Investigating CALL Teachers' Contextualised Views of their Evolving Roles

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigated how in-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in private language schools (PLSs) in Iran define and understand their role expectations in Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL); and how these definitions affect their teaching practices. Informed by Biddle's [1] role theory, the aim was to ascertain the mutual expectations of EFL teachers and learners concerning the selection and use of new technologies in foreign language teaching/learning setting. Eight Iranian EFL teachers and four EFL learners participated in this study. Semi-structured interviews and classroom observations formed the data collection. Participants reported minor role changes for teachers due to unsystematic and irregular use of CALL in the Iranian PLSs. The results of the thematic analysis and axial coding indicated that there is a mismatch between teachers' and learners' definitions and expectations of the roles of teachers. With regard to technological literacy, teachers have relatively high expectations of themselves as CALL teachers. This role conflict has seemingly caused teachers to be reluctant to use new technologies. These findings provide us with more realistic and practical insights for the integration of technology into foreign language teaching. The paper concludes with implications for CALL teacher education.

Keywords: teacher role, computer-assisted language learning, EFL, role theory

Introduction

The integration of technology with second/foreign language learning in recent decades, which is widely known as computer-assisted language learning (CALL), has provided new opportunities for target language learning [2]. The application of CALL, however, is a relatively fresh phenomenon in developing countries like Iran. Although extensive research has been carried out into the benefits of CALL [3] and learning outcomes for various language learners [4], the subject of CALL teacher education in the Iranian context is understudied. Although many teachers express positive attitudes toward CALL, few make practical use of computer technologies in their teaching practices [5], which demonstrates a gap between their rhetoric and practices [6]. From a broad perspective, Comas-Quinn [7] purports that the successful use of technology in education depends on how effectively teachers undergo transition from their conventional face-to-face classroom roles to a technology-rich environment, which requires specific roles and responsibilities. It has been challenging, however, to find a definitive answer to the roles that teachers should undertake in and outside the classroom [8]. A lack of consensus about the definition of the teacher's role adds to the ambiguity of designing appropriate teacher education programs and this continues to be a perennial issue [9].

Research shows that there is a relationship between the teacher's role definition and practices [10]. Hubbard and Levy [11] proposed a framework for teachers' and educators' roles in computer-assisted language learning, which was based on the Role Theory [12]. They posited "that we view ourselves and others in terms of expectations built around roles and the labels that accompany them" [11, p.14]. Building on Hubbard and Levy's [11] role-based framework for CALL education and revised version of Role Theory [1], the current study investigated how teachers define their roles in CALL in the Iranian context, and how this definition influenced their teaching practices.

Role Theory

Biddle [1] defines Role Theory as "a science concerned with [the] study of behaviors that are characteristics of persons within contexts and with various processes that presumably produce, explain, or are affected by those behaviors" (p. 4). The concept of Role Theory, which is widely used in education studies [13, 14], can help teachers to investigate and understand their roles and responsibilities in the teaching process and how their practices affect learners' achievements.

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Methodology

The study was conducted using a qualitative research design. The participants were eight Iranian EFL teachers (four males and four females) and four EFL learners (two males and two females) from four private language schools in northern Iran. For the purpose of this paper, pseudo-names are used throughout. Semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were used as data collection instruments. Data collection commenced with classroom observations. Teachers' use of technology in their practices was observed in the classroom observation stage. In the interview phase, the researcher investigated how teachers defined their roles in CALL context. Data were analyzed using two qualitative data analysis methods: thematic analysis [15] and axial coding [16].

Results and Discussion

Data collected from classroom observations revealed that, overall, teachers made limited use of technologies in their practices and the use of technology varied largely from one teacher to another. The most commonly used technologies included personal computers, TV screens, CD players, and, in some cases, data projectors and smart phones. Two of the eight teachers reported using online resources, with one using the Telegram social networking tool and the other employing the Edmodo learning management system. The observations focused, in particular, on the purposes for which teachers used technology, and how students were engaged in its use. The findings showed teachers primarily used personal computers and CD players to play audio files for listening comprehension exercises. In some cases, they used their smartphones to complete the same task. TV screens and data projectors were used to deliver new materials visually. One of the teachers used Telegram to maintain her connection with students after classroom hours, and she posted extracurricular multimedia materials in that platform. Navid used Moodle to manage students' assignments. In both instances, students were actively engaged in the use of these technologies. Apart from the use of Telegram and Edmodo, the roles of the students were more passive. In other words, technological tools were only used and manipulated by the teachers.

