

Keep calm and F.A.C.E IT: ICT is the least of your concerns!

Anna Hasper advocates knowing when and when not to use technology.

One of the greatest changes over the last 15 years has been the development of information and communication technology – ICT – or, in short, IT. Most teachers seem to agree that using technology in the English language classroom is a given, and using and extending digital literacy skills is expected as a part of a 21st-century education curriculum. Therefore, integrating IT tools into our lessons seems a necessary and logical choice even though little research provides evidence of the positive impact of technology on improved educational outcomes (Wright cited in Fraser & McGee, 2012: 228).

As a teacher-trainer I have observed many teachers using IT effectively in the classroom, but I wonder about the impacts on learning that the use of technology may have. Maddux (n/d) mentions the *Everest Syndrome*: teachers using IT 'because it's there' and this is exactly where I feel the problem lies. We all recognise the IT-addicted teacher walking into class armed with another YouTube clip, some cool apps and tons of links whilst seemingly neglecting key principles of effective teaching and learning.

Effective pedagogy should equip learners for life in its broadest sense and digital literacy is a part of that. However, a few apps does not automatically enhance effective pedagogy. Before deciding what technology to use, we

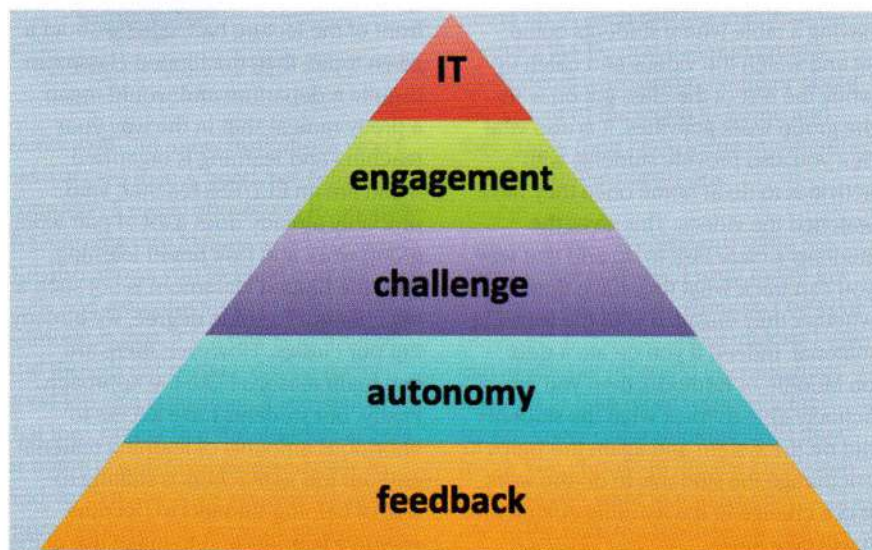


Figure 1: FACE IT: the foundations for effective practice

need to ensure several key ingredients are considered to provide 'a diet of effective teaching and learning'. Griffith & Burns (2012: 2) identify that opportunities for *feedback, autonomy, challenge and engagement* have a fundamental impact on students' learning. So shouldn't we facilitate these first before 'topping off our teaching' with the use of IT?

Focus on the added-value

Now, I'm not Luddite and I'm certainly not against using technology! When IT provides new possibilities for achieving objectives and enhances the foundations for effective practice

then bring it on! However, it's important to know when not to use technology. If IT complicates our delivery and negatively affects students' learning time, then why use it? If the foundations of effective practice are not in place, then how can the use of IT truly enhance learning?

I'm promoting that we take a more principled approach to using IT in the classroom, to shift our planning from *What IT shall I use today?* to first considering *What are my objectives?* and *How can I use IT to enhance my students' learning?* So in fact, it should be less about the tech and more about the teach as Bolstadt concludes (2006).

F.A.C.E. IT – principled teaching first, technology last

To reframe our thinking we need to think more critically about the role or potential of a certain IT tool in the learning process and thus in effect become smarter users. Only then can we integrate IT effectively to enhance students' learning. Basing the decision to use these tools on key principles should lead to a more pedagogically underpinned approach. You could say we're planning backwards to move learning forwards! I will now explore some practical IT tools for the classroom that can enhance Griffiths & Burns' (2012) key principles of effective practice.

1 Feedback

Finding a single definition of feedback is problematic as it is a rather complex concept. According to Wiggins (2012) feedback is information about how a learner is doing in his/her efforts to reach a goal.

Hattie (2011) adds that effective feedback also contains information regarding *how to improve* to get closer to an identified outcome. As such, effective feedback can be seen as a combination of information about progress made (feed-back), where we are going (feed-up) and actions to be taken to progress (feed-forward). It's important as, according to Hattie, effective feedback can be among the most powerful moderators of learning if it informs future teaching and learning. Below are several ways IT can be used to provide effective feedback.

- **Track changes** in Microsoft Word is likely to be a familiar tool, but it is a very useful feedback tool. The 'review' comments options in Microsoft PowerPoint can also provide learners with effective written feedback.
- **Google Drive** offers great possibilities for peer feedback where learners can collaborate and comment on their peers' work.

Using these tools for feedback might benefit students who prefer visual input,

whereas those learners who have an auditory preference might prefer the following.

- www.voicethread.com – here you can simply record your oral feedback and send it to learners. Even more effective could be uploading their annotated piece of writing (or a model) and record what makes it good and/or what could be improved.
- www.nearpod.com provides for a combination of written and oral feedback. Upload e.g. snippets of students' writing and provide your comments, via voice recording, and insert some quizzes. This will help students notice, and guide them towards improving written work more independently, priming them for independent self-assessment. You can differentiate your feedback by creating different groups within the presentation which may better meet particular learning needs.

