skype™

for literacy and language learning

"How To" Tips and Best Practices for Teachers

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Skype for Literacy and Language Learning: "How To" Tips and Best Practices for Teachers

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Disclaimer

The instructions and content provided in this manual are based on information that was relevant at the time the guide was written.

Social media services regularly change the format and presentation of their sites. While every effort has been made to provide accurate and up-to-date information, things may look or function a little differently in real life than they appear in this manual.

The author is not employed by Skype and has no official affiliation or association with the company, other than being an avid Skype user herself.

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Introduction

Skype is a communication tool that allows users to make audio and video calls over the Internet. These calls are free to other Skype users. Skype also offers a computer-to-land-line service for both local and international calls. The computer-to-land-line service is a fee-based service.

Skype is an excellent tool to help teachers build skills using technology. It also happens to be an effective tool to teach languages, as it incorporates high levels of verbal interaction between users, or in this case between teachers and students.

Technical requirements

It is necessary to have a mic and audio capabilities enabled on your computer. If the computer does not have these features built in, you must buy a Skype-enabled headset with earphones and a mic.

Once you have the necessary equipment and an account set up, you can begin using Skype to make computer-to-computer calls. If both you and the party on the other end have web cams, you can make a point-to-point video call. You can see each other throughout the call. If the connection is slow or if you do not have a web cam, you can still make audio calls.

Thinking about a computer-to-computer call

It is important to remember that Skype works computer to computer, not necessarily person-to-person. One computer may be hooked up to a large screen and presenter slides may be projected onto that large screen to a group of people sitting in a theatre-style classroom. In this way, Skype may be used to teach groups of people.

In this way, we can see how Skype may be used to connect individuals, one individual to a group or one group to another group.

Skype versus other technologies

It could be argued that Skype is less powerful than other real-time (also called "synchronous") learning technologies such as Blackboard, Adobe Connect or other services offering webinar capabilities.

This may be true. Right now, Skype offers interaction with only a very limited number of users at one time. It also does not include the same interactive features such as white boards, polls or other features found with more sophisticated technologies.

Skype's simplicity, on the other hand, makes it an accessible tool for those who are less comfortable using technology in the classroom.

Skype-enabled handsets

These phones look and feel like a regular land-line phone. The only difference is that they are connected to a Skype account.

Many "big box" electronics stores carry these types of phones.

Depending on the model, you may need to have your computer running and Skype open all the time in order to make and receive calls. You will need to read the manual or ask questions to clarify what a particular phone needs.

Set Up a Skype Account

A Skype account is required in order to make and receive calls. It is similar to needing an e-mail account in order to send e-mails. You choose a user name, just as with e-mail, or other technologies. That user name remains yours for as long as the account is active.
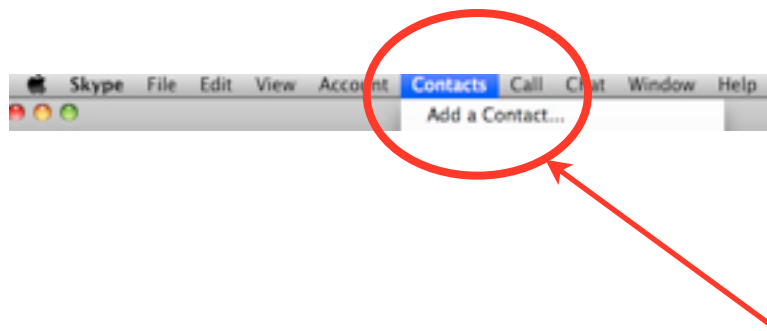


Go to www.skype.com

Click on "Join".

You will be guided through a number of steps to set up your account. Make it easy for other users to find you by listing your real name and the city and country where you live.

Add contacts

Across the top of your screen you will see a menu. Click on Contacts. A drop-down menu will appear. in the menu at the top of your screen to find people you know.
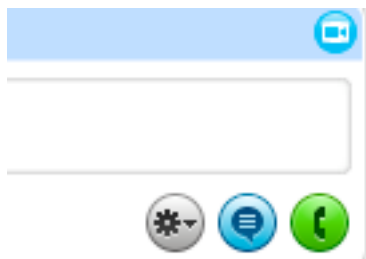
Click on "Add a contact".
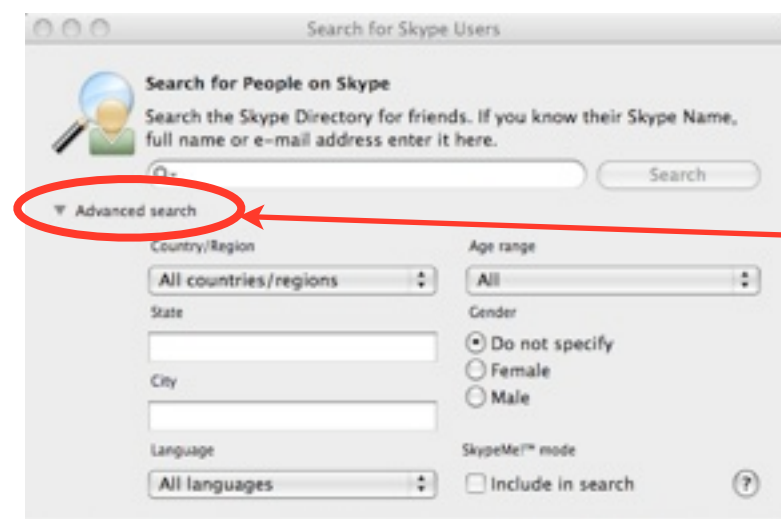
You will see a pop-up window that looks something like this. Type the name of your contact into the search box.

Use the "Advanced Search" tab to specific search criteria.

