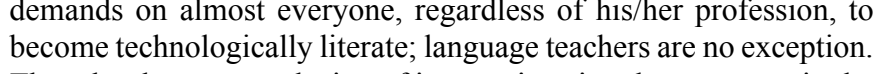# 1

THE COMPUTER IS IN THE LEARNERS' HANDS: ARE WE PREPARING OUR TEACHER-TRAINEES ENOUGH FOR THE DIGITAL AGE?

FATIMAH PUTEH

INTRODUCTION

Today we live in the age of the computer and there are growing demands on almost everyone, regardless of his/her profession, to become technologically literate; language teachers are no exception. There has been an explosion of interest in using the computer in the language teaching and learning classrooms in recent years especially with the multitude of resources available and the promise of the technology as a communication tool that can bring together language teachers and learners from across the globe. Just one or two decades ago, it was not a common sight to see a computer in use in a language learning classroom as it was the concern and interest of only a small number of specialists. Today however, with the advent of multimedia computing and the Internet, the role that a computer plays in language instruction has now become an important issue confronting large number of language teachers throughout the world. The question is whether or not these teachers have been equipped and trained enough to adopt the technology in their language teaching and learning classrooms. For an experienced teacher, the main problem faced by them may only be learning about the technology and how best to integrate the technology in his/ her classroom. But for teachers new in the profession, adopting a computer in their classroom teaching could pose a big challenge to them as not only are they lacking in teaching

experience, now they are confronted with yet another challenge, that is integrating the technology in their language teaching and learning classroom.

Bringing this technology into their classrooms is not an easy and straightforward task as adopting the computer entails knowledge of using the technology and also making decisions about which part of the technology to use, what activities are best done using the technology, how much of the technology should be exposed to the students, how long should a lesson last using the technology, and many others. The list of queries could go on and on so much so that newcomers to this teaching profession will be overloaded with nothing too much worries about adopting the technology. That is why it is imperative that these newcomers to the teaching profession be well-equipped and well-trained to take up the challenge of integrating the computer technology in the teaching of language in this Digital Age. Thus, it is the job of the teacher trainers to make sure that these teacher-trainees are given the necessary exposure and skills and enough confidence to use the technology and later to be able to integrate this technology in their teaching practices.

THE CHANGING ROLES OF THE TEACHERS AND LEARNERS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING CLASSROOMS

Before discussing the different skills taught and exposed to the teacher-trainees, let me first of all discuss about the changing roles of both the teachers and the learners in a language classroom today. It is based on these changing roles that the computer literacy and skills program was taught to the teacher-trainees. The adoption of a computer in a language classroom sees the changing roles of the teacher. If in the past the teacher is seen as the one dissipating information and as the knower-of-the-right-answer and taking control of the language classroom, today this role is changing. Firstly, the teacher is seen as no longer taking the pivotal role in the classroom

but as the facilitator to the learning and teaching process. This is
so because the responsibility for imparting the knowledge is no
longer shouldered by the teacher alone but shared by the learners
who now have access to a multitude of resources at their disposal.
The teacher is there to provide guide and assistance to the students
whenever necessary, for example assisting learners with problems in
understanding certain parts of a lesson accessed through the Internet
or problems in using the facilities offered by the technology. The role
of the teacher as a contributor of knowledge can vary from playing a
minor role as proposed in the Ahmad model (Levy, 1995) to a major
role as proposed in the Farrington model (Levy, 1995).

Secondly, the teacher is also seen as a writer to teaching
materials and the author to the language-learning programs. Instead
of using the materials available in textbooks that are almost always
with outdated information as most language learning textbooks are
used by several generations of students, the teachers are expected to
take advantage of the enormous range of information and resources
available on the Internet. This is so because the Internet is fast
becoming the largest reference library in the world with information
multiplying at such an enormous rate that language teachers and
learners alike are spoilt for choice. Articles, texts, stories, poems,
books, videos, audio clips, music – they are all only a few mouse clicks
away as long as the teachers know how to find them, utilise them and
maximise their use for the benefit of their learners. What more with
the data and information constantly updated by the minute, teachers
are no longer faced with the problem of using outdated data but can
constantly keep abreast with the current issues. Again, in order for
these to become a reality, the teacher-trainees need to be trained on
how to access these materials, then to adopt and adapt these materials
to suit the needs of their learners and then to make this collection of
materials accessible to the learners.

