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**Technology in Adult Education ESOL Classes**

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**Abstract**

Today's world is filled with technology resources such as cellphones, iPods, laptops and the internet. By using these technological resources, adult education ESOL teachers can improve instruction, boost learning and better prepare students for real world English use. This article examines advantages of technology use and offers examples of successful classroom implementation.

**Introduction**

Historically, technological inventions eventually require a corresponding change for classroom teachers. Quill pens evolved to fountain pens and then ballpoints. The abacus became a calculator. Typewriters were replaced by desktop computers. Each new invention has led to significant instructional shifts for educators.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century calls for even greater response to and use of technology in classrooms. Many types of technology have been introduced that would have been unimaginable only a short time earlier. The iPod (2001), wireless headset (2002), camera phone (2003), YouTube (2005) and iPhone (2007) are just a few examples (Bellis, n.d.).

Technology resources used by many teachers for years are now being phased out. VHS and cassette tapes are following dodo birds and dinosaurs into extinction and being replaced by DVDs, CDs, iPods and the internet as new systems for playing videos and audio.

This article explores the benefits of using current

technology, offers suggestions for effective implementation and provides sample lessons for incorporating multiple technologies to enhance learning in adult ESOL classrooms.

**Benefits of Technology in Adult ESOL Classrooms**

New technology provides both an opportunity and an obligation for adult education ESOL teachers. Wappel (2010) puts it this way: "technology has made a huge impact on the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language in the U.S.A." She notes that teachers now have a vast array of technology resources to help students move from their native language to English.

Further, Wappel (2010) contends that through the use of laptops, video cameras and especially the internet, students are making notable advances in their learning. Technology improves the quality and impact

of the lessons, helping students perform better. Additionally, many students are able to enroll in regular college classes more quickly. She states that technology is a key component to the success of English language learners.

Beare (1999) agrees about the power of technology in the classroom. He contends that computers provide advantages over more traditional instructional approaches. Beare notes that computers not only offer the option of listening exercises, but also the use of students' motor skills for typing, which can provide further enticement for learning.

The engagement aspect of technology is another important benefit. All learners need stimulation and varied learning methods. Technology offers students the chance to "do" as they learn, using hands and minds. Clicking the mouse or typing words on the keyboard gives physical stimulation. Many online activities provide instant visual and/or verbal feedback with congratulations or corrections. Students whose instruction includes music videos are developing their listening skills. When maps, graphs, text or pictures are part of an online lesson, reading and study skills are exercised.

Another notable advantage of technology use with items such as computers and iPods is that learning becomes self-paced. Students have more control over their learning. They can repeat exercises as they choose, or move on to the next items. They can determine which activities are most important to their needs and focus on those. Beare (1999) writes regarding the adult ESOL classroom, "Probably the strongest argument for the use of the computer in the classroom environment is that of student self-pacing." As an example, he notes that students using the computer for pronunciation help can record themselves and then repeat the process until they are satisfied with the results.

The use of technology in the classroom environment also prepares students to search for and find information on the internet. When a question is asked, the instructor can assist the student in looking up the answer on Google, Dictionary.com, Mapquest, or other sites. These learning opportunities then expand into "real life"

as students become competent in finding information on their own.

Using technology such as iPods and laptops also allows students to hear more than just the teacher's voice in instruction. Listening to a podcast, doing an online dictation activity or filling in lyrics from a music video requires students to concentrate on hearing English from another source. It broadens their ability to hear and understand English. It also shows students a range of resources which they might use outside the classroom.

Hopey (1999) notes the uses of technology have grown "exponentially" in adult literacy and adult education. Hopey states that "evidence exists that adults who use educational technology can acquire greater knowledge and develop active learning skills, problem solving skills and critical thinking skills." Hopey also says program directors see technology as a way to motivate adult learners to attend classes. He points out that adults attend programs when they see their learning goals being met. Technology can make instruction more vigorous and teach students ways to better function in the world.

