulary.com

Vocabulary.com is another free tool for learning vocabulary or reviewing words. The site has a gamified format that looks like flash cards, but it recognizes the users' success and progressively challenges their abilities, helping students remain engaged. The site has other advanced learning resources for those passionate about morphology and semantics.

8. ExplainEverything.com

One more tool that I can no longer live without is Explain Everything (EE). This software can be used on a smartphone. Basically, EE is an interactive whiteboard, but it is more sophisticated than Padlet. You create interactive presentations using templates, which can then be stored on the program's cloud as a video or processed via YouTube into videos. I use this tool to offer students short video lectures that they can watch during an online class or independently via a link—see Sartor (2020b) for an example.

My teachers-in-training create short EE video presentations to demonstrate how they use a specific method or strategy when teaching English. The free basic package allows you to create three projects at any given time (if you need more, you can pay a subscription fee or save and then delete older projects). The support services for this company go above and beyond helping everyone using the tool. A handbook is available for download at Explain Everything (2020).

FREE EDUCATIONAL WEBSITES

The resources above represent only the tip of the instructional-technology iceberg. If you are interested in learning about other available tools, I would recommend that you follow certain websites and blogs. My favorites that I

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mention here are free (although some promote their books and provide trainings for a fee).

- Not only does Jennifer Gonzalez's Cult of Pedagogy offer a diverse range of information regarding teaching and technology, but she also makes her information accessible via podcasts, which you can download and listen to while you are doing chores. She has also created YouTube videos with adjustable playback speeds. Everything is available at Gonzalez (2020).

- The Feedspot blog lists and updates content from innovative bloggers who post about numerous fields, including educational technology (Feedspot 2020). If the text is dense, I recommend using Google Translate to scan this site in order to choose a blog best for you.

- Another helpful website is Stannard (2020); Russell Stannard is one of the first British educators to recognize the power of technology as a language-teaching tool. He has won many awards and is a clear thinker and writer.

There are many more free websites and free video trainings on the Internet. An excellent way to find a website or blog that best suits your needs is to search for online seminars and conferences, such as Miller (2020a). Browse around these sites to find useful information and the names of people who will support your learning.

CONCLUSION

This overview is only a glimpse at the tools you can access to enhance and improve your teaching practice. Each year, new blogs and websites, as well as video tutorials and video channels, come into existence to help everyone develop innovative ideas for teaching. Choose a few tools that interest you personally, experiment with them, and critically reflect on their potential uses.

It is not likely that technology will replace language teachers in their classrooms, but an increased focus on online teaching and remote learning is taking place and will likely become a lasting trend. The demonstration of language competence is clearly moving from pencil and paper towards digital platforms. Alexander (2020) speculates that teaching and learning will eventually become a "toggle" system, whereby faculty and students will meet remotely or f2f, depending upon human safety and economic potential.

Over time, those who are skilled at integrating and applying technology will likely find more opportunities. We as language teachers must stay current with new tech tools and trends and continue to identify useful software and smartphone apps so that we can align them with our desired pedagogical outcomes.

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