

10 questions to ask yourself about integrating technology

Technology needs to be integrated into classroom practice in a principled manner. There is no point in using technology for its own sake. To help ensure that your use of technology with students is meaningful, and that it supports their learning as far as possible, here are some questions you can ask yourself at the planning stage. These questions will help with the initial planning stages of individual lessons, but they also need to be asked when looking at your syllabus overall.

1. What technology is available?

First off, you need to know what hardware and software is available. For example, if you are planning to integrate mobile devices into your classroom, do your students own enough devices so that there is at least one device per pair? You also need to have a range of technology tools and techniques to draw on. Think about whether your chosen tools suit the local context, and how to design effective task-types for them.

2. What will students learn?

This is arguably the most important question, and it relates to learning outcomes. Ask yourself exactly how your chosen technology supports and enhances student learning. Learning outcomes can refer to language (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, skills), but also to non-linguistic skills such as digital literacy, collaboration, or intercultural communication.

3. What does the technology bring to the activity?

This question is related to point 2. Ask yourself in what ways your chosen technology improves the learning experience for your students. For example, it might take your students outside the classroom and provide them with extra exposure to English, or it might increase their motivation and interest in the language. If you can't clearly identify what the technology brings to the activity, then it might not be worth using it.

4. What is the syllabus fit?

Look at your coursebook or syllabus and consider how your chosen digital tool fits in with the topic, language and/or skills work of the current unit. Ideally, the tool will help students understand, explore, extend or consolidate the language you are already working on in class.

5. Is the effort spent on learning to use the tool worth it?

It can take a significant amount of time to learn how to use some digital tools effectively. Sometimes the learning curve involved in getting to grips with a new tool is simply not worth the effort, especially if you are only going to use it very briefly with your students. On the other hand, learning to use some complex digital tools effectively can be worth the effort, especially if you're going to get long-term use out of it. A blog is a good example of this. Although it can take time to set up and learn how to administer a blog, it can be used by students over an entire course.

6. Is the time spent on using the tool in class worth it?

This question asks you to consider whether the time you spend actually using a digital tool in class helps students to produce a meaningful amount of language. For example, if it takes half an hour for the students to complete an activity using the tool, but they each only produce one or two words of English in this time, then it's probably not worth it. Tools that are quick and easy to use, but enable students to work with a significant amount of language, are best suited to the language classroom.

7. What skills do I need?

Your chosen digital tool may require you to have specific skills. To take a simple example, if you'd like to produce a model postcard for your students in a word-processing program, do you know how to use a table for the layout, and do you know how to embed a picture? If not, you can quickly learn these basic digital skills by searching online for video tutorials.

8. What skills do my students need?

If you expect your students to use digital tools to create something, ask yourself whether they need specific skills in order to carry out the task successfully. In some cases, the skills your students need may be less complex than the skills you need. For example, if you set up a blog for your class to contribute to, they only need to know how to add posts to the blog, and how to comment on their classmates' posts. You, on the other hand, would need to know how to set up and administer the blog as well.

9. Where and when will the tool(s) be used?

This question relates to location. Will you and your students use the digital tool during class time, or outside class? And related to this, exactly when will the tools be used? For example, if you'd like your students to post a photo to a social network you have set up for the group (see Unit 36) outside class time, are you going to set a specific day and/or time for them to do so?

10. Do my students consume or produce information with the tool?

Depending on the task you set and the tool you use, your students may consume information (that is, read, watch or listen to information), or they may produce information (that is, create their own content and/or produce language). It's a good idea to ensure that in your course, there is a balance between using digital tools to consume information and using them to produce it.