### **Implementation of Technology in Adult ESOL Classroom**

To maximize the benefits of using technology in adult ESOL classrooms, Hopey (1999) suggests the following guidelines. His views, while coming on the cusp of the new millennium, remain relevant more than a decade later. He contends that to get the highest quality and effectiveness from technology, adult education programs should follow five implementation points. These points are:

1. Planning: having a blueprint or plan is critical in using technology in adult education.
2. Training: because technology is complicated, adult educators need training to achieve the maximum benefit from using it.
3. Technical support: technology does not always work as it should. Teachers need technical support to maintain and get

maximum use.

4. Leadership: successful implementation of a technology requires the endorsement of program administrators. Some teachers can offer informal leadership and support.
5. Resources: technology can be expensive in money and time.

Programs wishing to include technology need to allocate appropriate amounts of financial and personnel resources. Hopey (1999) concludes with an eye opening assessment of adult education and technology use. He states that adult educators are usually last to use new technology for two reasons: a lack of training and money, and a lack of demand and vision. He notes that adult educators often think new technology is too difficult to understand and too time consuming to learn to use effectively. He challenges adult educators to understand the potential benefit of technology for their students. Hopey states that following these five implementation points is crucial if new technology's potential is to be used fully in adult education programs. Some years later, Bash (2003) encourages adult educators to be leaders in the use of technology because of their student population. He explains it this way: "The entrepreneurial response required to serve this population results from adult students' dynamic lifestyles and their experiences beyond the campus. Such learners constantly bring new experiences into their classrooms based on their own current work and life challenges." The author notes that adult students have more dramatic shifts in their educational needs than those of younger students. A veteran educator with more than 30 years experience in adult, college and high school education, Bash contends today's economy requires workers to be technology literate. He notes that nearly every profession now demands technology literacy, and adult education can play a major role in helping students gain this type of competency, which leads to job security. Boulmetis (1999) writes that the use of technology can be instrumental in helping adult students achieve their learning goals. Thus the implementation of technology is beneficial to adult ed programs for student retention.

## Computers in Adult ESOL

Computers are considered a key component in the technology arsenal. The *Handbook of Literacy and Technology* (Reinking, 1998) includes a chapter on the use of Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI). The authors (Askov & Bixler, 1998) describe CAI programs which allow students to do self-paced instruction through teaching modules designed to meet specific learning needs. Either at computer labs or at classroom computer stations, learners use this technology to improve their skills with such things as workplace vocabulary, pronunciation or life skills. The authors explain that teachers remain essential as facilitators in helping students and note that even when technologically delivered instruction is used, learners still need assistance from teachers.

Askov and Bixler (1998) detail how CAI can make instruction more meaningful to students and challenge adult education programs to use this technology to transform and deliver student-driven learning. But the authors are not optimistic in their conclusions. They note that while the cost of computers and software come down, many programs are still not using technology. While their article was written more than a decade ago, their conclusions are current. They contend that many teachers have not yet changed their view of instruction, from teacher centered of the past, to student centered using technology. They write that it is difficult to change the way instruction is delivered when most adult education teachers are part time and there is usually little if any in-service training.

## Technology Helps with Numbers

In addition to meeting the needs of students, being able to serve vast numbers of potential learners is a key issue in any discussion of the use of technology in adult education. Statistics (Census,2000) reveal the huge number of people for whom English is not their principal language. The census reports that of the 262 million people in this country age five and older, nearly 18 percent speak a language other than English at home.

This represents almost 47 million people. Interestingly, for nearly two-thirds of those 47 million, the language spoken at home is Spanish. Many of those millions of adults are presently seeking or will be seeking to improve their English language skills. They are part of a huge number of adults in this country who need college and job readiness skills. A report by the National Commission on Adult Literacy called *Reach Higher, America* (2008) declares that the United States is facing a crisis, with our educational system for both children and adults failing to produce productive and effective members of the country's workforce. The report finds that about half of the American labor force has at least one significant educational barrier which prevents them from achieving a 21<sup>st</sup> century job that pays a living wage. These barriers include those with limited English skills. The Commission notes that two million immigrants come to this country each year. Many of them have low literacy levels and lack English language skills. The report says the need and demand for ESOL services is far more than current programs and teachers can provide.

