



Teaching Issue

A Teacher-centered Networking Approach: Connectivism without Cell Phones

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Introduction

EFL practitioners are often reminded that the age of digital connectivity as an instrument of classroom learning is upon us. Administrators in institutions worldwide explain how the new generation is redefining modern academia and the future of second language pedagogy. Conventionalists are resigning themselves to the role of pure facilitator as their once prominent position in the classroom is reduced even further. Lesson planners are encouraged to incorporate motives for connectivity and causes for learners to have, at the ready, their pads, tablets, and the darling of all digital apparatuses—the cell phone. Having replaced the pencil as a learner’s indispensable handheld companion, these mobile devices are concurrently gaining support as a learning tool and criticized for their contribution to teen social isolation, addictive behavior, and the sharp rise in youth suicide. Morgan (2008) calls attention to the amount of electronic learning available and asks whether the pressure from institutional administrators and digital tech suppliers to acquire the latest innovations isn’t clouding their real compatibility to the objectives of a course. Warranted or not, they have become the very symbol of a modern classroom and institutions wishing to stay ahead of the curve are employing all manner and means to include these and other computer assisted language learning mechanisms into their EFL stratagem. For instructors who have not softened their view on ceding ground to these interlopers, finding a common ground is central to maintaining the class dynamic in an era that is hastening the approach of what might soon be referred to as the cell phone-centered classroom. Many of those in support of in-class mobile connectivity recall fleeting attempts at restriction and retribution. Gathering student devices upon entering a given institution was comparable to herding cats. Students offered every excuse for retaining their cellular companions and, with a general lack of parental backing, the idea of confiscation was deemed an exercise in futility. With deliberate speed, the prohibitivists movement lost its teeth and the populists prevailed. Looking at the advantages became the new mantra as educational facilities in much of the world bowed out of the fight and settled on a don’t ask don’t tell arrangement. To reject modernity in its many forms is to be old school, antiquated, a timeworn anachronism, and having one foot out to pasture. It’s to one’s benefit to be liberal in resolve and take what Brown (2014: 73) refers to as a Utilitarianism or Ostracism temperament. On balance however, the cacophony of dings, vibrations, and other audible warnings of outside forces crashing the lesson and leading learners astray is a genuine cause for concern. Listening to the instructor with one ear and reading textbooks, handouts, and the board with one eye is thoroughly insupportable.

The Modern Classroom with a Note of Caution

The notion of social learning can be traced back to the theory of social constructivism in the 1960s (Chen & Bryer, 2012). In the social nature of cognition, knowledge is constructed through the interplay and collaboration of members within a circle. In a modern adaptation of this theory, these interactions have become increasingly impersonal (Kawa, 2018). Web 2.0 refers to websites that promote user-generated layouts, ease in functionality, and system integration (sites can operate from multiple devices, systems, and program types) for user collaboration in classroom settings. These sites are easily accessed, cultivate interactive activity among users, and promote the freedom of expression which allows students of EFL to give voice to their thoughts in authentic ways (Chartrand, 2012). The benefits of mobile assisted learning to EFL/ESL programs globally are unchallenged. What practitioners, researchers, and theorists are attempting to discover is a way to merge in-class cell phone use and lesson objectives without learners being led adrift by the ungovernable quid pro quo of messages, tweets, and snapchat that are, in most every respect, unrelated to the lesson plan. Tindell and Bohlander (2012) claim the majority of students believe that instructors are largely unaware of the extent to which texting and other cell phone activities are underway in the classroom. Sherman (2012) contends that digital technology has changed the structure of the brain. Approximately thirty percent of our cognitive activity is now processing visual input as opposed to only three percent for auditory processing. Recent cognitive research suggests that with every small burst of information the brain receives, dopamine, the same pleasure chemical released when we take drugs, fall in love, or eat chocolate, is released. In other words, the information students receive through social media can be addictive. College-age cell phone users can show some of the same symptoms as drug addicts. Some students display feeling of anxiety when their phones are not available (Roberts, Yaya, & Manolis, 2014). A study by Kuznekoff, Munz and Titsworth (2015) saw classroom users who limited their in-class texting habits earn a 10–17% higher letter grade, score 70% higher on recalling information, and average 50% higher on note-taking than students who composed tweets or responded to irrelevant messages regularly.

