The Use of Information and Communication Technology in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Libya: A Survey

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Abstract

This paper depicts a descriptive study carried out among 70 teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) from secondary schools in Sirte, Libya to investigate their experience in and perceptions of the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). The findings revealed that only about one third of the respondents had attended computer courses due to limited opportunities. Mixed views were recorded on the usefulness of the courses attended. The majority of the respondents agreed on the importance, benefits and usefulness of ICT. Some recommendations are finally presented to maximize the use of ICT in TEFL.

Keywords: ICT; TEFL; EFL teachers
1. Introduction

We are now entering into a new era where computer technology is offering a large number of exciting new applications (Divaharan and Wong, 2003). According to Dennison et al. (1997), technology is affecting education in two harmonious ways. It is changing the content and methods that teachers use to instruct and is, at the same time, changing the methods by which students learn.

There are numerous acronyms in computer related learning. The term ICT (Information and Communication Technology) is used to refer to the employment of technological devices in learning (Ruiz-Madrid, 2005). Thus, ICT could be described as an umbrella term that covers any communication device or application, including television, radio, cellular phone, computer and network hardware and software, satellite systems as well as the different services and applications related to them, for instance, video-conferencing and distance learning (Oster et al., 2006; Ruiz-Madrid, 2005).

The advent of computers and computer software in the context of language learning has definitely added an entirely new dimension to language teaching. The use of technology in language learning is indispensable in this cyber age as both instructors and students feel the need to be exposed to the latest method and media for teaching and learning a language. Moreover, the use of interactive programmes further supports effective language learning. As Brett (1996) puts, “this is because the ability to interact with language learning communication elements via multimedia allows language learners to explore, discover, ponder, search, question, answer and receive feedback.” In other words, the learners have themselves become interactive learners.

1.1 Statement of Problem

ICT learning programs with technical support for language teachers can be beneficial for the enhancement of ICT in teaching-learning scenarios. However, before integrating ICT into their education program, there is a need to know how the potential of ICT can be utilized in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, and what challenges are faced by EFL teachers. Such teachers, particularly those in Libya, often face an uphill task in developing proficiency, fluency and sustained interest in students who are learning EFL. In reality, EFL students rarely use the language in their daily lives and the little time spent for the English lessons in the classroom does not often provide sufficient exposure to the language.

1.2 Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The study aimed to investigate the challenges faced by Libyan teachers in using ICT to teach EFL. It was also designed to find out the reasons behind these problems and to suggest some solutions. There are two questions for this study:

1. Have teachers attended courses on the use of ICT in teaching?
2. Do teachers have enough access to computers at schools?

2. Literature Review

2.1 EFL in Arab Countries

According to Zughoul (2003), “the Arab world needs English to communicate with the world and it needs English for development in its widest sense” (p. 139). Samak (2006) adds to this importance by pointing
out that fluency in English is significantly connected to higher social conditions as well as higher paying jobs in the Arab world. Teaching this language via EFL, for these purposes and in these conditions requires a number of changes in approach, perception, methodology and curriculum at large. These changes highlight the consolidation of the mother tongue teaching, pinpointing the content and making it related to the learner, maintaining the standing of English in the Arab countries as a foreign language and benefiting from what other countries projected in their foreign language teaching policies.

Samak (2006) insists that very little research is available on the implementation of ICT in classrooms in the Middle East. Similarly, there are a few researchers who have addressed the impact of teachers' attitudes on the use of ICT in education in the Arab region.

2.2 ICT and EFL

Successful communication learning relies on the students' desire to participate. Most teachers are familiar with and complain about students who have poor speaking and communication skills in an EFL setting. The same students, when asked to communicate, are often reluctant to do so or simply dare not use English in class. O'Dowd (2009) is of the opinion that this lack of participation is often caused by the artificial nature of the classroom. Hence, when asked to communicate about various situations, the students should also be involved in the actual situation to eliminate any unnecessary or unfounded fear of using English in their classroom. Authentic settings are required to ask for advice, to agree or disagree, to make decision, and to compromise with fellow students. Teachers can engage students in the task at hand through utilizing the computer as a tool to create student projects, research information, etc. Hereby, teachers can smooth the progress of the need of efficient communication inside a group setting.

Hence, computers must be used as a language learning device, only as any other piece of equipment such as tape recorder, blackboard, VCR, etc. It is vital the computer does not turn into the centre of attention of the lesson. There are circumstances when activities at the computer can turn out to be the centre of attention, nevertheless these circumstances ought to be avoided and left to students to decide if and when they want to use such activities (Moursund, 2007).

