Choosing Appropriate Educational Technology Resources
by Tara Arntsen

Since educational technology has become so popular and the number of educational resources such as websites, apps, and software has risen dramatically in recent years, educators are now faced with the unenviable task of selecting resources to use. This is not easy, especially because new resources seem to spring up daily; however, keeping the following areas in mind can assist you in making your decision.

School Environment

First of all, consider your school environment. Are educators being encouraged to embrace new forms of technology, use commonplace educational technology (such as PowerPoint), or teach without technology entirely? Is there someone at your school who can help teachers with technology training and setup? If there are computers in every classroom, iPads readily available, and an administration that is pro-tech, that will definitely influence what materials you even consider.

The present technology at your school, as well as your program's budget, may determine whether you research websites, apps, software, or some combination of those three.

- **Websites:** Websites are typically the easiest to access since they can be reached from any device with an internet connection. Many websites, although not all, are completely free, have free basic accounts, or are free to try.
- **Apps:** Apps are most common for mobile devices such as iPads and smartphones. Like websites, some apps are free and others cost a fee. Luckily, a quick search on Graphite shows many apps for under 5 U.S. dollars.
- **Software:** Software (e.g., many educational games) has to be installed on specific devices and would mostly likely only be accessible to students on certain computers at school. Consider what devices are available to students at home and at school. Software is typically the priciest category, and if you think of programs like Rosetta Stone, you can see how quickly it could add up—but again, some resources are free.

If you test something out that is not free and like it, make a recommendation to your school and start the process of getting funds to make that purchase.

Students

Security
Next, think about your students. Their age will dictate quite a bit. If you work with young learners, security is generally a big concern for schools and parents, whereas with adults, this is less of an issue in many ways. For example, if I taught elementary school, I would use Kidblog for blogging because its basic account is free and the site markets itself as being safe and secure. For classes at the university level, I would use Blogger because this is a site that students would use outside of class as well. Many sites address security concerns in a FAQ section, and I highly recommend you read up on this area in preparation for discussing security issues with your administration.

Language Level
Language level will also impact your choice. A resource with complex language would not be appropriate for anyone except students with high levels of English. Now imagine you have a class of very low level adult students. Do you choose the reading website designed for grade school students with easy English and children's stories, or the one designed for adults with material way beyond their level? In this situation, just keep looking. You are bound to find something appropriate for both the age and language level of your students.

Student Technological Savvy
Students' familiarity with technology in general will make a difference, too. In many countries, students start using computers or smartphones at a young age. However, this is not true everywhere. Do your students currently use computers, tablets, or smartphones regularly? How easy it is for them to navigate online? Teaching students basic tech skills in addition to whatever language objectives you have may be overwhelming for both you and them. As an ESOL educator, you want to focus primarily on developing language skills, with technology skill development being a good bonus. Try to choose materials that you think students will have an easy time adapting to based on the tech skills they already have.

Teacher Technological Savvy

You are also an important aspect of this, and not only because you are making the decision. Your level of comfort and familiarity with the resources you choose is of the utmost importance. Some educators feel pressured into integrating technology into their classrooms, choose the wrong ones for their teaching styles, and everyone suffers. If a particular app looks appealing to you and you can easily test it with a small group of students initially, do it. The more complicated it is to set students up with the material, the more time you should test it prior to rolling it out in the classroom. Having said that, some students absolutely excel with technology and if these students are in your classroom, you might decide to take the leap and let them lead you, instead.

Personal preferences will also play a role in this process. For example, if you do not have a smartphone (and I will reluctantly admit here that I don't), it is unlikely that you will choose an app for students to use. How would you test it? If you own a Mac and a particular piece of software is only compatible with PCs, you may have the same issue. If your school is investing in certain types of devices, such as tablets, you may find yourself making similar purchases for personal use to keep ahead of the curve.

Other Considerations

Resource Accessibility
Resource accessibility is worth considering, too. Some websites, for instance, are amazing—but it takes inordinately long to get students set up with accounts and logged in. It should never take longer to get access to the material than to the complete the learning task. On the other hand, if you plan on using something regularly throughout the semester or year, spending a class period getting students started would not be wasted time.

Resource Affiliations

Affiliations or sponsors are worth looking into as well and can give you some insight about the materials. There are some companies and organizations that have built their reputations on quality traditional educational materials, so you might find their materials for the 21st century digital classroom equally reputable. Others, for example the BBC, are well known in other fields and you might be surprised to discover that they offer great resources for ESOL teachers and students, too. Some materials are sponsored by governments, like Connected Educators, which is tied to the U.S. Department of Education. Materials that lack these prominent backers may be very good, but you might find comfort in using materials from familiar sources.

Real World Applications
From a tech standpoint, it would be ideal if all the resources you use in the classroom had real world applications. For example, you can use Dropbox to have students submit written assignments; its real world application comes into play because Dropbox is the digital version of handing in a piece of paper, but its real world applications are limited. If you are going to integrate technology into your writing course, why not create a blog for students? This way students can still learn about the course content, writing, but also learn about blogging, which is such a popular form of communication today. Students improve their written English and digital literacy skills. This really just follows the same logic that has led instructors to seek out authentic materials to use in class. What you do in class should prepare students for the rest of their lives.

Teaching Objectives
Finally and most important, what you teach will dictate what resources you should choose. If you would like to use technology in your classroom, do not choose the technology first and fit your teaching objectives to it. It is absolutely crucial that you choose your objectives first and then seek out a resource that will assist you and your students in reaching it. Resist the urge to try random materials in your classroom because they look attractive or fun; focus on what you do best: language teaching.

There are tons of resources out there, so finding, testing, and committing to one can be time consuming, but research is a good place to start, and you can build up from there. Taking recommendations from other educators and reading reviews on sites like Graphite can point you in the right direction. Considering the factors detailed above prior to selecting educational technology resources will help you make the best decision for you and your students.

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