2 Autonomy

Autonomy is often seen as the learners' ability to work independently in class, but according to Holec (in Little, n/d) it's more than that. It is also the ability to take charge and have responsibilities in the learning process. *Only* when students are given this agency and take ownership in the learning process by being active participants are they fully engaged, motivated and willing to learn (Fraser, 2012).

The rise of IT has greatly improved our opportunities to move away from teacher-centred learning and towards giving learners more choice in their learning process. However, we cannot assume they will make good choices. To develop language skills you may need to guide your learners in choosing a tool that truly extends their learning. For example:

- www.ted.com provides your learners with a wide variety of talks they can choose from to develop their listening skills. You could pre-select six or eight different talks and get students to work their way through

in their own time, most talks have transcripts available too. If you prefer more of a content focus and want questions to check understanding, ed.ted.com is a great source for short educational videos.

- www.zaption.com is a tool that allows you to insert your own questions to create interactive video experiences. By choosing the videos and tasks, you have more control over what target language students are focusing on. The only negative is that it is not free.
- To create a place for students to access all their choices you could use Moodle, Blackboard or a wiki, but these need some IT setup. For a simple solution I would recommend www.spaaze.com, a virtual corkboard where you can bring together your chosen links, videos and notes. You can even ask your learners to upload their ideas or comments onto the board.

3 Challenge

Can you recall a time when you had to work very hard to achieve a desired goal? I vividly recall some cold mornings outside trying to accurately complete a Kata (a sequence of techniques and moves in karate). A painful process, but when I finally succeeded I felt so much satisfaction.

Perkins (2009: 10) links learning to 'working through the hard parts'. An appropriate level of challenge will get students 'struggling' but also enhance engagement and gets them into a 'flow state' resulting in higher retention according to Csikszentmihalyi (1990). The art of teaching is to provide the right level of challenge to develop their potential. The tools below can help provide a level of appropriate challenge based on students' individual needs.

- www.acceleread.com helps learners develop their speed in reading. There are different levels of difficulty and the app adapts to students' current reading speed and takes them through a series of exercises based on their intended outcomes. A useful tool if you are teaching IELTS, EAP or struggling readers.

- Essay writing guide App: Teaching writing can be challenging with large or diverse performance classes. This app divides the elements of writing into four areas (content, style, organisation or the mechanics of writing) so you can select exercises according to a student's individual need.
- dreamreader.net provides reading texts focused on different aims – such as reading for academic purposes or reading for fun – and offers texts at different levels, covering a wide variety of topics. Based on your individual learners' needs you can direct them to work on lexis, comprehension or listening on a level of appropriate challenge.

4 Engagement

Using tools that increase engagement might be the most important pillar of effective learning. Engagement is the glue that sticks the other elements of effective practice together; it is a necessary condition for students to be fully involved, to be motivated and to be willing to take risks and ownership in the learning process. When students are fully absorbed, are in the flow, they are using their skills to the max which leads to more effective, deeper learning and enhances overall performance according to Czikszenimihalyi (1990). The following tools are some that have engaged my students fully in the past, but your students might well be different, so find out what engages them first!

- www.smore.com is a visual tool that enhances students' engagement in writing tasks such as research projects. Learners can write a text, paste it into a flyer online, insert videos, images and voice recordings. They can adapt the layout, fonts and design to tailor it to their needs.
- www.todaysmeet.com is an interactive 'backchannel' you can set up for a closed group of learners. Whilst you are explaining a topic, students can instantly answer your questions in written form or give you

feedback or share opinions through 'written chats'. This tool augments the traditional classroom alongside the primary activity. So you can channel their chatting to be used in a productive way!

- www.piktochart.com If you have learners who love design and tend to be visually inclined, this tool will engage them. There are various free templates learners can use to, for example, communicate their understanding of a reading or listening in a visual way. It is a great tool to enhance understanding of visual literacy and get learners to produce their own flowcharts, infographics, etc. to check understanding or summarise a project.

In a nutshell

As you can see, there is a wide variety of excellent IT tools available that can be used to enhance our teaching and students' learning and I'm sure you've got many other favourites you already use.

Bill Gates highlights that 'technology is just a tool, in order to enhance learning, teachers are much more important'. Indeed, I believe our role is to purposefully harness IT as a tool to support and enhance effective language teaching and learning rather than see the use of IT as a goal in itself. So to ensure that your IT choices are pedagogically underpinned, think about why are you choosing a particular tool and how it's enhancing the key principles of effective practice. Ask yourself *Will the tool enhance my learners' engagement? Will it challenge them appropriately? Does it provide opportunities for learners to take agency in the learning process? And what could I do to enhance giving effective feedback?*

Creating classroom cultures that promote the key principles above will enhance effective practice more than the use of IT alone. Smart use of IT in the classroom can facilitate a positive impact on learning but it depends on

us, as teachers, to make our own smart decisions to ensure this happens.

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Anna Hasper is a primary trained teacher and teacher development specialist. She delivers a wide variety of teacher training courses around the world, e.g. TKT, CELTA, YL- extension and loves travelling. She's a self-confessed addict to learning and is passionate about enabling English primary and secondary school teachers to enhance effective teaching & learning within their local constraints. Her special interest is educational psychology and in particular effectively feedback, developing a growth-mindset and learner-autonomy in the classroom.