In a follow-up to *Reach Higher*, the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy published its own report looking at adult education and workforce skills. This document, *The Power of Technology to Transform Adult Learning* (McCain 2009), seeks to answer the growing needs in adult education and workforce skills training by turning to technology on an unprecedented scale. The authors present the need to use technology to increase access to and to improve adult education and workforce skills training.

While noting that technology is not a remedy for all that ails adult education and workforce skills programs in the United States, technology is seen as a key part of the solution. The sheer size of the need is the main reason. The National Commission on Adult Literacy (McCain 2009) is calling for these programs to serve at least 20 million adults by the year 2020, 17 million more than are being served annually now. The Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy's report states without technology, only a fraction of those adults in need can be accommodated. Another key factor is that

today's world requires more and more technology literacy. The authors note that technology skills are essential for adults who want to improve their work and language skills. According to projections by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, by the year 2016 more than 70% of all jobs in the U.S. will require some amount of technology skill.

### **Tech Helps Build Literacy Skills**

The National Institute for Literacy (Silver-Pacuilla & Reder, 2008) looks at the availability of computer technology for low literacy adults and its possible value in increasing English skills. Their study finds that computer technology and the internet are ways to meet the growing need for literacy services. Researchers report that learners with the lowest literacy are more likely to seek out and use online learning opportunities than those with higher literacy levels. They contend that online learning engages adults and helps with workforce readiness as well as allows self-paced study.

Varied technology use is growing in adult education classrooms. Finn (2007) notes that there are already large numbers of resources which benefit adult learners and more are being created practically every day. Finn points to screen reading programs, which were originally designed for the visually impaired, as being extremely useful to students learning English. These text-to-speech programs highlight words and pronounce them. These programs help reinforce reading and speaking skills.

A report prepared by the National Institute for Literacy (Kruidenier, 2002) looks at the use of computer-assisted instruction (CAI) to teach reading to adults. Research is cited which suggests that CAI instruction is as effective as non-computer instruction for boosting reading comprehension. The authors say programs with read aloud aspects provide important help to learners.

### **Music as a Starting Point in Technology Use**

For teachers wanting to use technology in their

ESOL classes, one of the best starting points is music. Music videos are easy to find on YouTube and offer a chance for students to hear English in a different context. Students of all ages generally enjoy listening to music. To appeal to a broad range of musical tastes, teachers can vary the music styles from oldies, rock, pop, rap, country, and others.

Beginning students find the Beatles Song "Hello, Goodbye" an interesting and entertaining learning exercise. The vocabulary is limited and repetitive. Various versions of the song can be found on Youtube.com, some with singing and others that offer singing along with the lyrics being shown. As either a group exercise or individually with iPods, students can listen and fill in the missing lyrics with a cloze exercise worksheet. For example:

*The Beatles "Hello, Goodbye"*

You say yes, I say no.

You say stop and I say go go go, oh no.

You say \_\_\_\_\_ and I say hello

Hello hello

I don't know why you say goodbye, I say \_\_\_\_\_

Hello hello

I don't know why you say goodbye, I say hello.

Other Beatles songs which are good choices for cloze exercises include "When I'm 64," "Yellow Submarine" and "Here Comes the Sun." Don't be surprised if your students sing along with these songs and leave your classroom humming!

Music videos can also be used to build higher level vocabulary understanding. The 1979 hit tune "The Logical Song" by Supertramp is an example of a great resource when teaching adjectives to intermediate or advanced level ESOL students. This song contains more than a dozen adjectives. An interesting class activity is to have students look up the meaning of some or all of these adjectives before listening to the song. This can be done individually or by assigning different words to each student, who then report the results of their research to the whole class. Online resources for looking up the meaning of words include Dictionary.com or the Longman dictionary ([www.ldoceonline.com](http://www.ldoceonline.com)).

