

# TECHNOLOGY & TEACHING ELLS

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# Technology and Teaching ELLs

By Shawn Walker

Technology can be daunting when teaching a language, but it can enhance instruction. With online education becoming more prevalent, we are embracing a variety of technological tools even more. However, English Language Learners (ELLs) face unique challenges in the new digital environment. I have taught high school level ELLs online for five years as part of a blended learning school model. While course materials are online, we do have drop-in centers for students to come for additional support and social activities. Overall, I have identified three areas that require constant attention: teacher presence in the course, student digital literacy, and building classroom community.

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## The Teacher Presence in the Course

### Making videos

Do you cringe when you see a video of yourself? I most certainly did! When I began online teaching, I recorded instructional videos over and over and over again, striving for perfection. I would finally

find one that I thought would be okay or I would just get tired of recording. Either way, that was not a very efficient approach. Driven by the need to spend more time with my students on video calls to provide live tutoring and instruction, I needed to better manage the time I had to make videos. I began tracking the number of views videos received and saw that there was no difference between ones that were less perfect and ones that I had recorded multiple times. This led me to focus more on teaching the content and less on whether I stumbled over a word or was having a bad hair day. Then adding the benefit of video editing helped to quickly improve the quality of the final version. Two apps in particular are user-friendly and have both free and paid versions: ClipGrab and ScreenPal.

### Placing videos

The location of videos also made a difference on whether or not they were even watched. Students were more likely to watch videos that I embedded in their assignments rather than posted right before the assignment. However, I typically post videos in more than one place within the course materials and communication channels I have with the students.



## Connecting with the teacher

When asking students about my videos, I learned that the ones who were watching them were also more likely to connect with me in video calls for additional one-on-one or small group instruction. It seemed that my flawed human presence in the course materials not only provided content but made me more approachable. Additionally, since I am willing to be on camera, it encourages my students to do the same in assignments that require audio or video recording. At all levels of English proficiency, the recorded speaking samples provide important information about the student's progress.

## Digital Literacy

### Video support for digital literacy

Videos also help fill in gaps in students' digital literacy. Many of my students come from countries where they did not have much access to technology. Even students born in the U.S. can be behind in digital literacy due to their socio-economic status.

Indeed, The National Skills Coalition estimates that one-third of American workers have low or no digital skills. (NSC, 2023) My observations of students support this number. Many do not know how to write an email to a teacher, use technology to write and format a paper, or upload a document to submit an assignment. Once again, I have found that videos can provide quick tutorials and just-in-time training to students, so they can improve their digital literacy and not allow technology to become a barrier. In fact, I often make 30-90 second videos to quickly show students how to perform a digital task. This allows students to focus more on the content of the lesson instead of trying to figure out the technology. Another support is showing my students with the lowest English proficiency how to change the language in our Learning Management System (LMS) where all course materials are housed. The course materials are still in English, but the navigational tools are in their first language which removes another barrier to their learning.



## Modeling translators

Most of my students are Spanish-speakers, and some have very low English proficiency. I have found that introducing the technology of translators to be very effective in supporting early language acquisition. While I know some Spanish, I am not fluent, so at times I do use a translator to communicate with my students. In these situations, I present English first because the human brain automatically seeks patterns. When students see or hear English, they try to understand it. Then I can provide additional support in Spanish as needed. Indeed, in video calls with monolingual Spanish-speaking students, I do not hide that I am using a translator which then gives them permission to start using one.



Multiple times, students have taken the initiative to translate something from Spanish, so they can say it to me in English. These are huge successes! This gives students a way to interact in English all while becoming familiar with using another digital tool.

## Building Community

### Messaging board

Many of my students have experienced trauma in their home countries or while immigrating to the U.S., so even a virtual classroom needs to be welcoming, safe. All too often, my students are working or helping their families which is why they chose a virtual school to begin with. However, this can leave them very isolated without much opportunity to practice English or interact with their peers. Therefore, I provide a communal messaging platform. I happen to have access to Microsoft Teams, but anything like WhatsApp, Discord, or other social media platforms can work. The primary features to look for are keeping the group restricted and being able to make the content private or even secret. In other words, what is said in the group, stays in the group. The overall purpose is to protect the students' identities and privacy.



### Language and purpose

While the students know that I am not policing which language they communicate in, I am very clear that all content must be school appropriate. However, these are teenagers, so I always invite another teacher or staff member who is fluent in Spanish to partner with me to help monitor the chat in case I miss something. I find two sets of eyes are better than one anyway. In these chats, I will post announcements like reminding students of live class sessions or open office hours and reminders for testing or finals week. Conversely, I also post fun topics like “Would you rather” questions: “Would you rather be able to fly or be invisible?” Another might be: “What is your favorite animal?” or “Post a gif to show how your week is going so far?” Outside of announcements, I find that fun posts get more engagement where student will carry on extended conversations usually with a lot of code-switching between English and Spanish.

### Examples of Community

One time when I asked for a gif, I had a student tell me that she didn't know how. I did a quick tutorial to show her, posted it in the group, and encouraged her to try it. Not only did she post a gif, but many other students also joined in! We ended up spending about 45 minutes finding joy and laughter by posting silly gifs. I noticed a shift in the tone of my class chat after this. Students were more interactive on their own, including in the evenings and on weekends.



They were more responsive to my random questions, and they asked questions in the group chat more often too! Then when the last World Cup got down to the four finalists, I asked who was going to win. That debate went on for over two hours with many students giving their opinions.

## Value of Community

While many may not see the value in this kind of activity, I find that building a community for my ELL students draws them further into the school. They see that they are not alone at the end of an internet connection, and it gives them the opportunity to make new friends. It also increases their engagement. If nothing else, it gives them a reason to log in to their laptops which is the first step for them to also do their assignments.



As a teacher, every day, I focus on establishing my presence in the virtual class, developing students' digital literacy, and creating a classroom community. These strategies have not only proven to be successful when teaching ELLs with technology, they have enhanced the quality of instruction. With online education becoming more prevalent, the one factor we must keep in the forefront is the student. Typically, my high school ELL students are required to take core classes like history and math while learning English. Frequently, I reach out to other teachers, or they reach out to me. We establish collaborative partnerships to further wrap language support services around the students to advance and promote their academic success.

## References

National Skills Coalition. (2023, February 6). New report: 92% of jobs require digital skills, one-third of workers have low or no digital skills due to historic underinvestment, structural inequities. Retrieved August 31, 2024, from <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/news/press-releases/new-report-92-of-jobs-require-digital-skills-one-third-of-workers-have-low-or-no-digital-skills-due-to-historic-underinvestment-structural-inequities/>

