

Using Smartphones in the Classroom [20 ideas]

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I have spent a great part of my teaching career teaching young ESOL students. Sadly, a substantial part of that trying to police and prohibit using smartphones in the classroom.

Eventually I have to concede that it was a pointless exercise and a missed opportunity. I could have done all the things I am talking about below.



Some easy ways of using smartphones in the classroom.

There is a myriad of apps and websites available for teaching English and other subjects (these can perhaps be the subject of a future post), but I will focus on the free, simple and easily accessible resources on every run-of-the mill smartphone.

Many are obvious and I am sure many teachers use them regularly. However if, like me, you have not embraced technology as much as you could have done, I hope it will give you some incentive to do so now.

Some easy ways of using smartphones in the classroom

Access to Internet and social media

It's funny how easy it is to forget that the educational value of the internet is at each student's fingertips throughout the lesson. The same applies to social media and the various platforms that can be shared there (*padlet, blendspace, linoit, polleverywhere* etc.)

Emails

Communicative language tasks can be done via email across different parts of the class or even different classrooms. How often do you move students around and get them to do a speaking or writing task using pen and paper? If you have young learners who cherish that, great.

However if, like me, you were met with long faces, how about they stay where they are, text and/or email the work to each other, or use shared documents.

Circular writing where students create a story or other text, contributing one email at a time and sending it to another student. He/she then adds to it and forwards it and so on until the story is finished. The teacher is copied and has a record of the work.

SMS

Short basic conversations for lower level ESOL/EFL can be done using texts.

Reminders from Teacher. Reminding students what they need to do for the next lesson when they are packing their bags and dashing to the door is likely to be less effective than a text after the lesson. Use texts to send key words/language regularly to aid memory.

Voice recorder

Good for pronunciation work and real language analysis. Learners can record:

- themselves speaking English in any context
- their classroom interactions during "find someone who..." activities, for example.
- Conversation outside the classroom to interview others (preferably native speakers) in the school or in the street as part of a project or activity.
- extracts from the radio or TV.

The students' collected samples give you an opportunity to analyze the language, discuss where they collected them (context-register etc.), and provide feedback.

Camera

To enhance student work and generate discussions. Students can use photos or videos to

- Create a visuals about their daily routine/work/house/hobby/everyday objects they use. In fact the work on every topic, grammar or vocabulary item from beginners to Upper Intermediate (at least) can be supplemented with photos. Think of all the times you asked students about their weekend or holiday, their hometown, family, pets etc. Wouldn't it have been more interesting to listen to their answers while photos or clips appear on their phones or on a Data Projector.
- Bring authentic English text (signs, news headlines, notices) in the classroom for discussion.
- Copy notes and language from the whiteboard/smartboard. I am sure your students are doing this already but, again, how often your students waste valuable time while trying to copy notes?
- Shared documents



Students can text and/or email their work to each other, or use shared documents.

Google docs are ideal for circular writing, peer correction, simultaneous writing, academic writing with drafts, etc.

Notes/Memo

To collect everyday language.

Most mobile phones have a feature that allows the user to take notes. Students can use this to jot down the English they read or hear outside of school and either present the notes to the class or send them to you as a text message.

This activity helps break the boundary between the classroom and the “outside world” when students tend to switch off their learning.

TIPS

Using any sort of technology in the classroom, or generally for language teaching, is likely to be a long-term investment and for this to work teachers need to:

1. Engage with mobile technology themselves before they use it in learning activities.

2. Set clear learning objectives to minimise distractions: *“Go to website x and find 3 photos of y”* is more effective than *“go on the internet and see if you can find some photos of y.”*
3. Keep its use realistic otherwise it will overwhelm students and put them off. It helps to introduce mobile learning activities one at a time.
4. Use it both in and outside the classroom.

Using Smartphones in the Classroom: Things to consider

Costs

Can all students afford it (bundles/tariffs they are on)? Or do they have to share if some students say have unlimited texts, for example?

Noise and disruption in class

- Set ground rules.
- Have clear tasks (rubrics and outcomes).
- Notify management to ensure you don't get into trouble.

Privacy

- Use a school mobile rather than your own if possible.
- Get parents' consent to use mobile phones in school for young learners.
- Get learners permission to share numbers.