Concerning Unabated and Unethical Mobile Usage

Instructors from pre-service training to retirement-aged voice the same concerns over disruptions and exam cheating (Miners, 2009). The issues of a plagiarism that taint the many English writing efforts of Asian EFL learners are exasperated by the ease in which learners can type in a subject and have innumerable stories, chapters, paragraphs, and sentences to borrow from with impunity (Hosny & Fatima, 2014). Only the most steadfast of instructors would take the time to run a plagiarism check on papers from a class of forty to fifty students for signs of dishonesty, only to appear insensitive and unsparing to those more tolerant of such borrowings. Another concern is how a mobile device can be used to access examination answers. A report by Common Sense Media (2009, June 18) found widespread cheating among secondary school learners:

- 41% of teens say that storing notes on a cell phone to access during a test is a serious cheating offense, while 23% don't think it's cheating at all.
- 45% of teens say that texting friends about answers during tests is a serious cheating offense, while 20% say it's not cheating at all.
- 76% of parents say that cell phone cheating happens at their teens' schools, but only 3% believe their own teen has ever used a cell phone to cheat.
- Nearly two-thirds of students with cell phones use them during school, regardless of school policies against it.
- Teens with cell phones send 440 text messages a week and 110 a week while in the classroom.

Garcia (2007) provides additional evidence that faculty and students view electronic devices differently

when it comes to classroom use. She notes that most of today's students are members of the millennial generation and argues that this generation needs sufficient gadgetry to maintain uninterrupted access to the world. Millennials on the whole believe that all learning should be tied to technology and criticize classroom education for being bookish, irrelevant, and disjointed from the real world.

Reality vs. False Hope

At present, classroom connectivity cannot be isolated, controlled or affixed to an instructor's lesson agenda. The off-task interplay amongst learners and their outside connections present a near continuous disruption by the networking habits of those in the social circle whose whereabouts and actions are a call for response. Reciprocating a message competes with lesson participation and focus. The sociological realities witnessed in the group/class bonding and hazing, that most Asian universities impose upon incoming freshman, encourages and fosters these bonds that supersede classroom etiquette and compels learners to observe team player protocols and acknowledge the external happenings of those within their clique. To ignore or hesitate in a comrade's call for attention puts the respondent at an awkward footing and risks the reciprocation of their own calls for advocacy and acknowledgement. These near rhythmic pauses draw thoughts away from the instructor and create a multitasking conundrum. With the balance shifting from instructor to intimate, the classroom symmetry is compromised. The duplicity of student and peer identities ebbs and flows with frequent regularity. There always seems to be a message in need of response, a photo in need of commentary, and an issue in need of support. With hundreds and often thousands of friends and contacts vying for affability and endorsement, academic and social responsibilities remain in a state of contention. The ease of clicking over to a song, video, game, photo or other diversion explains why students hesitate to appreciate the value of these devices as a learning tool; hence, they seldom approach them in a way that facilitates learning. Phones are considered an extension of their persona, with most wanting this identity to be a personal expression of style, distinction, and membership.

Creating a Middle Ground

According to Bugeja (2007), some instructors have outlawed electronic devices with conviction. But why aren't instructors offering solutions to this issue by anticipating what learners will digitally need for a particular in-class event and display a prepared translation, photo, audio recording of the lesson, or other preconceived accessories to diminish the necessity of in-class learner connectivity.

1. Cell phone used for dictionary translations and thesaurus entries.

- Argument for: Eliminates the need for hefty print dictionaries and the time consuming process of turning pages. Instant translations, illustrations, explanations, and synonyms assist in vocabulary comprehension and improved writing.

- Argument against: Learners stop thinking of meaning through context; immediate translations equal a better chance of short rather than long-term memory retention. Synonyms are contextual with most entries in a list failing to accurately reflect the proper occasion or intended meaning.

