

What's a Level One ESL Class doing in the Computer Lab? Learning!

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All too often, we neglect to see our beginning ESL students as computer users; I know more than a few faculty who have expressed that those students “aren’t ready yet” and “need to focus on basics” as well as “there’s not enough time” to bring computer use into lower-level student curriculum. However, in my experience as both an eLearning administrator and advocate, as well as an ESL teacher, I find that the computer lab experience to be not only possible but also useful for even level one students. In the past, I taught many upper level ESL courses and used the computer extensively for blogging and online tools. I found that it empowered them to move forward with their English, gave them a grasp of digital literacy, and increased their reading and writing skills immensely. (And their CASAS test results were always high, for those who care about that.)

Then in a series of unusual events, I started teaching a level-one night class at a neighboring college. After two quarters of taking them to lab once a week as required, and watching them struggle to re-learn how to log on to the computer and then to our Canvas classroom, I had an idea. I decided to start an experiment: I increased their usual once-a-week lab time to twice a week in our four-night-a-week course. My reasoning was simple: If they came more often, they would remember more, and would become more comfortable and confident in the computer environment. It turns out I was right. Their skills increased greatly (yes, CASAS scores were great too) and they were able to do much more. Contrary to popular belief, increased computer time increased their English skills; listening, speaking, reading, writing, *and* computers.



Liz Falconer is an educator and lifelong learner. Her career path includes work in professional storytelling, music performance and composition, as well newspaper and magazine writing. Her undergraduate degree is in Japanese Studies, and she lived in Japan for 12 years, where she taught EFL and became a master of the koto, a traditional Japanese instrument. She then earned a Master's in Japanese Pedagogy and a Doctorate in International Education at the University of Iowa. She has taught in a wide variety of classroom environments, both online and traditional.

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I did this by giving them lots of guidance and step-by-step information. I modeled often, and also included typing practice as part of the lab time, utilizing the free interactive course at GCF Learn Free. One finger at a time, they became familiar with the keyboard. Then we talked about the shift key, and they learned to type @ (needed for the email sign in) and capitalizing "I", their name, and the first words of sentences. The physical steps needed to make a capital letter helps reinforce the concept.

I also incorporated many visuals, and teach them how easy it is to add visuals to their writing in Canvas (by using the flickr option) to illustrate their sentences. "Today it is rainy" calls for a picture of rain. "I like cake" calls for a picture of their favorite kind of cake.

Unlike the all-too-common approach of "computer time is game time" I do not send them off to various ESL sites to play games that have minimal relevance to our topics; with a "we are in college" focus, I embed or link to sites within Canvas, with specific instructions, visuals and ties to themes. In the lab, we work through much of the material as a class, with extensive use of the overhead projector. I do whatever I can throughout the computer lab session to keep the class community together, avoiding student isolation by interacting with the students. I vary the material and put it in small chunks, even if some students take more time and others move ahead, we pause several times during the class to work on something together, such as a crossword puzzle relating to current vocabulary or (their two favorites) play Bingo or Quizlet Live.

I sometimes put time parameters around activities as well; 6:00 - 6:20, typing practice; 6:20 - 6:45, Food: vocabulary and short quiz, to keep student on track.

As far as computer use goes, it seems that perhaps it is less that "the students aren't prepared" and more that the teachers aren't prepared on how to approach this. Where and when do level one teachers get trained to incorporate computers meaningfully into their curriculum? There's no place I know of. **I would love to have a mini online conference about this.** The computer is too integral to our lives; it is a disservice to withhold it from our students. A growing number of students can access it outside of

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class as well, meaning that ESL can have an increased impact on their lives. In the meantime, here are some of my more successful assignment ideas I've used in the computer lab:

- Computer skills:
 - 10 points for logging in by yourself
 - 10 points for sending me a message in Canvas that says "Hi"
 - 10 points for checking your grades
- Discussion posts: Ties with typing practice, canvas skills, and sharing their lives. Also, more advanced students can type more details and sentences. The visuals add something else to discuss together as well.

Examples:

10 points for writing:

- I am from _____. Post a picture.
 - I like _____. And posting a picture.
 - What is your favorite food? Post a picture
 - (Add your topic here. I love discussions!)
- Short Quizzes - these are great for reading skills, and computer skills are minimal: Students can have more than once chance, and they are graded automatically.

As with all new material and curriculum, this takes some time investment to set up, and some of it will depend on your own computer skills and familiarity with your learning management system, such as Canvas. The good news is, you can re-use content easily, adjust it easily (such as when you are standing in class and suddenly see your own spelling mistake) and make variations for different students...all without one visit to the copy machine. Keeping a growth mindset is key for this kind of change if you haven't explored these things before, and baby steps are definitely a great starting point. If you have, you probably have a hundred more ideas to add to this! This is an exciting moment in 21st-century education, and all of us can learn from it.

Resources

My favorite sites that I embed into our Canvas Classroom:

Typing Practice (this can be very empowering for some struggling students). For beginners, I use GCF Learn Free, <https://edu.gcfglobal.org/en/typing/typing/1/>. There are always one or two who can already type; I then use <https://www.typing.com/> for more lessons and timed tests.

Online Bingo (it automatically sets up for individuals) teacher is the caller, and students click on the squares: <https://myfreebingocards.com/>.

Quizlet flashcards...followed by quizlet quizzes... followed by Quizlet Live! Check out <https://quizlet.com/>.

Online Crosswords puzzles (you can print and bring to class first, then have them do it online as well). The site I use is <https://crosswordhobbyist.com/> (I subscribe; \$5.00 a month).

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