The third role of a computer-using teacher is that of a user
of an authoring tool. Being able to access, compile and categorise
resources into files that are accessible to the learners are not enough.
Teachers need to move a step forward by being able to utilise these
files for different purposes of their teaching and for students with

differing needs so that these files will not remain idle but are fully utilised. To realise this goal, a language teacher should become authors to their language learning programs. A simple way of becoming authors to their language learning packages without having to learn any particular programming language, a teacher may utilise one of the authoring tools such as *Toolbook* or *Authorware*. However for the computer-savvy teachers, they may want to move yet a step further to the next role of being teacher-programmers. Taking this role demands a lot of the teachers' time and energy of which we all know a language teacher may not have access to.

Moving on to the changing roles of the learners, learners in today's Digital Age are no longer seen as passive receivers of information but that of taking proactive roles in participating in the learning process and being partially if not wholly responsible for their own learning. They now have access to computers be it in the classrooms, or computer rooms or even at cyber cafes. The fact remains that these learners have the technology in their hands and it is the job of the teachers to tap the skills and expertise that these students have in order that the skills and expertise they have can be fully utilised for language learning.

To realise the different roles that a language teacher may have to play in this Digital Age, the multitude of choices of facilities available to them to realise these roles, and the fact that many students today have access and some even have some knowledge and expertise of handling the computer, the teacher-trainees are exposed to both the theories and practice of adopting the facilities in their language teaching/ learning classrooms.

PUTTING THEORIES INTO PRACTICE

Exposure to the many facilities available on the Web for language learning comes in two forms: theories and practice. It was felt that knowing the theories alone will not be sufficient to equip the teacher-trainees for the Digital Age as putting these theories into practice is a

more challenging and difficult task than simply knowing about what the technology has in store for them. To realize this goal, the teacher-trainees were given both training both as a user of the technology and as a teacher adopting the technology in the classroom. The following are some of the components of which the teacher-trainees have been exposed to in acquainting them to the Digital Age.

TECHNOLOGY USED	SKILLS TAUGHT	TRAINING GIVEN AS A USER	TRAINING GIVEN AS A TEACHER
Search engines	Using the different types of search engines to access information: e.g. http://uk.yahoo.com http://www.yahoo.com http://www.altavista.com http://ask.co.uk http://www.google.com etc.	To be given or to choose a topic of interest and complete a given task. The task may be in the form of producing a piece of extended writing, an essay or a newsletter based on the topic	• To compile lists of URLs and to categorise them based on topics or headings. • To compile lists of URLs available and to categorise them based on specific language teaching/ learning skills such as Reading, Writing, Vocabulary. • To create own web page based on a particular language learning skill that uses hyperlink facility of the internet. • To create own web page based on own topic of interest, or a particular language learning skill.

Table 1(a) Activities using search engines

TECHNOLOGY USED	SKILLS TAUGHT	TRAINING GIVEN AS A USER	TRAINING GIVEN AS A TEACHER
Search Engines/ Web pages	Reviewing and Evaluating web pages	To visit some URLs of own interest and to review and evaluate the materials available on the URL using: 1. internet detective 2. web page evaluation worksheet	• To evaluate and review some language learning web pages and to share the information with the rest of the group so that a list of "evaluated and reviewed" web pages can be compiled for use by the Teacher-trainees in the future. • To create own web page containing information of own choice integrating the tools characterised by web pages such as hyperlinks, texts, animations, graphics.

Table 1(b) Activities on reviewing and evaluating web pages

TECHNOLOGY USED	SKILLS TAUGHT	TRAINING GIVEN AS A USER	TRAINING GIVEN AS A TEACHER
Multimedia software	Reviewing and evaluating language learning software	To review and evaluate well-known and well-used multimedia softwares such as Rosetta Stone, Real English, and to compare own review and evaluation of the softwares with that done by professional reviewers.	To review and evaluate some language learning softwares of own choice and to suggest and recommend how these softwares could have been improved or used in own language learning classrooms.

Table 1(c) Activities on reviewing and evaluating multimedia software

TECHNOLOGY USED	SKILLS TAUGHT	TRAINING GIVEN AS A USER (some examples)	TRAINING GIVEN AS A TEACHER
Communication tools: 1. Electronic mail	• Sending and receiving emails • Attaching documents to emails • Opening attached documents in an email	• Required to use email when communicating with course-mates to discuss academic-related issues • Required to use the email when communicating with lecturer outside class time	• To submit assignments in soft-copy via email. • To communicate with Keypals from abroad by exchanging ideas and to completing a given assignment.
Communication tool: 2. Electronic discussion group	Subscribing to selected discussion groups	To participate in e-discussion groups and to share ideas gained from the discussion with other teacher-trainees. The sharing of these ideas are done through E-forum	To participate in e-discussion groups and to share ideas gained from the discussion with other teacher-trainees. The sharing of these ideas are done through E-forum
Communication tool: 3. E-forum	Participating in E-forum on topics selected by teacher-trainees or topics based on information gathered from E-Discussion group or chosen by the web master	To participate in E-forum, by giving views on issues in the discussion. Each teacher-trainee is required to pose or give his/her views on the topic at least 3 times every half of the semester.	To form own E-Forum group based on specific subject they study during the semester. This is to familiarise them with the use of E-forum.

