Mobile technologies, friend or foe?

Kat Robb argues that the smartphone should be welcomed into the classroom and beyond.

With a current global subscriber rate of 3.8 billion at the time of writing, (https://gsmaintelligence.com/), I think it would be fair to say that most of us own a smartphone these days. In fact, many of us own more than one, and they are sometimes all connected at the same time. There's the work phone, the personal phone, and in some cases maybe even the 'secret' phone, that speaks for itself. There is no doubt then that these devices have permeated society at an incredible rate and more than any other electronic device known to date. The smartphone has become a companion that we carry with us everywhere and look at a countless number of times a day to check that somebody cares enough about us to send a message. Why then do many educators fear the incorporation of smartphones into their teaching practice when they are intrinsic to daily life and ubiquitous in society?

Pedagogy and mobile phones

Many would argue that there is no pedagogical value in using smartphones for teaching and learning, that they are a distraction in the classroom or even a gimmick. Some even consider materials presented digitally to be regressive in nature and that there is nothing wrong with textbook learning, which of course there isn't. However, I do strongly believe that like any teaching aid or material a teacher takes the pedagogical decision to use in the classroom, it's not what it is, but how it is exploited to meet learning goals and reach teaching aims, and if digital technologies and more specifically smartphones are able to do this, then welcome.

Today's learners are digital natives from the net-generation, technophiles who have grown up in an electronic environment with strong 21st-century digital skills. Many of our students have never experienced a life without smartphones or digital media. They wouldn't remember life when we put our fingers in circular holes on a dial to call a four-digit number to speak to a friend or relative, in a world before electronic devices became glued to the palms of our hands. If, like me, you do, you have quickly adapted to a digital life where everything one does is related to a screen, whether it be a tablet, a laptop or a beloved smartphone.

I think it seems unnatural therefore to exclude a device from the classroom that is such an integral part of our daily lives. Personally, I want to extend my students' learning, and encourage them to engage with English as much as possible, both inside and outside the classroom. I'd like them to take advantage of those lost moments while commuting and waiting around for class, where they would usually be involved in less cognitive activities like playing games or messaging friends, by encouraging them to use their phones for learning, and for them to be motivated to engage with English outside the classroom so that it too becomes an integral part of their day-to-day.

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Motivation

Motivation is often a large obstacle for learning. Just because students attend a lesson, does not equate to the fact that they are ready to learn, or are enthusiastic about the lesson ahead for that matter. From a teaching perspective, this is easy to pick up on but equally as easily disregarded and often not dealt with. I am not going to suggest for one minute that incorporating smartphones into our teaching practices will instantly solve this issue, but I do believe that

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motivation to learn can be increased by using a variety of tools and techniques, and smartphones are one of those. The affective impact of using smartphones for learning also needs to be given some consideration: people generally feel happy when using their phones, and that includes our students.

Furthermore, smartphone usage in class is a way of meeting learner expectations in the 21st century. It is also a way of bringing the outside world into the classroom and taking learning outside the classroom, thereby extending learning and not confining it to the boundaries of the classroom walls. With teacher support and guidance, students can begin to take ownership over their learning and harbour autonomous learning that is student-centred. In reality, smartphones are mini computers that open up a whole range of learning opportunities without the requirement of a computer cluster or expensive investment from the learning institution, and we all have them at our fingertips.

Activity ideas

There are a plethora of activities that have been designed to incorporate smartphones into the classroom. I'm sharing some of my favourites from different teaching contexts that I have found worked well and motivated my students. They serve as a guide to demonstrate some of the various ways that smartphones can be exploited in the classroom and the different contexts that they can be used in.

Instant messaging

Instant messaging apps like WhatsApp and WeChat are perfect for creating small communities of practice within a teaching environment. The existence of a learning community amongst my students and one that I am also a member of allows me the freedom to engage with them outside the classroom and prompt and encourage them, which they have personally told me motivates them. I wondered if they may be apprehensive of the teacher belonging to the group and if they would feel under constant scrutiny, but when I asked them they told me they had set up another group that I was not a member of!