"We Are the World" is an example of a song which offers the chance to discuss global issues as hunger and fundraising. This 1985 song recorded by a superstar line-up of artists raised money for humanitarian aid to Africa. The song was remade in 2010 as a fundraiser for Haiti earthquake victims.

Current singers and their songs have special appeal to younger members of the adult education ESOL student population. Taylor Swift's songs "Love Story" and "You Belong to Me," Adam Young's "Fireflies" and David Cook's "Light On" are prime illustrations of new songs that are on the radio and Youtube, and the lyrics provide interesting cloze exercises.

### **Music Combined with Other Technology Sources**

For instruction beyond simply studying music lyrics, teachers can use a song in conjunction with other technology resources to expand the lesson. Here is an example of an activity using technology which adult education ESOL teachers with intermediate or advanced level students may want to try. These lessons require a computer, a projector to show the computer image on to a screen or wall, mini speakers to broadcast sound and an internet connection. For classrooms with no internet access, some of the material can be saved to a flash drive and played that way. Wikipedia and Dictionary.com can be replaced with printouts of the wiki page and a dictionary.

### **30 Minute Lesson Using Elvis Presley Song "In the Ghetto"**

Use a computer connected to a projector to do this activity as a class, projecting the computer image on to a wall or screen for the entire class to see. Students take turns leading this activity. Individual students go to the class computer and pull up each website, then enter the required information.

1. Look up *ghetto* on Dictionary.com. Discuss the meaning of the word.
2. Look up *slum* on Google images. (Do not look

up ghetto as many Google images for this term are not appropriate for viewing in a classroom setting). Have student(s) project multiple images of a slum. Discuss what a slum is and whether they have ever seen a slum and know what it's like. Slums in India were portrayed in the 2008 British film *Slumdog Millionaire*, which won an Academy Award for Best Picture.

3. Look up *Elvis Presley* on Wikipedia.com. Discuss Presley's background, singing career and death. Ask students if they are familiar with Presley and his music.
4. Watch and listen to Elvis sing "In the Ghetto" on Youtube (select 2:41 version posted by ramonda in 2006)
5. Hand out worksheets of the song lyrics with blanks for missing words and have students fill in blanks while listening again.
6. Go over lyrics and discuss what the song means to them. Do they like it? Why/Why not?

The John Lennon song "Imagine" provides a similar learning opportunity. Students can look up on dictionary.com words such as imagine, heaven, countries, dreamer, possessions. They can find pictures of the future and world peace on Google images. Wikipedia provides information on John Lennon. Youtube features versions of "Imagine" for students to watch and then fill in the lyrics.

For adult education programs with access to sets of iPods, these activities can be adapted to provide both large group and individual work. Teachers can synch the iPods and load the YouTube music video(s) to be viewed. After doing steps 1-3 as a group, students can listen and watch the music video on their own, fill in the lyrics, and then resume as a group activity for the discussion in step 6.

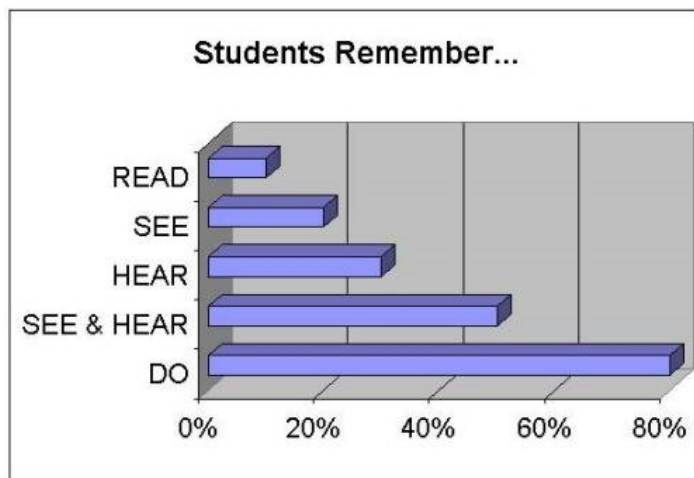
For most effective classroom use, each student using an iPod needs headphones or earbuds and adult education programs (or classroom teachers) may wish to buy sets and store them with the iPods to make sure all students have them when needed during class time.