The Roles of the Computers and Teachers

The eight teachers in this study were asked about their perceptions of the roles of computers in language teaching and learning. All teachers perceived the role of the computer (i.e. new technologies) as that of tool, rather than tutor [17], although they held different views about the potential uses of it as a tool. In other words, much emphasis was placed on the presence of the teacher as the stimulating force, who motivates students and organise learning. Within their own teaching and learning contexts, teachers proposed the following roles for the computer: a source of access to authentic input (i.e. target language), a medium for multimodal production of output (e.g. verbal, visual), facilitator of out of classroom interaction with students via social media, an enricher of classroom practices, a means of dynamic assessment, and a medium for providing feedback. Even though the increasing role of computers in language teaching was affirmed, teachers tended to dismiss the possibility of being replaced by computers.

As one of the teachers reported, the language teaching contexts and resources are continuously evolving, and therefore, teachers need to adapt to these changes. Reza, for example, explained that whist teachers used to be the primary source for students to ask questions about vocabulary, nowadays almost every student has a smartphone providing instant access to digital dictionaries. This example demonstrates how the presence of technology affects the roles and responsibilities of the teachers. Likewise, Mahin purported that easy access to online authentic materials, such as movies, in English language by the students, makes the role of the teacher less prominent in delivering new materials. Amir believed that teachers should determine the use of technology, and not be controlled by its presence. Many of the teachers believed that they needed to a have wider knowledge of ICT than the students, whereas, this perception was not shared by the latter. The students did not expect their language teachers to be IT experts, but they were keen to have their teachers employ new technologies and let them engage in various tasks and exercises. One of the students commented that the ability to contact her teacher almost anytime via the Telegram platform was helpful, because she could receive immediate feedback. Another student, however, expected her teacher to introduce more Internet-based group activities.

Design, Implementation and Evaluation of CALL

The majority of teachers did not undertake any formalised CALL training, and only two of them had the experience of attending CALL workshops. This kind of self-training had resulted in a technology-driven understanding and implementation of CALL, a phenomenon that is criticised by CALL experts [18]. This reveals that these teachers did not follow any particular instructional design for CALL, and they mainly implemented new technologies based on their personal motives and methodologies. Besides this intrinsic motivation, teachers strongly believed that language schools needed to be responsible for training teachers to use CALL regularly in an organised way.

Technical design and development of CALL materials were not perceived of as roles of the teachers, however, they believed teachers could consult designers and developers to support them with information about classroom needs. For some teachers, a lack of adequate technological infrastructure and financial support were demotivating factors with regard to the implementation of CALL. These contextual factors, as stated by Biddle [1] in Role Theory, tends to affect teachers' expectations and how they define their individual responsibilities. Teachers were ambitious to have comprehensive knowledge of the tool they use, which in turn encouraged them to use simpler technologies in order to have more control on it. It seemed that 'technological knowledge' was the focus of teachers' attention, rather than 'pedagogical technological knowledge' [19], which emphasises the pedagogical potential of any technological tool and teachers' understanding of these potentialities. Additionally, responding to students' possible negative predispositions was believed to be among the responsibilities of the teachers. Ava described that it is very common that some students do not favour a particular technological tool, which leads her to inform them about the advantages of that tool. Teachers expressed their willingness to alter their use of technological tools based on the feedback received from students.

Conclusion

Despite appreciating motivational and instrumental advantages of CALL [20], teachers in this study described a disorganised and irregular use of educational technologies, which was mainly driven by either the excitement of new technologies or the comfort of using old and simple tools like CD players. In either case, no formal or informal CALL training or instructional design was offered by the private language schools and teachers mainly engaged in a plug-and-play method [21]. Accordingly, no significant change of teacher roles was observed, and teachers continued to follow their conventional practices with the supplementary use of technological tools. In other words, neither teachers, nor school administrators, designed and developed plans for the use of technological tools. Nevertheless, teachers reported that they were aware of the gradual changes that technology is bringing into their classes. The lack of CALL teacher training has caused teachers to have a limited understanding of their roles and responsibilities. In the case of this study, teachers expected themselves to have a wide knowledge of new technologies in order to become successful CALL teachers, and this perspective seemed to hamper their transition from conventional methods to CALL, thereby impeding their progress.

These findings demonstrate that teachers' mere intrinsic motivations for using new technology result in a chaotic implementation of CALL, where students' receive passive roles, despite their vast access to and knowledge of new technologies. Considering these points, it is suggested that context-specific CALL teacher training could help Iranian EFL teachers have a more realistic understanding of their roles and expectations of them. Moreover, the provision of a sound instructional design for the use of CALL by language schools could guide teachers throughout the labyrinth of questions of what, how, when and how much technology use.

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