Integrating E-learning in Classroom-based Language Teaching: Perceptions, Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract

The paper presents the findings of a recent research study at Majan University College, Oman, which aims at exploring the perceptions of students and teachers regarding the use of e-learning pedagogical tools in a language classroom, the challenges they face and some strategies to enhance the practical application of e-learning tools in classroom-based language teaching. The study, following the qualitative and quantitative research approaches, interviewed 8 English lecturers and administered a five-point Likert scale questionnaire with 46 learners. The qualitative data were analyzed using a coding system and quantitative data were analyzed using computer excel programme to get highest and lowest percentage of subjects' responses. The study finds that both teachers and learners perceive that e-learning: helps students take the ownership of their own learning, provides diversification of activities, fosters intrinsic impetus of learning, enables introvert students to interact better, permits acquiring valuable study and time management skills, allows teachers to have more student-centered form of learning, etc. However, reservations regarding excessive use of technology at the cost of language learning have also been reported. The paper discusses the challenges that hamper ICT success under three headings: technical, administrative and pedagogical. The major challenges reported are marginally less technologically sophisticated faculty, unreliable technology, lack of confidence and experience of instructors and students with technology, substantial amount of time required for lecturers to fine-tune their instructions for electronic transmission of knowledge, lack of e-learning resources to administer networked classes and electronic assessments, etc. The study concludes that ICT has great potential to be integrated in classroom-based language teaching. However, in order to utilize the full potential of ICT and to equip students with skills to be life-long language learners, it follows that teachers and learners' confidence to use technology should be raised by duly facilitating them with the required electronic equipment, training and time resources.

1. Introduction

We live in a landscape where text messages, photos, audio and video files are transmitted from one cell phone to another in seconds, latest mobiles and iphones allow us to connect to the internet through wireless network; e-mails, instant messaging, chat rooms, usenet groups, blogs and wikis have revolutionized the way we share information and communicate with each other [1]. Rapid evolution of these modern information communication technologies (ICTs) has greatly changed every walk of life including language pedagogy, language learning and language use. The introduction of ICT in language teaching has opened new horizons for language teachers to have more interactive and learner-centered classroom environment [2]. These technological advancements have led to the emergence of numerous learning management systems which have almost made it mandatory on language instructors to acquaint themselves with these systems for successful knowledge transmission. In their attempt to familiarize themselves and utilize these new media in their pedagogical instructions, "language educators are interested in research-based evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of e-learning tools" [2]. They are more eager to know the perceptions of

language learners on the effectiveness of technology-led language instruction and the challenges they face while learning through these electronic gadgets. In what ways these challenges can be overcome to enhance the effectiveness of these tools is an important, yet not fully answered question for instructors.

Majan College, a private higher education institution in Muscat, Oman, encourages its staff to use e-learning pedagogical tools to support students' learning. The college runs one year English Foundation Programme which consists of eight modules over the period of two semesters. Based on the current developments in knowledge delivery, the college stresses upon integrating ICT in classroom-based language teaching. This demand has enabled language teachers to redefine some perceptions of language acquisition bringing new challenges for them to face such as integrating networking into curriculum, tailoring web based language tasks to suit module learning outcomes, designing and conducting computer-based assessments, giving effective feedback on students' work, etc. This study aims at exploring the perceptions of students and teachers regarding the use of e-learning teaching tools, the challenges they face and some strategies to enhance the practical application of these tools in classroom-based language teaching.

2. Research Questions

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

Q1: What are the perceptions of ESL/EFL students and teachers at Majan College regarding the use of e-learning pedagogical tools in a language classroom?

Q2: What are the challenges that ESL/EFL students and teachers at Majan College face while using e-learning pedagogical tools in a language classroom?

Q3: What are the possible strategies to successfully overcome the challenges that ESL/EFL students and teachers at Majan College face while using e-learning pedagogical tools in a language classroom?

3. Setting and Participants

The setting of this investigation was English Foundation Programme at Majan College, Muscat. 8 English Language Lecturers and 46 ESL/EFL students participated who were selected randomly from semester 1 and 2. The students, ranging in age between 18 to 45, were both male and female.

