Utilizing Technology in ELT Classrooms

Mohammed Abd Alla Abd Algane Mohammed

Department of English Language & Translation, College of Science & Arts Arrass, Qassim University, Al-Mulida, Qassim, KSA
Email: dr.mohammed_saleem@hotmail.com

Abstract

This study aims at investigating the effective role of utilizing technology in language classrooms, *i.e.* it is intended to highlight the significance of exploiting technology in ELT classrooms. The main objective of this paper is attempting to raise the awareness of both teachers as well as learners to take advantage of technology and use it usefully in teaching and learning processes. This study adopts the descriptive research methodology which is appropriately convenient to describe the topic of research. The paper is constructed of a brief introduction, literature review, conclusion, findings & recommendations, and list of references.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Storyboard Program, Varietext Program, Deadline Program, Classroom Observation

1. Introduction

This paper is an attempt to clarify the idea of utilizing technological devices in language classrooms to serve the purpose of promoting learners' language skills as well as motivating them. It is an attempt to familiarize both teachers and learners with some tools that can be exploited to facilitate teaching and learning processes.

While teachers' conservative attitude toward technology has been identified as a barrier to effective technology integration in classrooms, it is often optimistically assumed that this issue will resolve when the digital generation enters the teaching profession as in [1].

Reference [2] states that rapidly evolving technology has not only fundamen-

tally changed the way in which we live, work and communicate, but also revolutionized the education system. A wealth of studies investigating ways of harnessing technology to transform teaching and learning suggest that technology, when used appropriately, offers great promises to facilitate teaching, engage students and increase students learning achievement, e.g. (Mann, Shakeshaft, Becker, & Kottkamp, 1999; Funkhouser, 2002-2003; Salpeter, 1999). Technology access in classrooms has been steadily growing in the last two decades and education is experiencing an increase in classroom technology demands as in [3].

2. Dedicated Programs

The programs written with specifically ELT applications in mind which are perhaps of most obvious relevance to the teaching of literature in ELT are those which involve the manipulation of text in some way. Reference [4] classifies the commercially available programs for purpose of illustration into three types, all of them are available for the BBC and Apple II microcomputers:

2.1. The Storyboard Program

Published by Wida Software, embodies the cloze principle taken to its logical extreme. A text, drawn from a bank of texts held on disc, is completely blanked out, only one underline per letter and punctuation remaining visible on the monitor screen, as well as the title of the passage. The students' task is to reconstruct the text by typing in words which they judge to be in the passage. On each successful guess, the word is replaced in the text in all its occurrences. The students thus gradually build up a linguistic context which guides them in thinking of further words which might appear in the text. The students have the option of viewing the texts for variable periods of time before starting the activity or may choose to start "blind". Let us take that well-worn stylisticians' path and illustrate these points by supposing that the text in question is Hemingway's short story "cat in the Rain". Suppose, for example, that students are working on the first paragraph of the story, which describes a view of an Italian piazza from a hotel room. The students may come to recognize the passage as a description and, quite logically, experiment with a variety of adjectives which could plausibly be used to provide the kind of detail which would bring the scene to life. If they did, they would find most of their attempts frustrated. In fact, in this first paragraph, consisting of a total of 93 word tokens, Hemingway uses only some 8 adjectives (the exact count depends on precisely which tokens one allows to count as adjectives): big, green, good, bright, gravel, long (twice) and empty. This finding certainly tells us something about Heming-way's style. It is something that the students, through use of the program, will have discovered for themselves, and a discovery which could lead to a valuable class discussion of Hemingway's purposes in deliberately adopting such a Spartan technique. In other words, the computer program, by forcing students to pay close attention to every word in the text, can help foster a sensitivity to the particular choices made by a given author.

2.2. The Varietext Program

Is another dedicated program which has great relevance to the study of literature in the ELT context and it is published by CUP in the British Council Software Series. In this case, however, the screen displays the text with certain words highlighted in a distinctive color. For these words there exist alternative readings, which may be viewed at the press of a key. The student, by pressing a given key, can cycle through all the options available at a given highlighted spot in the text. At each key press, the highlighted word is replaced by one of alternative readings, the rest of the text staying constant. The students can work their way through the whole text examining the options for each highlighted word in turn. An especially interesting use of this program is where the author him or herself can be enlisted to provide the alternative readings. This is the case where, for example, a variorum edition of a particular text exists or where the authors various drafts are preserved. A good example is the poem "Anthem for Doomed Youth" by Wilfred Owen'. We have some insight into the process Owen went through in creating this poem from study of his manuscript. We know, for example, that at one stage Owen considered calling the poem "Anthem for Dead Youth" likewise, there many words which Owen changed before the published version was achieved. In other words, the variants can be those actually considered as possibilities by the author him or herself. The student's task of reconstruction is thus given added relevance insofar as it throws a sharp light on the choices made by the author and the reasons for them.

2.3. The Deadline Program

Is the last dedicated program which focuses more on creative writing by the students than either of the Programs examined so far. The researcher is aware that there are some who would dismiss the claims of creative writing to a legitimate academic activity but nonetheless there seems to be a fairly widespread acceptance of the proposition that the experience of writing can help students towards an appreciation of the achievement of other writers.