- Plausible solution: Instructor anticipates difficult L2 to L1 word and phrase transitions from assignments and arranges context-based clues and examples that lead learners towards a solution. Learners make use of hard copy dictionaries with on-line assistance provided by the instructor upon request.

2. Cell phone use for visual imagery by using Instagram or visual dictionaries to improve comprehension and retention.

- Argument for: Words or story lines tied to imagery increases vocabulary retention and promotes a better understanding of the narrative.

- Argument against: Searching for one image draws attention to a host of non-relative imagery and again becomes an avenue for cyber wanderings and lesson disconnect.

- Plausible solution: Instructor anticipates the imagery suitable for the assignment and provides these illustrations in digital or hard copy form. Instructor access to alternative imagery sites fills any supplementary requests.

3. Use for inner communication with classmates to share ideas, clarify meanings, share apps, and contact outside sources for assistance.

- Argument for: Learners can share ideas and resources for a given assignment; group members can work individually and blend their contributions with others; increase in social interactions by those who might not ordinarily join a group discussion or cooperative activity.

- Argument against: Better suited for outside class communiques where learners are not in proximity. In class sharing, discussing, and mediating the assignment can be done vis-à-vis since everyone is within range. Access to apps and outside sources is provided by the instructor who advises on its preferred usage.

- Plausible solution: Since imagery plays a significant role in memory retention, instructors could select an assortment of images that relate to vocabulary or storylines, saving learners a considerable amount of search time in their quest for suitable images. Group/pair work arrangements.

4. Use cell phones to improve pronunciation.

- Argument for: Learners make use of a recording app to parrot the pronunciation and language suprasegmentals of native English speakers.

- Argument against: Pronunciation tools have thus far had limited success in EFL classrooms. Voice recognition apps are never reliable.

- Plausible solution: Pronunciation issues can be addressed via the instructor either by a personal rendition of the word or phrase. Sharing online pronunciation through WhatsApp or providing a phoneme map that illustrates the position of the lips, tongue, jaw and teeth during various articulations.

5. Phones can record lectures and snap images of what is written on the board.

- Argument for: Learners who miss something in a lecture or need more time reflecting on something written on the board can snap and record sights and sounds for playback and better clarification.

- Argument against: Classroom focus and overall attention fades with the reliance of these functions, no follow up questions with recordings, learners use the additional time for games and texting. The future listening of a lesson tape does not always come to pass.

- Plausible solution: Instructor provides recording of lesson and snaps of the board through WhatsApp or equivalent. In-class learner focus is on the lecture and assignment, with audio and visual replays serving as reminders.

Discussion and Conclusion

The end of cell phones in the classroom does not suggest the end of MALL. Instructors would continue to connect with students and parents on relevant issues and assignments, recommend supplementary online information, and make use of snapchats, tweets, blogs, and posts that inform as well as appease a learner's digital desires. Asian tertiary institutions point an accusatory finger at phones for social isolation, depression, suicide, and lack of focus; primarily with millennial-aged learners. The drawbacks of in-class phone use and its foreseeable impact on both mental and physical well-being has the two camps thinking in similar terms. Perhaps the classroom is one institution that would function better without such contentious foes. If there is a place in the lives of millennials where the much discussed need for a cell phone break is most befitting, the classroom environment would be the likely candidate. The worry for instructors is not in the procurement of digital technology. The quibble is with the battle for attention that arises when instructors and cell phones are sharing the same ear. Moreover, when not upholding social

obligations, the networking lull is often replaced with the less discussed yet equally habit-forming mobile gaming that likewise bleed their way into lectures, assignments, and attempts at collaborative learning. Episodes of addiction with secondary and tertiary learners is real to the degree of which is only recently becoming understood. One study found withdrawal symptoms included diminished success in mental tasks, increased blood pressure and heart rate as well as a sense of loss of a part of themselves (Walton, 2017). Parental controls may work for the very young but for older learners they are hardly governable. The instructor's restriction of in-class phones and the teacher-fronted use of digital technology in a shared environment would be the start of a logical compromise.

The Author

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