

Our bots, ourselves: An argument for the importance of online teacher training in ESL

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This research article argues for the importance of including educational technology training, including learning how to teach online, across the entire teacher education curriculum, especially ESL.

Keywords: teacher education, online teaching, educational technology, language teacher training

In the contemporary landscape of teacher education, educational technology training is sometimes viewed by pre-service teachers (PST) as irrelevant, dismissed under the assumption that future teaching will remain confined to physical classrooms. This resistance can be tied to deeply-held, “traditional” beliefs which negatively impact technology use (Hermans et al., 2008); it also could be tied to lingering aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which many PST – who were at that point in secondary school – saw technology used poorly, resulting in a form of technophobia that soured them on its usefulness (Wilson, 2023). Whatever the reason, the bias against technology in the classroom presents a significant internal barrier to evolving educational landscapes. In addition to the shift to emergency remote teaching (ERT) during the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, Minnesotans saw the necessity of offering online classes for students in Minnesota in early 2026 in response to federal occupation of the Twin Cities during Operation Metro Surge. These events should make it clear that proficiency with educational technology is not optional for any teacher.

However, a significant tension exists: the need for more technological training is fundamentally at odds with efforts to streamline licensure requirements in response to the national teacher shortage, which is especially acute for English as a second language (ESL) instructors (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Furthermore, the number of teacher education students declined by a quarter of a million between 2008 and 2020 (Will, 2023). As the number of teachers and teacher candidates has dropped, the number of multilingual learners in the U.S. who need ESL classes has risen, which has led to an “alarming trend toward less rigorous add-on certification (i.e., endorsement) pathways” as well “as a number of states either no longer offering initial certification or providing options for testing-out of coursework altogether” (Gras & Kitson, 2021, p. 1). In the effort to provide enough teachers to meet demand, the requirements to become a teacher have been reduced, and educational technology classes are sometimes seen as an easy place to trim the corners.

Part of educational technology training includes learning how to teach online; however, teacher training programs have consistently disregarded the necessity for practical online experiences in PK-12 education (Woo et al., 2023). Even before COVID-19, a PK-12 teacher trainer

commented that “[p]reservice teachers learn best to teach by teaching real children in real classrooms in real schools” (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012, p. 195), which implies that not only are online schools not real schools, but that children who study online are, somehow, not real children. Learning how to teach online was covered more during the ERT days of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is now addressed less frequently in the teaching curriculum, even though the number of students in online PK-12 schools is rising steadily (Goulas, 2024). In Minnesota, as PK-12 school districts have largely pivoted back to traditional snow days or days off instead of utilizing e-learning, the perceived urgency for online teaching proficiency has faded. However, as the winter of 2026 demonstrated, the capacity for snow days is not limitless. When severe weather struck late in the season, some districts – such as Minneapolis Public Schools – were forced to implement an e-learning day on March 16 to meet the state’s required instructional hours threshold (Minneapolis Public Schools, 2026).

The stripped-down approach to becoming an instructor, as well as the bias against online teaching and learning, deprioritize the necessity of educational technology and online teacher training across all areas of the curriculum. I argue that ESL instructors need additional training when it comes to online teacher training, given that our multilingual learners (MLLs) struggle more than others with online learning (Bavaria, 2021; Madden & Kim, 2023), and that increased training in online teaching can help increase the number of MLLs in virtual schools, who now, post-pandemic, enroll and succeed in full-time virtual schools at much lower rates than their monolingual peers (Moorer, 2025). To fully understand why this specialized training is necessary for ESL educators, it is essential to establish the broader, foundational role that educational technology plays in modern instructor proficiency.

The importance of including educational technology in teacher training

Regardless of personal reluctance or systemic skepticism among incoming educators, the literature consistently demonstrates that proficiency in educational technology is an indispensable professional skill for teachers (Arnold & Paulus, 2010; Bahari et al., 2022; Bond et al., 2020; Graziano et al., 2023). The ability to use technology to teach well – in face-to-face, hybrid, or online modalities – requires specialized knowledge. This specialized knowledge is the combination of technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge, known as the TPACK framework (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). TPACK describes the interplay between three separate knowledge domains: technological, pedagogical, and content. Teachers with TPACK understand how to apply suitable technologies to teach specific content with appropriate pedagogy. The lack of knowledge in one domain affects others, and teachers’ lack of content knowledge, content-supported pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge of technology integration leads to poor use of technology in education (Lee & Kim, 2014). The current rallying calls for either a rigorous evaluation of technology’s effectiveness (Grose, 2024a) or even its complete removal

from PK-12 classrooms (Grose, 2024b; Singer & Elliott, 2026) underscore the prevailing skepticism towards the misguided or inappropriate use of technology by ill-informed instructors.

I argue that while removal of technology from classrooms is not the answer, instruction in the best practices for educational technology, including online learning, should be integrated across the teacher training curriculum. Four years ago, researchers presented “a vision that by 2025 all teacher education programs will prepare teacher candidates with the knowledge, skills, and experience necessary to be successful teaching in online and blended modalities” (Hodges et al., 2022, p. 201), which has yet to become reality. Teacher training programs currently focus on the need for PST to develop P (pedagogical) and C (content) knowledge, but neglect the development of T (technological) knowledge, leading to underdevelopment of synthesized TPACK knowledge essential for 21st century teaching; the current state of technology training for PST is seen as “inadequate, inappropriate, irrelevant, or outdated” (Kessler, 2018, p. 215).

It is likely that educators will teach in different modalities during their careers (Hodges et al., 2022); even those who plan to teach fully in-person may be obligated to switch modalities in the future. Therefore, including coursework about educational technology and online teaching as an integral part of ESL teacher training provides PST with the necessary skills not only to be competitive but to be solvent in the future.

It is imperative to focus on educational technology, including learning how to teach online, in teacher education in general and ESL in particular. PST should learn to teach with technology through dedicated coursework focused on skills, not tools, since technology tools quickly become obsolete (Torsani, 2015), or by simply devoting time in the practicum for reflection and discussion about it (Durham, 2022). Optimally, PST will learn by encountering technology-enhanced learning situations in which they acquire professional skills through the use of technology (Bueno-Alastuey & García Esteban, 2016; Guichon, 2009; Vinagre, 2017). If teacher education curricula – especially in ESL – are to remain relevant, we need to elevate technological and online competence to the same level as knowledge of methodology or assessment. Only by doing this can we ensure the next generation of educators have the skills and agility needed to begin and sustain a successful career.

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