ADAPTING FAMILIAR, NON-PEDAGOGICAL TECHNOLOGIES TO THE ELT CLASSROOM

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INTRODUCTION

A recent report issued by the global consulting company McKinsey & Company found that venture capitalists alone had invested more than $20 billion in educational technology in 2021, an increase of about 4000% since 2010 (Sanghvi & Westhoff, 2022). These investments are reflected in the glut of commercially available technology (or 'edutech') offerings available to teachers today, including learning management systems, assessment tools, material design tools, and more. The contemporary teacher, and especially the contemporary ESOL teacher, is inundated with an extraordinary assortment of new digital tools, each custom made for the educational space and designed specifically for teachers and learners. Yet despite the variety and quality of new edutech services, there is a case to be made against the hasty adoption of new, unfamiliar technologies and for an entirely different approach to bringing technology into the classroom. This paper will explain how an ESOL teacher can successfully adapt familiar, non-pedagogical technology into their ELT classroom.

The Case against New Tech

New technology is not, in principle, a bad thing, but when venture capitalists demand a return on their investment, the first priority for edutech companies must always be profit. New teaching technologies brought - often rushed - to market tend to advertise themselves as problem-solving tools, but in fact numerous problems can arise when adopting new edutech.

A learning curve for learners and teachers - Even software and applications with a simple interface require some amount of learning before they can be used to their full potential. Some services, such as learning management systems, include an array of complex tools, and it is not uncommon for teachers to ignore some elements of the system that they haven't yet mastered. Time is a precious resource in the classroom, and the time spent learning, for example, how to operate a new attendance system might better be spent on language teaching.

Asymmetrical understanding of technology - In some cases, the teacher's understanding of a program or application may exceed that of the learners, resulting in an asymmetrical understanding of the technology. This is likely to happen when the teacher uses the technology

every day, but the students are only exposed to it in only one lesson. In other cases, the learners for whatever reason may be more effective users of the technology than the teacher, and in yet another common scenario, some learners may be more familiar with the tech than others. These types of asymmetry may limit the usefulness of some technologies, which typically work best when all users have an approximately equal level of competence.

Bugs - Due to the financial incentive to bring a product to market as soon as possible, edutech tools are often rushed through the quality assurance process, resulting in flaws in the design and/or code.

Resource demands - Many edutech tools require resources, such as a stable internet connection, which are not available to users or are unevenly available. Even simple browser-based activities are limited in usefulness if not all users have access to a device with a stable internet connection.

Time demands - Every minute spent fussing with the colours in a presentation or reloading a page is a minute that could spent on real learning. From creating an account to verifying an email address to logging in to choosing an avatar, it is not uncommon for a teacher to lose control of an activity - and a lesson - when an edutech tool takes more time than expected.

The Case of Telegram in Uzbekistan

The idea for this paper emerged when the author observed how English teachers in Uzbekistan had begun incorporating the application Telegram into their teaching. Telegram is a freely-available messaging application that can be used on computers, tablets, and smartphones. In addition to basic messaging functions, Telegram also allows for audio and video calls and the sharing of audio and video files. It is especially popular in the post-Soviet space and in Uzbekistan in particular, with approximately 18 million active users - over half the country's population - connected to each other via Telegram (Ubaydullaev, 2021).

Telegram is not a purpose-made teaching tool, and at first glance, its pedagogical implications appear limited. However, through years of creative experimentation, many ESOL teachers in Uzbekistan have learned how to successfully incorporate Telegram as a core tool in their classroom. Teachers in Uzbekistan use Telegram to share teaching materials, which is especially useful in flipped classrooms; to coordinate class logistics and housekeeping, such as lesson cancellations and changes; to assess students, by, for example, instructing students to submit audio recordings of themselves speaking; and to facilitate students sharing their work with each other, for the purposes of peer assessment, a jigsaw activity, etc.

The success of Telegram as a teaching tool in Uzbekistan convinced the author of this paper to think more generally about how technologies not designed for classroom use might find themselves front and centre on a course syllabus. Clearly, the most important element is familiarity: due to Telegram's widespread use in Uzbekistan, the vast majority of teachers and learners already know how to use it and feel comfortable using it. There is, usually, no learning curve, no asymmetry of understanding, and no time wasted creating an account and logging in. The question then emerges: How can the success of Telegram be replicated with other familiar, non-pedagogical technologies?