The problem of the teacher of creative writing in the ELT context is that of providing appropriate support to students writing in what is a foreign language so that they are not defeated by the demands of a task which can be beyond the powers of many a native speaker. This Program is also published in the British Council Software Series, and it is designed to provide just that kind of support.

The core of the Program is a simple word-processor which is accessible to students, that is one which has little overhead in terms of learning effort. This word-processor has extensions, the possibilities of providing an initial input and guidance for revision. This is not to say that the kind of activity it fosters could not be undertaken without the use of the computer. But what the computer Program offers is a powerful simplification of the logistics of integrating the various elements of the activity used as a word-processor can testify. Thus "Deadling" provides the kind of supportive writing environment that the foreign student

needs and which makes it particularly useful tool for examining the progress of writing skills. As such it is especially relevant to what has been inaccurately termed the "language/literature interface".

3. Classroom Observation

Reference [5] cites that classroom observation plays a crucial role in program evaluation (Worthen, Sanders, & Fitzpatrick, 1997). Schools can count up technology units installed and hours of professional development as inputs to a program. Surveys and interviews can record student and teacher attitudes about an innovation. Tests and school transcripts can quantify outcomes. But only observation of students and teachers at work can document the learning experience itself. In particular, observation helps determine whether an intervention has actually been implemented before a program tries to evaluate outcomes (Frechtling, 2002).

Reference [2] cites that since 1999, the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) has conducted classroom observations as part of its evaluations of numerous initiatives funded by federal, state, and private grants [5] [6]. In these projects, the point of the observations was to determine whether information and communications technologies (ICT) were being integrated into instruction. This is more complicated than noting that technologies are present and that students are attending to them. Numerous attributes determine what constitutes true integration as defined by the National Educational Technology Standards (NETS), including alignment with curriculum and instruction, active interaction with technology tools, and the use of technology to promote a range of important cognitive skills (ISTE, 2000, 2002, 2007, 2008). Making this determination is important for two reasons. First, ICT integration can be a goal in itself to make school learning environments more like postsecondary education, workplaces, and homes in terms of technology access and use. Second, assessing outcomes related to ICT integration e.g. (student achievement or attitudes) is moot unless a project can show that classrooms actually changed.

In 2008, the Hewlett Packard Company funded ISTE to develop a computer-based note-taking application that would take advantage of tablet (pen-based) technology. The program, the ISTE Classroom Observation Tool (ICOT), can be used on any Windows or Macintosh computer and is optimized for tablets, which allow the user to hold the computer in one arm and write on the screen with a stylus. ICOT was based on protocols employed in previous ISTE program evaluations, particularly those presented in [5] [7] [8] [9].

Over the years that led up to ICOT, it became clear that the NETS are necessary but not sufficient for the purpose of program evaluation and improvement. The standards themselves do not describe how they are to be achieved, but that is the point of most project evaluations. Although program evaluations may not have the theory-building imperative of pure research, they are generally charged with estimating whether and how a successful initiative could be replicated or scaled. ISTE makes clear that achieving the standards is contingent on a number

of essential conditions (ISTE, 2000, 2008). The ICOT looks at seven attributes of the learning environment that: 1) are related by theory or experience to ICT integration and that 2) can be noted by classroom observation:

- Student groupings (individual, pairs/small groups, whole class).
- Teacher roles (lecture, model, interactive direction, moderation, facilitation).
- Learning activities (a lengthy list, with space for additions).
- Technologies used by teachers and by students (a lengthy list, with space for additions).
- Technology use time (recorded as presence during 3-minute segments of the class period).
- Percent of students engaged (estimated by noting students distracted during any two 3-minute segments).

Some important attributes, such as levels of teacher preparation or technology support, are essential conditions that are not explicitly included in the ICOT because they are not directly observable. Observers can comment on the extent to which these conditions are implied, but the circumstances under which they might become manifest are too diverse to code in a protocol that is already attending to numerous other aspects of the environment.

4. Conclusions

To conclude this paper, it is crucially important to mention that no one can deny the effective impact that technology has in facilitating and developing both teaching as well as learning processes. The world lives in a technological era and almost everyone uses some sort of technology nowadays. Language learners are so hooked up to their cell phones, so why don't teachers take advantage of this inclination and turn it into something useful?

Technology has to be incorporated into teaching methodologies so that it would facilitate the learners not only to acquire a second language effectively but also to develop electronic literacy skills. The "traditional" methods of ELT are less preferred to computer and technology assisted methods in effective ELL classes. Thus, "Teaching our students language in its traditional media is no longer enough". Traditional literacies, such as reading and writing, are now only a subset of the skills a learner is required to develop in order to function efficiently. Increasingly, in everyday and professional life, people need the skills of electronic literacy, such as accessing, evaluating, and utilizing information as in [10].

5. Findings & Recommendations of the Study

This study has reached that technology is a must-use in education in general and in ELT classrooms in particular. In addition, technology utilization requires instructors' observation in classrooms to achieve the intended learning goals. Thus, the study recommends further research in the field of technology utilization in education and specifically in ELT classrooms. It is also recommended

that those who are specialized in computational linguistics conduct further research in this domain in order to assist both teachers as well as learners to benefit from the great revolution of technology.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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