Full Tech, Tech-free, or In Between? – Students Perspectives on Learning Without Technology in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This study investigates university students' views on learning in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom without the use of personal technology. Existing literature spans various educational contexts, yet perspectives in higher education remain notably divided. Many educators consider technology an integral part of academic life, while others—particularly in light of recent developments in artificial intelligence—argue that its role should be critically re- evaluated. This ongoing debate is further complicated by a lack of clear institutional guidelines, leaving many university teachers uncertain about effective classroom practices. Focusing on first and second year Media Studies students at the Catholic University in Portugal, this study draws on student survey data and individual perspective essays to explore attitudes toward traditional, technology-free learning environments as opposed to digital classrooms. Findings show that although students are accustomed to — and generally enjoy — using digital tools, many express concern over distractions and diminished focus. A significant number favoured device-free settings, emphasizing benefits such as improved concentration, deeper interpersonal interaction, and enhanced peer collaboration. Others acknowledged the educational advantages of technology, especially when applied creatively by teacers, while some also advocated for a balanced integration of both digital and traditional strategies. Overall, the study offers insight into students' critical stance towards the role of technology in the classroom and highlights the need for thoughtful pedagogical models that foster engagement through both low-tech and innovative means. It aims at contributing to broader discussions about classroom innovation and the evolving challenges that educators face in tertiary settings.

Keywords: english language teaching; digital and non-digital pedagogy; classroom focus and distraction; student engagement; higher education