A Methodological Approach to Adapting Technology for the ELT Classroom

This approach is designed to empower ESOL teachers to combine familiar, non-pedagogical technologies into their teaching practice. Inspired by the successful implementation of Telegram into ESOL classrooms in Uzbekistan, this approach consists of four steps: 1) gather information, 2) explore affordances and risks, 3) test and troubleshoot, and 4) share experiences. These steps are explored in detail below.

1) Gather information

In this step, the teacher is focused on gathering general information about the types of technologies that are already familiar to their learners. This step begins with direct consultation with students and other stakeholders with the intention of learning which devices and applications are most popular among them. These consultations can take the form of informal chats or more formal interviews, or some combination thereof. Surveys and questionnaires may also be used in this stage.

In addition to speaking with stakeholders directly, the teacher can also review statistics of application downloads and product sales, which may give a more big-picture view of which technologies are most widely used. This step ends with the teacher drawing up a list of familiar technologies.

2) Explore affordances and risks

In this step, the teacher begins exploring the potential advantages and disadvantages of using each type of technology identified in the previous step. In terms of affordances, the teacher should consider:

How can this tool be used to…

- provide input to learners?
- assess learners?
- promote learner engagement and participation?
- facilitate communication between learners & instructor and learners & each other?
- encourage intercultural awareness?
- build digital literacy?

If a tool can do one or more of the above, it may be worth implementing in the classroom. However, in addition to considering affordances, a teacher must also take care to assess the potential risks involved in bringing a new tool into the classroom. They can do this by asking: Is there a chance this technology might…

- demand resources that aren't accessible to all students and teachers?
- pose a risk to student privacy?
- make students uncomfortable, stressed, or anxious?
- be a distraction from learning?
- be considered inappropriate by parents or other stakeholders?

● be an inefficient use of time?

If a tool runs the risk of one or more of the above, then its implementation should be considered only with a great deal of caution. In an ideal case, a tool will present one or more affordances and no evident risks. In this case, the teacher moves on to the third step.

3) Test and troubleshoot

Once a teacher has identified the potential affordances of a teaching tool, they can start thinking of ways to exploit that affordance in their lessons. The teacher can start planning and teaching lessons that incorporate this technology. There is no requirement that the technology take centre stage in the lesson; rather, it should be incorporated organically, in line with the lesson's target learning outcomes. As they teach, the teacher should record their observations and impressions for the purposes of reflection and evaluation. Moreover, the teacher can encourage learners to record their own impressions both during and after the lesson. This information can be considered holistically for the purposes of assessment: *In what ways, if any, was the tool implemented successfully? In what ways was it not successful? How could it be improved?*

This step is about not only assessment, but also implementation. Future lessons involving the chosen technology can be updated and adapted based on the teacher's observations and feedback from learners. The process of assessment and implementation may take several cycles of gross- and fine-tuning. The ultimate goal at this stage is to refine the implementation of the target technology such that it is being used to the best of its potential. Once the teacher is confident that they have begun to use the technology as best they can, they can move on to the fourth and final step.

4) Share experiences

In this step, the teacher shares their findings with other members of their teaching community. Colleagues at the same institution and peers at other institutions may benefit greatly from learning about how a familiar, non-pedagogical technology was implemented in another's classroom. They may choose to implement it themselves, to implement the same technology in a different way, or even to experiment with an entirely different technology. It is worth noting that certain technologies are especially popular within certain geographical areas, such as Telegram in Uzbekistan and WeChat in China. In these cases, the teacher's findings will be particularly relevant to other teachers within the same geographic bounds who are likely to have students familiar with the same technologies. Likewise, decisions made in consideration of certain cultural elements are more likely to be relevant and useful to teachers working in the same cultural context.

In addition to sharing their findings, teachers might also consider sharing materials they developed using this technology. This will be beneficial to their teaching community overall, and may result in materials being shared with them in the future.

Summary and Conclusion

The modern ESOL teacher is spoilt for choice when it comes to new teaching technologies, however, implementing these new technologies may be problematic and could in some cases

do more harm than good. The case of Telegram in Uzbekistan demonstrates that it may be better to adapt familiar, non-pedagogical technologies to the classroom than to seek out new ones. This can be done methodically and effectively by first gathering information, then exploring affordances and risk, then testing and troubleshooting, and finally sharing experiences.

References

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