Using ICT and integrating it into the learning process can ensure effective learning. For effective integration of ICT in teaching and learning, teachers are required to know how learning occurs (Divaharan and Wong, 2003). Based on the work of Roschelle et al. (2000), it has been found that technology improves the teaching and learning processes when students learn via active engagement and reciprocities actions based on the real-life situations.

Apart from knowing how learning occurs, teachers must also have a good knowledge of the pedagogy on how children learn language and also how the learning can be improved by means of ICT (Wilson, 2002). With such knowledge, it is almost certain that the use of ICT will be an effective tool in enhancing the teaching and learning of the English language, especially EFL. That is, the proliferation of electronic aids will enable the teachers to choose from the best available solutions to suit their students learning needs.

Interacting with a computer, students are also using motor skills that can reinforce the learning process by connecting physical actions (for example, typing and clicking) with looked-for results. Moreover, on the basis of their progress, students can control over their learning process as they decide when to practice exercises and questions again. Maybe, student self-pacing is the strongest argument for computer use in
the classroom setting as not all students learn at the same speed. At the same time, proper guidance and co-ordination offered by the teacher or facilitator would definitely boost the learning task at hand.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

This study was performed in all 12 secondary schools in Sirte, Libya. From these schools, all 70 EFL teachers were selected equally without any preference. Out of these 70 participants, 86% were female. Looking at age groups, 97% of the participants were below 40 years old. Findings on academic qualifications revealed that 66% of them were academically qualified teachers. The study also revealed that 44% of them possessed less than 3 years of teaching experience whereas those who had 4 to 7 years of teaching experience amounted to 39% of participants. The remaining 17% have been teaching for more than 8 years and thus can be regarded as experienced in TEFL.

3.2 Instrument

Responses were obtained through a questionnaire. The survey questionnaire was divided into 3 sections. Section one was used to obtain personal information on the respondents. Section two was designed to gather data on the teachers' experiences in attending ICT courses in particular or other computer courses in general. This section was also intended to find out whether the courses they attended were useful in teaching EFL. Section three was to seek information about the teachers' access to computer technology facilities at schools. Close-ended questions were used for the questionnaire.

Before distributing the questionnaire, it was tested for validity by selected respondents proficient in the content and language. The reliability of the questionnaire was then determined through a pilot test carried out on a sample of 8 teachers who were doing their education as foreign students at University of Science Malaysia. The questionnaire was then e-mailed to research assistants in Sirte who then distributed them to all 70 respondents in 12 schools.

4. Results and Discussion

Findings showed that only 30% of the respondents attended courses on the use of ICT in teaching. Out of the 30%, 25.7% of the respondents had only attended one such course. 2.9% had the opportunity to attend 2 to 4 such courses while only 1.4% of the respondents managed to attend 5 to 8 such courses.

Findings also revealed that computer facilities provided by schools were not adequate. 61.4% of the respondents stated that they did not have computer labs in their schools. Looking into the number of computers offered by schools for the teachers' use, 68.6% of the respondents claimed that there were no computers available for teachers use in their schools. 5.7% of the respondents claimed that their schools had less than 5 computers for teachers' use. 10% of the respondents claimed that their schools offered more than 10 computers for teachers' use. Only 4.3% of the teachers claimed that they had their own computers in their schools. Above that, 58.6% of the respondents revealed that their schools did not conduct any courses pertaining to ICT.

Results also showed that a high percentage of the respondents, 87%, did not have internet access in their schools but 60% of the respondents revealed that they were familiar with the use of internet. But then, it was noted that only 35.7% of the respondents were using the internet and computer software for TEFL.
Similarly, the findings about familiarity with the use of computers showed that the majority of the respondents, 74.3%, were familiar with the general usage of computers.

Further, the findings of this study indicated that only about one third of the respondents had some experience in attending computer courses. It was also disclosed that the majority of the respondents had not attended more than one course although 77% of them agreed and strongly agreed that the courses on the use of ICT were useful for the teaching of English language.

One possible reason as to why 70% of the respondents did not have vast experience in attending such courses may be the lack of opportunities for doing so. The fact is about 86% of the respondents were female and it is a social norm in Libya for most families to disallow their daughters to go to internet cafes or any other private organizations to attend such courses. This was made more difficult when not all schools provided computer labs, facilities or internet access for the usage of these female teachers.

