

4-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Bursztynsky, Natalie, "How Technology Has Affected the English Language Learning Classroom" (2010). *Technology Essay Contest Winners*. Paper 1.

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How Technology Has Affected the English Language Learning Classroom

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There was a time when English Language Learners (ELLs) were given a large transition period to adapt to their new language before being deposited in a core-curriculum, English-only classroom. Today, however, there is a push for ELL students to be transitioned into core-curriculum classrooms as soon as possible, and often this means limited to no time in an English-learning classroom. The responsibility for these students then rests on the teachers, most of whom have never been taught how to adapt their curriculum to serve the needs of ELL students. Thankfully, there is one thing in common between teachers and these students that may help to bridge the language barrier and allow ELL students to better understand their new language: technology. While the need for new ways to reach ELL students grows, technology continues to advance. Blogs, videogames, video-conferencing, MP3 players, and much more can all be made accessible to and adapted to help ELL students.

Blogs

Yang (2009) describes a blog as, “an online journal that users can continuously update, in their own words, online.” Blogs are relatively easy to use as anyone who has the ability to type can make one. Blogs are also completely interactive, allowing users to write their own thoughts and to respond to others’ posts.

Blogs are useful tools for teachers hoping to help ELL students. Yang makes the observation that it can be difficult to motivate language learners to read items in their new language. Blogs allow students to read and write things that they are actually interested in. This allows students to combine what they read with discussions among peers to make what they have learned in their new language more meaningful and easier

to grasp (Yang, 2009). Teachers who make use of blogs in their classrooms allow their ELL students to work on their literacy, language, and grammatical skills in a way that seems exciting to students.

MP3 Players

Music has long been used in the classroom to help students learn. Often, teachers will accompany a lesson they would like the students to memorize with a jingle to help the words stick. If music can help students memorize the fifty states, it is only logical to think that it can help ELL students to remember the meanings of the words in their new English vocabulary.

Ullman wrote about a young teacher, Ms. Grace Poli, who started an after-school iPod program to help ELL students. Ms. Poli said, “When we worked with the iPods, the students were so engaged.” There were some students in Ms. Poli’s classroom who had never spoken before. These students listened to the music repeatedly and eventually were singing the lyrics along with the music. Ms. Poli used the music to teach grammar lessons, allowing students to correct grammatical errors in their native languages and then discuss the meaning of the lyrics. Students also listened to audiobooks first in their native languages and then in English. The iPod allowed students to view the meaning of vocabulary words while listening to the stories. At the end of the year, half of the students in Ms. Poli’s class were able to transition into English-only classrooms, a task that usually takes four to six years (2010). Using MP3 players allows students to engage in a hands-on way of learning that stimulates multiple areas of their brains. This creates a more effective way of learning than lectures, which can only stimulate one or two areas of the brain at a time.

Digital Jumpstarts

Schema, the background knowledge that a student has on a topic, is very important. Without it, students may learn a topic on a surface level, but they will never be able to fully comprehend it and it will soon be forgotten. ELL students, who often lack schema about many subjects because of their limited vocabulary, have an even harder time comprehending what they are learning than their English-speaking peers. According to Rance-Roney (2010), teachers can give their students the more intensive instruction that is needed through digital jumpstarts.

Digital jumpstarts are storytelling or moviemaking software programs that allow ELL students to develop language skills through scaffolding reading. Digital jumpstarts combine vocabulary, sounds, the teacher's voice, pronunciation, and background information into one program (Rance-Roney, 2010). With these programs, students can replay the disks as many times as they need to understand what is being taught. It can also be sent home for ELL students and their families to practice using. This allows students to feel like they are taking control of their own learning which gives them a sense of motivation. It also has benefits for teachers; it helps them better understand students' cultures and language needs (Rance-Roney, 2010). Teachers who better understand where their students have come from and what difficulties they now face can teach in a way that will be more effective to their students.

English language learners are a growing percentage of students in today's classrooms. These students' educational needs will continue to grow, but so will technology. Blogs, MP3 players, and digital jumpstarts are just a few of the technologies that are already available. There are multiple technologies today that can be incorporated

into the classroom, and teachers can be comforted in the fact that there will always be something to keep them one step ahead in the English language learning classroom.

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