



Supporting English Language Learners Through Technology

SUMMARY

English language learners benefit from the reinforcement of vocabulary and concepts through pictures, graphics and video. They also benefit from being able to use technology to express themselves. As the authors demonstrate, technology helps English language learners find a voice, easing the transition to a new language.

If you are looking for a way to add excitement to your lessons and connect with more of your students, technology is the answer! Utilizing and combining graphics, video, and audio can address varied styles of learning in a more effective way and be a tremendous support to English language learners. Finding a way to infuse technology into instruction not only helps English language learners acquire a second language, but also enhances motivation and confidence (Lacina, 2004; Lin, 2009). The *National Education Technology Plan 2010* focuses on using technology to transform the American educational system (US Department of Education, 2010). As educators, we are in the unique position to embrace new technologies and use them to enhance curriculum while better engaging each of our students.

Acquiring a New Language

It is important to understand how students acquire a new language in order to appreciate the significance that technology can have in ensuring success for English language learners. Research shows that it can take more than five years for the average child learning a new language to acquire the academic language necessary to succeed in school. Successful acquisition requires two types of skills: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS refers to social or conversational language, while CALP is the academic language needed to comprehend and analyze a textbook or understand a presentation by a teacher (Cummins, 1996). This distinction explains why it often appears that some English language learners have a better grasp of English than they actually do.

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“Conversational fluency is often acquired to a functional level within about two years of initial exposure to the second language, whereas at least five years is usually required to catch up to native speakers in academic aspects of the second language” (Cummins, 2000, p. 76). By using multimedia technology to incorporate pictures or video into the lesson, the teacher can provide students with the necessary contextual cues to understand new concepts. Visual information can provide the necessary bridge or scaffold between everyday language and more difficult academic language (Cruz, 2004). In addition, technology allows students to show what they have learned in *multiple* ways — offering a more accurate assessment of their growth.

Hardware

Many schools are installing new types of hardware into classrooms and computer labs that can make a tremendous impact on instruction.

Interactive Whiteboards

One of the most common types of hardware used in schools is the interactive whiteboard (Davis, 2007). This

technology is an excellent tool for presenting multimedia lessons and encouraging student participation. If you are unfamiliar with how an interactive whiteboard works, think of the board as a large computer screen and the pen as the mouse. There are numerous benefits of an interactive whiteboard over a traditional chalkboard. For example, the teacher:

- No longer needs to erase notes from the board in order to make room for more information. This is problematic for English language learners who have difficulty copying and comprehending simultaneously. Notes and visuals can be saved for students to review later.
- Can save the note files and post them to a website or print them out.
- Can go back and forth between different pages of notes in order to help students make connections with previous lessons.
- Is able to incorporate pictures, videos and organizers with ease, thus assisting English language learners to more fully understand concepts and learn new vocabulary.

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Document Cameras

Document cameras, like the one manufactured by Elmo, can project images directly onto a whiteboard, allowing teachers to write notes on the projected image. Document cameras can be used to project pictures, pages from textbooks, student work and even three-dimensional objects.

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Web-based Software

Video is a particularly powerful tool. Commercially produced video and teacher-created video can greatly enhance classroom instruction. In addition, having students create their own videos can help them express their thoughts and show what they have learned. There are many software programs that make video production easy and fun, such as Animoto, Microsoft Movie Maker, and Apple iMovie.

Microsoft Photo Story 3.1 is a free user-friendly program that is available as a download for Windows users. This program brings new life to traditional picture slideshows by allowing users to customize motion, include voice narration and add music. The final product can be saved as a video. Software such as Photo Story can be used in a variety of ways to assist English language learners. For example, Photo Story can be used to summarize a particularly difficult concept or lesson. Since oral language is acquired before written language, this allows students to showcase and reinforce what they have learned. Students can work independently or in small groups to create a Photo Story project on an assigned topic. Students use the Internet to find pictures and information, then create and record dialogue to go along with the images. Public speaking can be intimidating for



language learner is able to see what is being addressed while listening to the information. The major advantage to a document camera is the ease with which almost anything can be quickly displayed for a large group.