The lack of computer courses offered by the school was one main reason why twothird of the respondents did not attend any computer courses besides the fact that most respondents were female. Other reasons that could be related to the lack of experience in attending such courses may be due to lack of interest and motivation among the respondents as well as the obstacles of time and not forgetting financial constraints. Another reason could be that a large number of respondents were still young and new in the teaching field. 92.8% of them were 2235 years old. Only 17.1% of the respondents had been teaching for more than 8 years. 82.9% of the respondents had only 17 years of experience. Therefore, probably they were not offered to attend any courses yet or were still waiting their turn for professional development.

Teaching English in schools with the use of ICT requires the teachers to be familiar with the use of ICT in class. They are required to be knowledgeable and skilful, especially in using computers and other technology tools. Therefore, English teachers need to use the opportunities available, such as the internet in promoting and developing the teaching and learning of English. Armstrong (1995) points out that there are numerous resources online to help teachers to teach. Lesson plan ideas, suggested classroom activities and projects from other teachers can be found. The teachers can also locate wonderful personal and professional resources online. No longer is a teacher isolated from the world as he/she struggles to succeed in a difficult field.

5. Recommendations

The respondents had put forward numerous suggestions on ways to overcome the challenges they faced. It was recommended that teachers must be given sufficient opportunities to attend courses related to the use of ICT in teaching English. Both the Ministry of Education and the Teachers’ Training sectors should play an active role in collaboratively conducting relevant ICT courses. Partnership can be fostered between schools to conduct relevant seminars, workshops and other ICT related trainings. These trainings have to be thoroughly planned and put into operation. Post mortems should be conducted to determine the outcome of the courses so as to find out the shortcomings and improvements could be planned for further courses.

To further enhance the usage of ICT, these courses could be extended to students as it was discovered that using computers can improve students’ grammar and the four language skills. Adequate number of computers should be made available for the perusal of teachers and students as availability and
accessibility to these facilities would encourage teachers and students to use ICT in the teaching-learning process. To keep up with the fast pace of technology, internet access should be made available in all schools and the school administration should encourage and support the use of ICT in the teaching of EFL. This suggestion is supported by the fact that 60% of the respondents were familiar with the use of internet while 74.2% were familiar with the general use of computers.

The findings revealed that some schools had computer labs but were not used for language teaching. Therefore, the school administration could intervene by probably deciding the number of lessons to be carried out using ICT in EFL per week and make sure the teachers conduct their lessons to reach this target. This could encourage teachers to use computer facilities provided by their schools for teaching purposes and in the long run could produce teachers with higher skills in ICT.

To overcome problems faced by female teachers not being able to use ICT outside school, it was recommended that ICT courses be planned and conducted in schools preferably during holidays as there would be no objections from families for this venue. Therefore, the school administration could play an important role in solving this social problem faced by female teachers in Libya. School administration could contribute further by forming ICT courses that caters to the students' level and needs, teachers' interests, curricular specifications and syllabus contents. A co-ordinating board can possibly guarantee the standardization of the objectives and the content of the courses besides fostering interests among teachers and subsequently allowing new methods of teaching using ICT among EFL teachers.

Concerted effort need to be put into overcoming financial constrains which is considered as one of the biggest challenges in the use of ICT in teaching. The parties involved in allocating the budget and providing the necessary funds should be made aware of the numerous benefits of ICT in TEFL. Financial commitment is greatly needed from these parties in order to make sure that the budget allocation or funding for facilities and trainings related to ICT are considered as one of their top priorities.

6. Conclusion

ICT is a force that has altered many facets of our living style. The impact of ICT across the last two decades has been quit undeniable particularly if one compares fields like tourism, business, medicine, law, engineering, and architecture. The way these fields function nowadays is greatly different from the ways they functioned in the past. However, while one considers education, there appears to have been a strange lack of influence and far less change than other fields have experienced.

One of the challenges for the reform process in the area of education is to equip teachers with ICT knowledge (Hamdy, 2007). Despite many problems and challenges faced by the teachers in using ICT in the teaching of EFL in Libya, this study proves that a great deal of teachers believe ICT to be an important tool in enhancing the teaching of EFL and are willing to accept this technology in their teaching. This could be a positive drive towards the involvement and advancement of ICT in upgrading the educational standards specifically in the teaching and learning of EFL.

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References