4. Instrument

A questionnaire with close and open-ended questions was administered with students asking them to indicate on a five-point Likert scale their degree of agreement on 26 statements and an online interview was conducted with teachers who were asked to answer eight questions related to their perceptions on e-learning, challenges they face and strategies to overcome them.

5. Procedure

All the participants were approached via e-mails, face book, text messages and phone calls. The purpose of study was explained to them and they were informed that their participation was voluntary. The participants responded via e-mails.

6. Data Analysis

The percentage of each response was obtained using excel sheet and the qualitative data were categorized into main themes to find out perceptions, challenges and strategies of using e-learning pedagogical tools.

7. Findings and Discussion

The study found a number of perceptions, challenges and strategies.

7.1. Perceptions

"I believe e-learning tools help to enhance learning … which depending on the student may be more geared toward their preferred learning style".

"Yes, I agree e-learning is better because it keeps the students concentration for a longer period of time".

"…as a new generation we have to move with technology…"

"I believe that using book is better than computer."

"Sometimes traditional teaching practices are the best methods". (Participants of this study)

Such comments from the participants of this study demonstrate generally positive perceptions of both ESL/EFL learners and teachers towards the efficacy of e-learning pedagogical tools in classroom-based language teaching. Both perceive that ICT "*can help students take ownership of their learning, make them autonomous and confident in their learning, enable introvert students interact freely, acquire valuable study and time management skills with better intrinsic impetus for learning and teachers can have a more student-centered form of learning*". These perceptions have also been replicated in the questionnaire data. Out of total 46 students, 92% students agreed that "*the lesson is more interesting if teacher uses electronic tools*" and 82.4% agreed that "*they prefer learning from a teacher who uses various e-tools while teaching*". This shows learners' high demand to learn from latest digital devices adding extra pressure and responsibility on language educators to reengineer their selection and use of teaching materials [3]. The finding also corroborate the findings of earlier studies which conclude that "*computers will not replace teachers, but teachers who use computers will, inevitably, replace teachers who do not*" [4]. Participants favored combination of instructor-led traditional learning and computer-aided learning. The following graph shows some perceptions of learners.
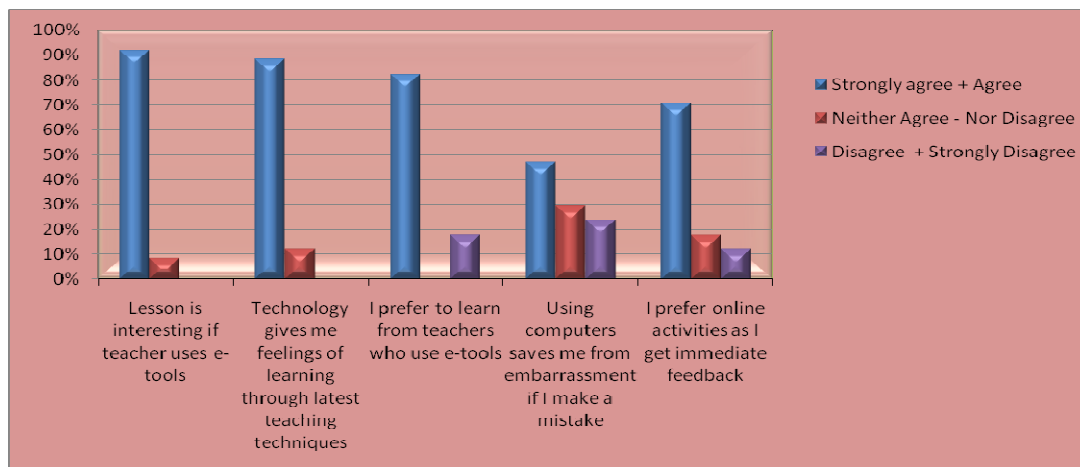

Fig. 1 Perceptions

Contrarily, some participants exhibited signs of reluctance in relying heavily on digital devices as one student expressed, "*I believe that using book is better than computer.*" Another said, *"…as time passes and I get used to technology, I will find it similar to the traditional method*'. Similarly, participants' endorsement of the statements indicative of computer-based assessments as well as

their comments show their lack of enthusiasm in designing and conducting computer-based assessments. "*A computer-based assessment may cause extra stress if the student is weak with the technology...it often consists of decontextualized objective questions resorting more guess work, etc.*" as commented by some subjects. 58.4% students said that "*they feel more comfortable with paper and pen exam*". However, they acknowledged that "*the ease and immediacy still makes e-learning an extremely useful tool*".