Writing (General English and EAP)

Students view a YouTube clip, TED Talk or listen to a short audio excerpt open class or using their smartphones. In groups they discuss the content and each group produces a written summary of the main points with a maximum word count of 100 words. This is written up in the class instant messaging group. The groups read each other's summaries and peer correct them. Each group then reads their summary aloud open class, and if any student or group considers there is an error, they call out 'Stop!', and the error is discussed and corrected. This helps students strengthen their editing skills, focus on language structures, learn new vocabulary, and take the organisation of their ideas into account. This activity is student-centred, dialogic

and practises reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Creative writing (General English and EAP)

Students write a continuous story. The only rules are: maximum ten words and each student in turn. An alternative is for the current student writing to nominate the next person, or the first to start writing takes the lead. The teacher can monitor participation. This activity is heaps of fun, and a great warmer or foundation for extended writing. The teacher can offer the first 10 words, or set a theme, but essentially the activity is student led.

Reading (General English and EAP)

A written text can be uploaded to the WhatsApp group for the students to read at their own pace. The advantage of being able to read on individual devices is that the text can be saved on the device and, unlike papers that easily become lost, a digital document can be referred to at a later date and stored on multiple devices. I have uploaded texts and articles that students read in their own time, and were later discussed in class; or a written summary was uploaded to the WhatsApp group and they were compared and contrasted outside class, with students commenting freely. I have also given students a text to read via WhatsApp that was later discussed in class. These kind of freer activities help to scaffold autonomous learning and once students know they are also being assessed on their participation, they do participate.

Listening – Podcasts, SoundCloud and YouTube (General English, Business English and EAP)

The teacher uploads a short audio clip on soundcloud, or chooses a clip from a podcast or YouTube. Students listen on their personal devices so they can pause and repeat as desired. The idea is that the students can work at their own pace unlike conventional open class listening activities and this personalises the learning to their individual needs.

The clip can be used as the basis for a piece of written discourse discussing some of or all the main ideas, or a speaking activity. Depending on the content of the audio, specific features of connected speech may be the focus and students are guided to listen out for them and they are later discussed.

Pronunciation (General English, Business English, EAP and ESP)

The regular use of voice messages and voice-automated controls for smartphones has resulted in us not feeling quite so self-conscious when hearing a recording of our own voice. I regularly use the Dictaphone app with my students so they can record themselves, play back and reflect on their pronunciation. This purposeful and deliberate reflection helps them pinpoint features they would like to improve, and they set themselves goals to achieve. Recordings range from a mini presentation or elevator pitch, to audio guides for a museum or a favourite monument, or to reading a piece of their own writing aloud. The recording can also be in response to a discussion question given by the teacher.

Videos for presentations and reflection (General English, Business English, EAP and ESP)

In the same way that voice-recording apps can be used, short videos can also be created where students practise a specific element of giving a presentation, for example, and the footage is viewed to identify features for improvement, and objectives are set to improve for the next class.

As I have already said, the opportunities are endless and no, I don't think that using smartphones is suddenly going to revolutionise the proficiency of English learners worldwide. I do, however, think that it is worth keeping in line with the progressions of society, where for the most part, smartphones are a huge part of life, so I'd hope that they can also become a huge part of learning too.

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Next issue

Materials writing.

Over the last few years there has been a huge increase in the number of people writing materials either to be published or for in-house use. We are looking for articles which answer some of the following questions.

- How can you source interesting topics?
- How do you write texts to level?
- Is there anything new in current materials?
- What is the role of images in ELT materials?
- How can I write worksheets to supplement online video clips?
- What is the role of the editor in ELT publishing?
- How easy is it to self-publish?
- How do you write interesting exercises for class use?

Future themes

We are always keen to get articles from new writers in different parts of the world. Look at the topics below and contact **Robert.mclarty@pavpub.com** if you would like to contribute. Don't forget to send the idea first before we commission you to write. Deadlines for finished articles in brackets.

Issue	Theme
July 2016	Materials writing (May 20th)
October 2016	Teaching vocabulary (August 19th)
January 2017	Teaching teenagers (November 18th)
April 2017	English for Specific Purposes (February 17th, 2017)