Another option is to have students bring their own earbuds to class. This option is less effective since students often forget to bring theirs and new students are not aware of the need for earbuds.

### **Enhanced Instruction Through Technology Use**

Using music videos and other technology can enhance instruction and make it more real and engaging to students. Studies have found that students who are engaged in and interact with their learning retain more information (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Retention with Various Learning Methods



Source: [http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~tbayston/eme6313/learn\\_retention.html](http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~tbayston/eme6313/learn_retention.html)

A teacher wanting to present a civics lesson on the Statue of Liberty could talk about the statue, provide picture books to pass around and worksheets to complete. But with the use of computers and internet connection, the civics lesson becomes much livelier. Students can visit the US National Park Service website for an etour video or slide show of the statue, watch the Neil Diamond song "Coming to America" on Youtube to see footage of immigrants landing at Ellis Island, and

complete interactive puzzles and memory games from a variety of Statue of Liberty websites.

Instructors can also use the internet to produce activities to allow friendly competition among students. An engaging review of class material can be done through creating Jeopardy games and forming teams to answer curriculum based questions. There are many websites which provide Jeopardy templates. Other interesting educational games which test student knowledge are Hot Seat and Taboo. Templates are readily available on the web to create these class games.

### **Other Technology Resources for Adult Education ESOL**

A search of *adult ESL* on Google brings up more than four-million results. Lesson plans, teacher guides and interactive sites for students are just some of the seemingly endless number of sites available. Some of these offer listening and interactive comprehension activities. A good example is *Randall's Listening Lab* (esl-lab.com). On this site, students will find general listening quizzes rated easy, medium or difficult. Students listen to everyday conversations and then test their comprehension by completing a short online quiz.

Another site with lots of interactive activities is manythings.org which offers work on vocabulary, grammar, listening, and speaking. Students can choose the level of difficulty from beginner to advanced. Englishclub.com provides lessons, games and videos to help English language learners. The dictation exercises in the learning section are particularly useful for intermediate and advanced students.

One of the best aspects of using the internet is the ability to find a wide variety of resources. Now teachers across the globe can tap into websites where there is information to use in their classes. And it is easy to save and organize interesting websites by bookmarking them on a social networking site, such as delicious.com. A teacher can group websites on delicious using tags such as grammar, games, dialogues and technology for easy reference. Readers of this article who are interested in viewing the author's delicious site can do so by going to

<http://delicious.com/nball356>.

### **Technology Use in Adult ESOL Classes**

Using new technology resources in adult education ESOL classrooms requires both teachers and students to be flexible. When working with computers, the internet and iPods, things do not always go as expected. There are technical difficulties and glitches; thus, there is a need to be flexible and have a backup plan. Teachers and students can find that even mistakes and problems provide learning opportunities.

It is also important to note that attitude can determine whether new technology is a success or failure in the ESOL classroom. If a teacher is excited and enthusiastic about these new tools, then his or her students are more likely to be excited and enthused. Teachers who are reluctant to use technology may transfer that reluctance to their students.

### **Conclusion**

For some adult education ESOL teachers a whiteboard, worksheets and similar low tech options are staples of their class instruction. These tools have long been mainstays for successful ESOL teaching. But in today's 21<sup>st</sup> century society, new and creative resources are needed to help students achieve their goals of greater English proficiency and improved work skills.

One answer is expanded use of technology. As described in this article, most jobs already require some use of technology and soon nearly all will. Adult ESOL students want and need technology skills to compete for jobs. Adult education programs that incorporate technology in their teaching offer students the best opportunity to build not only their language skills but work and life skills as well. Students in these programs are likely to vote enthusiastically with their feet – and show up for ESOL classes.

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