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Make a Skype call

To call one of your Skype contacts, click on his or her name. The name will expand into a larger box that may contain their photo and information about his or her location.

To the right, you will see four icons. There is a blue video camera on the top right. And three circle icons on the bottom right.

Click on the green circle to start a call. You will have the choice of either an audio or a video call. This is the most common way to make a call.

Click on the blue video camera at the top to initiate a video call. Choose this option if you are sure that the other party has a web cam, too.

Click on the blue button to start a text-chat with the user.

Click on the grey circle to list all the possible ways to connect with the person. Some users will also include their land line or mobile number in their contact information. This grey circle offers you the most options.

Advanced features

Although Skype could arguably be considered less sophisticated than other web or video conferencing tools, nevertheless it has some advanced features that make it useful for educational purposes. These advanced features include:

Conference calls

Skype can be used to make conference calls with a number of users (Family Matters, n.d.). Using this feature, up to six users may be on the line at one time. At the time of writing this manual, the conference calling feature included audio only.

Video calls can only be made with two parties on the line.

Instant messaging or chat

Skype has a chat function which can be used for a variety of purposes. You can use text chat while in a real-time audio or video call. This is useful if the connection breaks up. Users can let each other know if unable to see or hear well using the chat function.

In addition, if another call comes in while a user is in a real-time call, he or she may send the other party a quick instant message to let them know that their call can't be answered at that time.

The chat function helps to smooth out online communications, allowing users to briefly acknowledge one another or explain a situation, rather than simply terminating a call.

File sharing

You can send files, which is much like adding an attachment to an e-mail, except that the sharing takes place in real time, during a call.

Users can send someone an attachment such as a .pdf, a Word document or other types of files that they might normally send as an e-mail attachment. The the party on the other end can open it as soon as they have received it, allowing users to discuss it during their call.

Teachers and tutors can use this feature to share activities or resources with students during a lesson.

Screen sharing

This feature allows users to share a portion of their screen or their entire screen, with others on the call. This is particularly useful for giving presentation. One user may enable a presentation in full-screen mode, while sharing their screen with other users.

Teachers can use the screen sharing option to give slide presentations to students during a lesson.

The screen sharing function is only activated once the user is in a call. So the downside is that one can only "learn by doing" for this feature.

To access this function, the user clicks on the "call" tab on the menu at the top of the screen. That will brings the user to a drop-down menu.

From there choose "share screen". You will be asked if you want to share part or all of your screen.

Insider's Tip

If you are going to share slides, open your presentation before the call and then have it running in the background. Then, when you choose to share your entire screen you can quickly flip to your slides and run them in full-screen mode.

There will be a moment where the party on the other end will see the your entire screen before the slides begin, so you will want to ensure that there is nothing else open on your desktop such as personal e-mails, etc. Screen sharing requires practice, and it is a powerful feature for learning.

Ideas on How You Can Use Skype

Personal Use

Teachers and others who are reluctant to "learn yet another new technology" can be encouraged to try Skype for personal reasons.

Organizational Use

Non-profit organizations are often strapped for cash and look for ways to reduce costs. Skype offers an alternative to expensive land-line telephones.

You can call a land-line or a cell phone from a Skype account.

Leadership Use

Managers and directors who regularly participate in conference calls can use Skype's conference-calling feature to engage with others at a distance. You can have meetings and discuss projects from your computer. No more cradling the phone on your shoulder.

Marketing your programs

Marketing is all about relationships, particularly in education (Drysdale, n.d.; Eaton, 2005, 2009b).

Create and maintain relationships with students. This may be of particular relevance for programs that recruit international students. There are a few different ways to do this. One is to have a Skype account that students can call to ask questions. These calls can be answered by your receptionist or clerical staff, just as the phone is.

Pre-arrival tutorials for international students. Another way to use Skype for marketing is to conduct pre-arrival orientation tutorials with students. This can be done on a one-to-one basis, but also with groups. The orientation session can go over a variety of pre-arrival information: an introduction to the school, an introduction to some of the key staff the students will meet when they arrive (including a photo to make it more personal). It can include information about airport arrivals and pick up, a list of things to bring with them (such as a warm sweater or coat), the schedule for a typical day of classes and so forth.

Teaching

Educators can use Skype for a variety of learning uses such as:
- Virtual field trips
- Skyping in a guest speaker
- Skyping in an author

Teachers can project a guest speaker to a large class using a big computer screen. Students can use an external mic to ask questions.

Tutoring

One-to-one video tutoring is becoming increasingly popular via Skype. This has significant potential for rural and remote communities where learners can not always access the tutors for a face-to-face session. Providing the learner has enough technology literacy to open and use a Skype account, he or see can access tutoring in real time using Skype.

More and more independent schools and non-profit organizations are setting up Skype tutoring programs that connect learners and tutors. Sometime learners pay for this one-to-one tutoring and tutors receive some compensation. In other cases, tutors volunteer their time to help a learner improve his or her skills. There are many possibilities.

Conclusions

Because Skype originally began as a voice-over-Internet-protocol (VOIP) service, as a cost-effective alternative to traditional phone calls, its application as a personal communication tool makes it more attractive to those who struggle to incorporate technology into their classrooms. Skype is an excellent tool for educators who are somewhat tentative about using more sophisticated learning technologies.

Skype's advanced features such as screen sharing, file transfer and instant messaging make this VOIP technology appropriate as a teaching tool, in addition to a personal communication tool.

In the literacy and language classroom, Skype can be used to provide a variety of authentic learning experiences to students, including an interview with an author or other native speaker of the target language, or an international collaborative projects with other classrooms.

Skype is an effective tool because "the technology becomes invisible".

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