

# SMART PHONES, SMART BOARDS, AND THE STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH

## How and why we should incorporate technology in the L2 classroom

By Olga Taratuta, Humber College

Technology is at the heart of everything we do on a daily basis. At the click of a button, we can have an encyclopedia, map, clock, calculator, or mailbox. Technology has in fact rewired our brains; we are no longer as capable of deeply engaging with long pieces of prose (Carr 2008). It is astounding that with the literal rewiring of the way we read, think, and learn, schools have still not caught up to the technological age. This has negative consequences for L2 learners, as many do not have much experience with computers, and they are barred from learning authentic, technology-based communication used in workplace settings. However, we can easily change outdated teaching methods to suit the technological era with adequate teacher training, as well as a shift in pedagogical approach. We must realize that we can learn from our students, too!

During my TESL program, I took a compulsory course called The Adult ESL Learner. I learned different online resources to be used with ESL students, how to incorporate technology in the classroom, and how to use the popular interface used at many colleges and universities: Blackboard. However, a lot of the things I learned week to week were already familiar. I knew how to create a Google doc and share it. I didn't require an in depth tutorial on the use of Blackboard, it being very similar to any regular blog. I knew how to do a screencast without a YouTube explanation video. The teachers-in-training were treated as if they were devoid of any basic technological knowledge. I noticed that younger students like myself found the over-explanations to be boring and repetitive, while some older students appreciated the extra help. However, the manner in which we received technological training was also flawed: our class focused on the mechanics of different web applications and programs, but we were not taught how we could realistically use them to aid instruction in an ESL classroom. The assumption seemed to be that the faculty members are general experts and the students ignorant, regardless of the material.

In a study researching why many L2 teachers don't use technology in the classroom, most of the teachers answered that it was due to lack of professional development (Lam 2000, p. 3). In many schools, and even ones I have visited, the administration budgets for an expensive gadget, such as the Smart Board, and plops it into the classroom, hoping it will increase the look and value of the school. Lam calls this the "technological power

game,” which is true of our society: everyone wants to have the newest and most expensive gadget, and those with the better technology are perceived as “better” (Lam 2000, p. 2). There usually is a class or workshop on how to use the device/program (e.g. Smart Board, Blackboard) but teachers are not always taught the real use of the device, and why it may be beneficial over the standard chalk and board.

There are two main factors that hinder teachers from being more tech savvy in the classroom: most of the teachers interviewed in the study saw technology as a means to an end, and lacked confidence using the technology on a daily basis (Lam 2000, p. 12). In other words, teachers used technological sources such as Word to write their lesson plans or create worksheets, but technology was a minor consideration in the lesson plan itself: Word simply helps us write things more quickly than on paper. The teachers also lacked confidence and were threatened by the students’ ample technological knowledge. They wanted to maintain their authority over the students by being seen as the “experts.” Those teachers also reported that they would be more confident with adequate teacher training.

There are simple solutions to both of these problems. Instead of seeing technology as a mere “means to an end,” teachers need to see justifications for using technology in the classroom as opposed to more traditional methods. Computers, the Internet, and smartphones have become more accessible, and as a result many immigrants are comfortable with technology (McClanahan 2014, p. 22). Incorporating a gaming aspect to the lessons, such as Kahoot quizzes and online surveys, may motivate the modern student more so than a passive activity. Also, using genuine materials in the classroom contributes to student success.

Students will be exposed to technology in all aspects of their lives, from emailing the boss, to handling a self check-out station at the grocery store. Technology is not a means to an end, but, rather, a vital aspect of “genuine, meaningful communication” (McClanahan 2014, p. 24). We not only use various technologies as a conduit for communication, such as Whatsapp or SMS, but we also learn the culture of communication through technology. In order for ESL students to fit into Canadian society, and to find jobs, they must understand how technology works, and when and how to use it. For example, when writing an email as a response to an interview invitation, the potential employee must know what to write in the headline, what the acronyms such as CC stand for, how to begin the salutation, and so on. It would be unjust for teachers to omit this entire aspect of online communication during their lessons, as it would make it harder for the students to fit in, to get a job, and to continue their education in a post-secondary institution.

These are the ways teacher trainers can solve the L2 teacher’s “technophobia:” adequate teacher training to show how technology can be used as more than a means to an end, and the encouragement of genuine material in the classroom, rather than worksheets from a textbook published in the 1970s. Above all, teachers should not be afraid of seeming less experienced or technologically inferior to their students. A minor change in pedagogical attitude will go a long way—from teacher as unquestionable authority, to teacher as guide, as equal with student. The teacher is not a knower of all, especially the teachers who are

from a different generation, those that didn't grow up with touch screens at their fingertips.