7.2. Challenges and Strategies

While debate rages hotly over the advantages and shortcomings of using technology in a myriad of ways in all walks of life, language teachers struggle to catch up or keep up with the heap of newly invented digital gadgets to effectively adopt them for their own agenda of language pedagogy [4]. In their struggle, language educators face a number of challenges signalled by research subjects of this study. A wide array of these challenges and strategies can broadly be categorized in three areas: technical, administrative and academic.
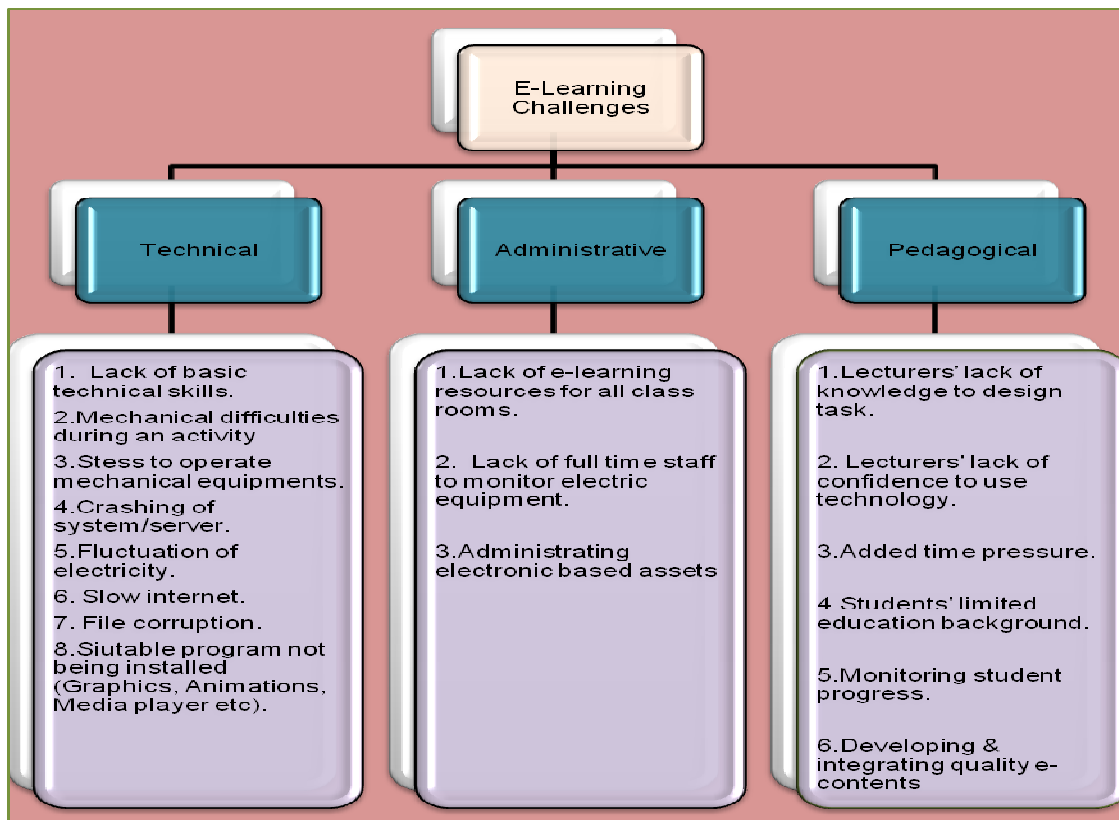