| Communication tool: 1. E-diary | Keeping a record of what they have learned about integrating the technology in their language learning classrooms. | To keep a record of their learning of the technology in the form of an E-diary. They are also encouraged to view their response about using the technology through E-diary | |

Table 1(d) Activities on using different communication tools

TECHNOLOGY USED	SKILLS TAUGHT	TRAINING GIVEN AS A USER	TRAINING GIVEN AS A TEACHER
World Wide Web	• Searching for specific information based on a given topic • Creating web-based worksheets.	To use the search engines to search for information based on a specific topic	• To make use of information gathered and to adapt them to suit a particular group of learners. Then to prepare specific exercises that can give practice on specific language skills for the learners. • To use the same materials which have been adapted to teach yet another skill. • To produce language learning activities in worksheet forms using MS Word document where learners are required to use MS Word tools to improve their writing skills.

Table 1(e)   Activities on using the World Wide Web (WWW)

CREATING LANGUAGE EXERCISES ON THE WEB

In addition to the above skills introduced to the teacher-trainees, they are also exposed to the possibility of creating their own language exercises on the web. The advantage of introducing this skill is to help these teachers become future material writers so that they do not become dependent on ready-to-use materials which most of the time are not tailor-made for their own students. By having this skill, it is hoped that these teacher-trainees will not only be able to produce their own materials but they will also be able to put into use the skills they have acquired in using the technology in their language teaching/learning classrooms.

For creating the exercises, a web authoring package called *Hot Potatoes* is introduced to the teacher-trainees. *Hot Potatoes* was developed by Martin Holmes and Stewart Arneil at University of Victoria, Canada. More information about *Hot Potatoes* can be obtained at: http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/halfbaked. This web-authoring package consists of a suite of five authoring tools which enable language teachers to create their own exercises in Windows format. The available types of exercises that *Hot Potatoes* are able to develop include:

- Multiple choice quizzes
- Jumbled sentences
- Short answer questions
- Gap-filling exercises
- Crosswords

EXPLOITING INTERNET RESOURCES OFF-LINE

Much has been said about one of the major problems faced by users on the web such as the slowness of accessing the Web at peak times. If this becomes a problem especially amongst the teacher-trainees, the chance will be that they may not even want to use the Web in their teaching. It will be such a waste if this happens since all of us know how much information there is available on the web. Therefore, to overcome the slowness problem, teacher-trainees are also given the training of downloading web pages in advance so that these materials can be used by learners off-line.

Creating Exercise Off-line

The web is an excellent source of authentic materials. It is fairly easy to develop meaningful exercises off-line using texts which have been carefully chosen from the web. A variety of text-reconstruction exercises for example can be created using Camsoft's *Fun With Texts* packages. All a user needs to do is find a text, copy and paste it into *Fun with Texts* package and the computer will do the rest. Gap-filing and Multiple Choice exercises can also be created off-line using Camsoft's *Gapkit* package. The procedure is still as the above but with *Gapkit* it gives the teacher more control over the way the exercises are presented to the students.

CONCLUSION

Having said all of the above, and having trained the teacher-trainees with such extensive computer and language teaching/ learning skills, it is up to the teacher trainees whether or not they want to integrate the technology in their language learning classrooms. It will be such a waste if the teacher-trainees are unwilling to integrate the technology in their language classroom especially if the machine is at their disposal and above all the web, being an Aladdin's cave of information, has everything to offer these newcomers to the teaching profession. As far as imparting the knowledge on theories, practice

and facilities available to integrate the technology in the language classroom, we have done our part to deliver the goods but whether this knowledge is put into practice, lies in the hands of our teacher-trainees when they face the real world outside the confines of the four walls of the language computer rooms.

REFERENCE

Geisert, P. G. & Futrell, M. K. (2002) *Teachers, Computers and Curriculum*. Massachusettes:Allyn and Bacon.

Jonassen, D.H., Peck, K.L. & Wilson, B. G. (1999) *Learning with Technology: A Constructivist Perspective*. Ohio: Prentice Hall.

Levy, M. (1997) *Computer Assisted Language Learning: Context and Conceptualization*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Windeatt, S., Hardisty, D. & Eastment, D. (2000) *The Internet: Resource Books for Teachers*. Oxford: OUP.