The phenomena of a teacher and student exchanging ideas as partners is known as “communicative learning” and is taught at post-secondary institutions for ESL teachers-in-training. The staple of communicative learning, and what separates it from other teaching methodologies, is that it is learner-centred, and has a few central components: teachers use learning techniques that allow students to be autonomous, such as group work; the curriculum is flexible and can incorporate unique student needs; teachers use techniques that stimulate student creativity; and the teacher's goal is to increase student confidence in the language by treating students as people with worth (Brown 2010, pp. 46-47).

Simply the act of incorporating the learner-centred approach in the classroom will increase the use of authentic technological materials. When students are autonomous and can make their own choice of what they want to learn, undoubtedly a lot of them will want to learn practical English skills in the cyber world—how to write a resume, how to search for an apartment online, how to type faster, academic research skills, and the list goes on. Shifting to a student-centred approach will also allow the teacher to lift all the pressure off of her shoulders: she will no longer carry the burden of knowing all the answers. Through group work, students can learn from each other, and through observation, the teacher will, in turn, learn from the students. This model is, perhaps, the most effective “teacher training,” when it is not isolated from the classroom and the students.

From my observations of the TESL certificate program, we were taught to teach the students the basics: how to fill out an application form for a job, how to use a bank machine, and how to call the fire department. While all these are vital survival skills, it is presumptuous of us to assume that students need careful and over-guided instruction doing everyday adult activities. The “pre-task/activation” stage of the lesson plan, I was taught, should work on what the students already know by asking questions like, “have you ever used a bank machine in *your* country?” Then, after hearing the students' answers, the teacher should say, “wonderful answers. However, this is how we use a bank machine in Canada...” This struck me as unrepresentative of a “student-centred” approach to teaching. The teacher still positions herself as the source of knowledge.

In the example above, many if not most students would likely be familiar with using a bank machine, and the differences from country to country would generally be small. Given that, the lesson might have students teach each other the basic technological skills. Or, if the topic is too simple, the teacher can move on to online banking, which truly might differ in North America compared to other countries, and which has a lot more specialized jargon. Even there, though, it is unsafe to assume that students are less familiar with the technology than the teacher.

When the teacher places the students' world knowledge on par with her own, the entire layout of the lesson plan is potentially altered as well. That is, the plan can become less of a rigid plot of events and more of a series of starting points, with large information gaps

that are then filled by the students. For example, the teacher can start the lesson off talking about a new app created by CIBC, even if she doesn't own this app herself. Other students will inevitably use a banking app on their phone, and can explain the technology to their peers. When the teacher gives the students the reins, students often have more genuine conversations with one another about things they are interested in, including technology. They may also feel more respected and confident.

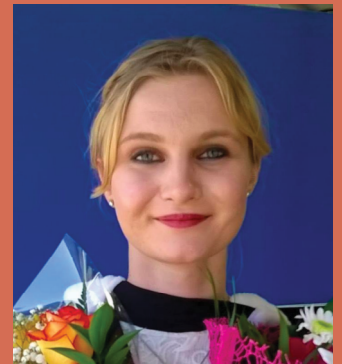
As a student in my TESL certificate program, I would have definitely felt more confident and less patronized if the Adult ESL Learner teacher had asked me for my input, via a survey, for example, before the start of an online, technologically-heavy course. Do I know email? Check. YouTube? Check. Blogging? Check. Can I teach this to my peers? Clearly, the professor had more experience teaching and more knowledge of pedagogical theories than we did, but there's no reason to believe that she should therefore know more about making videos, or dealing with YouTube.

There is still a lot more work to be done to incorporate technology in the L2 classroom, and it starts from a shift in attitude, a shift towards acknowledging the knowledge of students, be it in a TESL certificate program or an ESL lesson. We cannot escape from technology. The classroom should not be disconnected from reality, as it so often is.

## References

- Brown, H., & Lee, H. (2010). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy* (Vol. 3). White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.
- Carr, N. (2008, July & Aug.). Is Google making us stupid? *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>
- Lam, Y. (2000). Technophilia vs. technophobia: A preliminary look at why second-language teachers do or do not use technology in their classrooms. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 56(3).
- McClanahan, L. (2014). Training using technology in the adult ESL classroom. *Journal of Adult Education*, 43(1).

## Author Bio



Olga Taratuta is a professor in the ESL program at Humber College and a LINC/ESL Instructor for the Halton Catholic District School Board. After graduating from the University of Toronto with a Bachelor of Arts and major in English, she completed her TESL Ontario certificate at Humber College. Even though she just recently obtained her certificate, Olga has already worked with many ESL students from her time at Humber's Writing Centre, and the college's Summer Language Program. She is currently teaching English to international business students from China at Humber, as well as teaching a LINC beginner course to newcomers to Canada.