Fig. 2 Challenges

7.2.1. Technical Challenges

The subjects pointed out several technical challenges that hamper instructors' as well as students' activities in an ICT learning environment. "*Lack of basic technical skills*" of both students and teachers alike came up as the most frequently cited technical challenge. Some staff members expressed that "*they feel stressed and embarrassed even to invigilate for an exam which requires technical equipment of any sort*". "*An unexpected technical issue*", especially during an exam, further "aggravates this stress" [5] as narrated by a module coordinator, "*I literally felt bewildered when more than a 100 students, in a listening exam, stared at me complaining about a few seconds crash of an audio cassette*". 60% students also reported that "*their lack of digital competency hinders their*

learning English through computers" and almost 58% agreed that "*mechanical difficulties interfere with their abilities to express their thoughts*". Some other challenges reported are "*crashing of system, fluctuation of electricity, slow internet, files corruption, suitable programmes not being installed like graphics, animation or media players, etc*". The participants suggested arranging extra classes or training workshops for both students and teachers to get the maximum advantage of ICT.

7.2.2. Administrative Challenges

Administering an activity or an assessment which requires technological infrastructure is another significant challenge identified by the subjects. "*Lack of e-learning resources for all classrooms*" and "*lack of full-time staff to monitor the electronic equipments*" are the main challenges cited by the participants in this regard. "*My classroom is currently limited in the availability of resources to use e-learning*", which also makes it "*hard to integrate e-learning into curriculum*", commented by a lecturer. As a strategy, the interviewees suggested that teachers "*must make sure an adequate amount of classroom and independent e-learning is used in advance of an electronic-based assessment. Otherwise, it is unfair for the medium to be used as a testing tool.*"

7.2.3. Pedagogical Challenges

The challenges of the above mentioned two categories, i.e., technical and administrative, make the task of language pedagogy more challenging. "*Lecturers' lack of knowledge to design language tasks with technology and lack of confidence to use technology while teaching*" came up strongly as basic pedagogical challenges that need to be addressed to enhance ICT application in classroom-based language teaching. Lecturers reported "*spending a substantial amount of time and effort restructuring web-based language activities to adopt for online delivery for students with very limited educational background and digital competencies*". This sometimes goes at the expenses of focusing building the target language skills. The subjects strongly recommended building the lecturers' and the learners' ICT skills and adding up the bank of e-learning resources in order to facilitate language educators in multitude of ways such as designing web-based language activities, tailoring language tasks to suit module learning outcomes, assessing students' language skills electronically, etc. When introducing new technology to the classroom, as elaborated by a keen e-learning practitioner, it is "*critical to ensure that there is a sound pedagogy behind the move, not just a desire to use new toys. Students can be overwhelmed with too much technology, or confused by badly used or badly setup technology*". A clear link needs to be established between the e-learning pedagogy adopted and the target learning outcome in order to understand, what Arabasz et al. [3] say, "*the logic behind integrating e-learning tools in language pedagogy*". Lecturers confront another difficulty of "*monitoring learners' progress in an online activity*". This has been complemented by students' responses as 50% found "networked conversation as disorganised" and 67.7% expressed "*occasional frustration because of the quick evolution of ideas and multiplicity of entries on the computer screen simultaneously*". Another challenge reported is "*the extent to which quality e-contents can be developed and integrated into curriculum*". The study found that though "*technology can be integrated into any curriculum to quite a depth*", this area is yet to be explored which presents scope for future research. The participants recommended a "*blended form of learning*" which equips traditional language teachers with a variety of e-learning tools such as Discussion Boards, Classroom Response System (CRS), Voting Pads, Moodle/Virtual Learning Environment, Blogs, etc. Students only need, in a lecturer's words, "*quite a bit of encouragement to actually use these technological sophistications and teachers need a bit of momentum built up on them before they become an integral part of learning process*". The following graph shows percentage of responses.

8. Conclusion

Evidence from this research shows that participants have diverse perceptions towards e-learning ranging from highly positive to reluctance of relying heavily on the use of technology in classroom-based language teaching. Generally, students are more comfortable with a mouse or touchpad than a dry erase board, which shows that ICT is being increasingly called upon to address the growing demand of learning through latest media. However, the challenges like technological illiteracy, extremely limited educational background of some students, lack of time and digital resources, lack of confidence to use digital equipment, untrained lecturer, etc. act as barriers to cause the full potential of ICT to remain untapped. In order to enhance the efficacy of ICT learning environment, teachers and students must be provided ample support in terms of training, equipment and time resources.

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