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Siri

Justin Nightingale

In line with my love of gadgets, I've written previously about my experiences of using an iPad in my working day as a primary school teacher. In short, it wasn't as useful as I had hoped. While the functionality was attractive it lacked the instant accessibility of good old pen & paper - a combination that even modern day technology is proving hard to beat.

So Mr. Nightingale, have you given up on introducing gadgets into the classroom? Not a chance. I've found a new channel for my enthusiasm but this time (although it's still an Apple product) it seems I may have found something more promising.

Background

Worldwide, 1 in 4 mobile phones is a smartphone mainly due to the proliferation of devices using the free to licence "Android" operating system created by Google and adopted by multiple manufacturers. On a units-sold basis, Android phones outsell the iPhone by a ratio of 3 - 1. Google's marketing strategy is (and always has been) not to necessarily make an initial profit in a chosen area but to make sure competing companies don't have a chance of making their profit-centered marketing strategy succeed. In other words they remove the competition first.

These numbers sound bad for Apple until you realise that the iPhone pulls in 75% of all mobile phone profits worldwide no doubt due to a carefully crafted image and also because their technology is already very mature: iOS (the operating system that the iPhone/iPad uses) uses exactly the same core code as the Mac desktop OSX that has already celebrated it's 11th birthday.

I've used an iPhone in the class setting before but the new iPhone 4s has a new feature that really stands out and has made for an interesting change in my classes.

1 . Siri: Pronunciation

Sometimes I've thought that my students don't believe me when I say that the pronunciation for L and R is different, and why should they? They are both represented by the same character in Japanese and the gap is small enough not to cause too much confusion in normal, English conversation. TH and S are another pair of criminals that promote the "It doesn't really matter if I can't say it perfectly" mentality that is detrimental to gaining accurate, English pronunciation as bad habits start to set. Enter Siri.

Siri is a speech to text function built into the iPhone. Speak at normal speed (and I really DO mean normal speed) into the microphone and it will convert everything you say into text on the screen. It doesn't seem to matter how fast I speak or how much I say, it usually gets it right.

Here's what I do. I stand in the front of the class and, while pointing up, say, "Light" I then point with my finger to the wall and say, "Right" I repeat this a few times but as usual the look on the faces of the students (grades 3 - 5) tell me they don't believe the word sounds any different and that it's all in my head.

I then connect my iPhone to the large display already in the classroom using a video cable and repeat the same words while speaking into the mic. Much to the bewilderment of the kids the screen

becomes filled with the words, “Light, Right, Light, Right...” They genuinely look shocked that it can hear something that they can’t. I can just imagine what they are thinking: “You mean he was actually telling the truth when he said the pronunciation was different?” There is also a darker side to this reality: it appears they trust my phone more than me...

THIS is what makes Siri stand out. Not just because it can recognise what I say but because there is proof, in black and white for all to see, that the two letters do indeed have a discernible difference in pronunciation. If the iPhone says it then it must be true.

I then explain in detail how to form these sounds going around the class asking everyone, one-by-one, to repeat the two words after me.

Now that they have a rough idea of how the sounds are formed, I grab a few brave volunteers and bring them to the front to try it for themselves in front of everyone. This has to be done carefully as I don’t want to crush their confidence at such an early stage if they’re unable pass the Siri test but if they do get it right, it gives them an instant, visible confidence that hopefully will stick and maybe even flow over into others areas of their English learning. The B and V difference is an easier stage to start with for lower grades.

As a pronunciation awareness tool it has proved very successful but the fact that it’s so sensitive to non-native accents can limit it’s usefulness when used with volunteers.

2. Siri: Mirroring

Although mirroring has been available with laptops for many years, it’s a function that is only recently starting to appear on mobile phones. Mirroring allows you to see your device’s display “mirrored” onto a larger TV/display via a video cable; whatever you do or show on your iPhone can be seen by the whole class in real time.

With this setup I’ve been able to show pictures, flashcards and animated story books. In the eyes of children, as long as I use the display to show something, they’re happy.

At the beginning of every class I ask random questions to students: What’s your name? What colour is your teacher’s neck tie? How many doors in this room? etc. While the students may be used to these questions aurally they probably wouldn’t always be able to read them.

While speaking into the iPhone using Siri, I say the same questions while having the actual text “mirrored” to the large display so they can actually see what they are hearing (maybe for the first time). Instead of my speech just being a stream of audio that will be forgotten over time they see the original text (in real time) thus helping them to connect the sounds with text - a continual focus I try to stick to.

Conclusion

Technology in the classroom, as much as I’m reluctant to admit it, has often proved to be a hinderance and/or a novelty that soon faded away. In a primary school I find it hard to imagine that there’ll ever be a good substitute for a lesson that is active, has a genki teacher leading the show and where

everyone is at least trying to use English. This has proved to be a successful pattern.

As soon as the classroom display is switched on, the mouths close and the English stops so it's a tool I try to use in small doses. But, when something as effective and fun as Siri comes along, everyone is delighted to give it a go - especially me.

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