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Author(s)	J.ナイティンゲール
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30 Minutes

Justin Nightingale

Challenge

As many of you know, I scramble at any excuse to bring some form of gadget into the classroom - much to the delight of the students. Although, it can be a little disturbing when a 7 year old comes up to me and says, "Is that a retina display iPad with 64Gb memory?"

Bringing technology into the class is often not successful because it so easily takes away the limelight from English and becomes the focal point which of course defeats the object. But, sometimes, it works well therefore when I was asked to speak at a seminar on this very subject ("Using technology in the classroom") I thought I'd try to summarise some of my experiences.

I'll have 30 minutes, a room full of primary teachers and a chance to share four of my daily routines using my beloved iPad/iPhone combination which I thought I'd share with you in this paper.

1. Reading

Three activities to promote reading:

1.1 The Silent Treatment

All my English lessons start with English question and answers: How is the weather? What time is it? Are you a cat? The children like it and it quickly gets them into English mode.

Every now and again, though, when the lesson starts I take a vow of silence. I plug in the video cable to my iPad and the class' large screen and start typing various questions: "Hello! What colour

is the sky?" Any question works although the funnier it is, the longer I'm able to hold their attention. After typing the question I wait for their choral answer while staying completely silent.

In smaller classes it works especially well when you select (read: pick on) individual members: "Number 34, can you stand up? What's your name? Are you a banana?" then when done, "OK, thank you! You can sit down." This one-on-one style is particularly effective as the unadulterated fear that they may well be the next victim to be chosen by the large text on the looming screen in front of them, gives me their undivided attention. The possibilities are endless.

This can go on for 10 minutes or more and the kids, for reasons I haven't quite worked out, love it. A great way of practicing your typing skills, too.

1.2 Flashcards

The focus of the textbooks I use is reading short stories. I've taken the vocabulary from all the stories and put them into a slide show which I connect to the main screen showing each word one by one while everyone reads chorally. Perhaps due to the style of other lessons in the school, the children readily "click" into this mode of study even though to me, it doesn't seem particularly exciting. Maybe the fact that the focus of the lesson has effectively become a TV is reason enough for me to be rewarded with such effective participation.

1.3 Dr. Seuss

I find it amazing to find that even though the UK and Japan are chasms apart in culture, Dr. Seuss reading books work just as well with British and

Japanese children. The difficulty range of the books is huge and most of them, unfortunately, lean heavily towards L1 children but the ones that don't have proved very popular.

Just download a book (which is actually an app) from the Apple App Store (around 250-450 yen depending on content and sales), connect your device to the screen and press play. Due to the read words flashing red as they are spoken (aka "the bouncing dot") the student can make a connection with the spoken and written words.

It's a shamelessly easy and stress free lesson to "teach" but every now and again it's much appreciated.. by all concerned.

2. Bento Database

Bento is a database app designed for iOS devices and the Mac platform. Now in it's 6 year, it's a mature and fully featured app that is now a regular fixture in my lessons.

In a previous paper I bemoaned the fact that after an experimental 3 month period of trying to replace my mountain of work related papers with an iPad, it failed in being useful because, in comparison, paper is just that much quicker and easier to use. But, after many hours of tinkering and thinking under the midnight oil, It seems I have stumbled on a system that is actually working very well.

With the data for the 500 students I already have (along with their pictures) I adjusted Bento so that 22 students (i.e. the class size) and the information I absolutely, must see is visible on one screen. Besides their names and pictures, there are also

checkboxes for forgotten homework, bad behaviour, EIKEN level and a box for general notes. No menus, no sub screens. Just touch a box to check and sync to a Mac after the lesson.

3. Pronunciation

Three activities in order of difficulty

3.1 Siri Part 1

Siri is the built in voice recognition system of iPhones, etc, that can transcribe (and act upon) normal, spoken English. You don't even have to slow down. With this in mind and when teaching basic question and answer structures, I've used this function in the class to test and affirm pronunciation.

"Do you think you can say, 'What's your name?' into this iPhone with a pronunciation that will be recognised?" Upon setting this challenge, students come up to the front, one by one, and speak into my iPhone while watching the big overhead screen (attached via an A/ V cable) to see if it has been transcribed correctly.

With the right length and difficulty of sentence it's a quick way of boosting spoken confidence. If the sentence is too difficult, it can have the opposite effect. Use with care.

3.2. Siri Part 2

As above but focussing on specific phonetic pairs such as light/right, van/ban, etc, all the areas that are renowned to cause havoc in Japan's EIKAIWA classes. Again, use with caution.

Dictation

I have to admit that on first hearing this technique, while being aware of its obvious educational value, I wasn't convinced it would be sufficient in holding a young learner's attention for it to have any value. I have been proved wrong.

I make a small story - no more than a few sentences - and read it repeatedly to the class in various ways (slow, fast, phrase by phrase, etc, depending on their level) until they have managed to write it out in full on the blank, writing paper in front of them. Depending on the grade I'd have to pre-teach most of the words beforehand, either on the board, on the screen or ask them to write them at the top of the page.

The story doesn't even have to be that exciting, just something I did at the weekend. When it looks like most have finished, I show the full story on the screen. Writing and showing the story on the screen is where the technology turns 10-20 minutes of preparation into 1 or 2 minutes. This works best with grades 5 and 6.

4. Context

Believe it or not, many lower grade students fail to grasp the concept that I'm a foreigner who is still learning Japanese because, well, a teacher is a teacher. As an example, children come up to me and show me someone's name written in kanji (maybe on a lost hat or pencil case) and seem a little confused that I can't read it for them.

Showing my British side in lessons is sometimes a good wake up call for them; I really do come from a different planet. Bringing this fact home

with various visual aids showing my background has proved popular.

"Street View" is a service offered by Google that extends their map database by showing the places using pictures from the perspective of someone walking down the street. Using this function I've "gone for a walk" with a class down the street I was born in (20 or so years ago..) They've been mesmerised. It was as if they didn't expect houses in the UK to look any different to the ones here in Japan. Leceister square, Covent garden, a REAL park... great fun.

Summing up

The great power of technology isn't the fact that it's a superior medium for learning but because it keeps the attention using a medium they're already familiar with and/or are fascinated with. But, the ultimate responsibility of learning is the individual and the motivating means a teacher uses. Care should be taken that this fact isn't usurped by one of Apple's latest toys, something I keep telling myself.

(ジャスティン・ナイティンゲール 聖学院大学総合研究所特任講師)