English language learners. With this approach, students can narrate each picture and do not have to feel overwhelmed by the demands of the task (Lacina, 2004). Students feel more confident knowing that they can erase and redo any recording. Through the use of these types of projects, students can demonstrate a level of comprehension that may be difficult to assess using traditional methods such as an essay or multiple choice format. By requiring that students incorporate some of the vocabulary of the unit into their project, they are also further developing their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).

This type of software can also be used for creative writing. Many students, including English language learners, find it difficult to express themselves in writing. When using Photo Story to facilitate creative writing, the students start by creating a brief outline of their story ideas. Next they create several illustrations to go along with the outline. The illustrations are scanned into the computer and imported into Microsoft Photo Story. The students then develop and record the narration to accompany the story. The final project includes the Microsoft Photo Story video as well as a transcript of the narration. Projects like this allow students to use their Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) to express themselves.

Jean is a student who benefited from the use of Photo Story: A middle school English language learner at the beginner level, Jean had a very limited English vocabulary but was able to understand basic language and simple syntactic structures. Jean was in the “silent period,” where he absorbed language but was not yet ready to express his understanding through spoken or written English. During this stage, students will begin to understand basic language but are not yet able to communicate that understanding. Forcing them to speak can be counterproductive, and in turn, slow down their learning process since it erodes confidence and creates a stressful learning environment. The use of technology can provide the opportunity for students to demonstrate their knowledge while reducing much of the accompanying stress.

Jean’s ESL class was completing a unit on *Aesop’s Fables*. The students were required to summarize and reflect on the lesson in each fable. Jean’s ESL teacher guided him in using Photo Story to engage in this task. Despite the fact that Jean was uncomfortable speaking in English, he was able to complete the project in a way that enabled him to demonstrate his understanding.

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Since Jean showed an interest in art, his teacher encouraged him to use this ability to retell the story through pictures and simple narration. The success of this project seemed to contribute to the confidence he needed to emerge from the silent period.

Social Networking

Forms of social networking such as discussion boards can be beneficial for English language learners since they “encourage students to collaborate with others and participate in experiential learning experiences” (Lacina, 2004, p. 114). Discussion boards can create a platform for students to be actively engaged in academic and social English while outside of the classroom environment. There are several social networking programs available on the Internet, such as Dave’s ESL Café, Classroom 2.0, and Moodle. Edmodo is a free social networking program that provides “an intuitive way for teachers and students to stay connected in a safe and secure learning environment” (Edmodo, 2010). This program allows teachers to post assignments, discussion topics, links and even videos. Students can comment on and discuss these topics within the framework of the Edmodo site. The teacher has full control to edit or delete comments. Also, students cannot privately interact with

classmates through this program, making it easier for teachers to track student behavior and work. Another benefit of this program is that students can submit assignments electronically, saving paper and reducing the possibility of lost assignments. Teachers can grade and comment on assignments through the site as well.

Anita is a student who benefited from a social networking program: Anita began the school year as an intermediate level English language learner who had difficulty expressing herself in spoken and written language. Her social studies teacher noticed that she was more comfortable using social networking sites, and she was able to express herself using the Edmodo discussion board. As the year progressed, Anita appeared to transfer some of the skills she developed through the use of Edmodo to classroom discussions. Her proficiency with language advanced, her comfort level seemed to increase, and her level of engagement was greater. While improvement in Anita’s development was undoubtedly linked to many aspects of her educational program, it appears likely that this strategy was influential in her growth.

English language learners in particular benefit from the reinforcement of vocabulary and concepts through pictures, graphics and video. They also benefit from being able to use technology to express themselves. Technology helps English language learners find a voice, easing the transition to a new language. To help students learn as much as possible and to demonstrate that knowledge, we need to fully and creatively use what advances in technology have to offer.

Additional Online Technology Resources

<http://www.freetech4teachers.com>

Free resources and lesson plans for teaching with technology

<http://www.mimio.com>

Teacher-created lessons for interactive whiteboards in the classroom

<http://www.animoto.com>

Create videos using photos, video clips, and music

<http://www.youblisher.com>

Allows you to turn PDF documents into flipable online magazines

<http://forums.eslcafe.com/student/>

Free discussion board forum for ESL students and teachers

<http://moodle.com>

Allows you to create teacher-hosted classroom discussion boards and online courses

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