3
THE INTEGRATION OF ICT IN A LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: ARE TEACHERS THE ULTIMATE ARBITERS?

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INTRODUCTION

"Do you use computers in your teaching?" "Do your students use the Internet?" "Does your school have a Web site?" These are some reasonable questions to ask any teacher in this age where most of the world's information is being handled electronically. Powerful computer capabilities have made classroom computer use a matter for every teacher to consider, regardless of level or subject matter. The Internet, the World Wide Web and even a word processing tool such as Microsoft Word have opened wide to the world the classroom doors, offering everyone, teachers and students included, new routes to learning and presenting teachers with fresh opportunities and novel ways to discharge their professional roles.

Recent years have shown an explosion of attention being given to how computer technology might and could be used in classrooms, colleges and universities to facilitate the instruction and learning of language among students. Everywhere across the globe researchers have been kept busy with this newly found tool for language teaching and learning. Some researches point in the direction of positive results whilst others do not show marked differences in students' performance in the second language or foreign language with the integration of the technology in the classroom. Yet, there are still a lot more to be

learned and discovered as far as the technology is concerned. The fact remains that the technology does have a lot to offer. It is up to the creativity and innovative nature of the teachers to put this technology into use. Or is it? With the promises that the technology can offer, how do teachers, especially teacher-trainees handle the challenge of bringing this technology into their classrooms?

This paper aims to share the results of a survey conducted on 56 TESL teacher-trainees of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia who have completed at least 20 credits of computer related courses, on their willingness and readiness to integrate computer technology during their practical teaching.

IMPLEMENTATION OF COMPUTER LITERACY IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia, in its desire to become a developed nation by the year 2020 requires workers who are not only knowledgeable but also proficient in information technology. The government, upon realising the importance of information technology, begins to place greater emphasis on computer literacy education and what more, with the promise that the technology has to offer, the emphasis is extended to the learning of languages, including the English language. Schools are expected to produce students who are proficient and competent in information technology. With that, SMART schools were established where the use of multimedia and information technology is integrated into the teaching and learning process. In line with the nation's desire to produce as many computer literate people as possible, in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, all students registered for the TESL program have computer as their minor in the hope that these students, upon graduation will help the nation realise its vision. As part of the training, these teacher-trainees are exposed to at least 20 credits of computer literacy/ integration program throughout the course of their studies.

COMPUTER LITERACY PROGRAMS FOR TESL STUDENTS

As computer is their minor in the program, these teacher-trainees are exposed to courses which include the following:

- Teaching and Learning Technology
- Telecommunication and Networking
- Multimedia Software Development
- Computer Language I
- Graphic, Animation and Digital Video Technology
- Language Programming
- Methodology of Teaching Computer Literacy
- Introduction to Computer Assisted language Learning
- CALL and the Internet
- Web Design
- Computer Electives: AuthorWare, Visual Basic, MacroMedia Flash

As part of the training, these teacher-trainees not only learn the theories and applications of computer but are also given the opportunity of hands-on experience of building their own programs, multimedia and language learning software, language learning web sites just to name a few. They also prepare lesson plans and language learning worksheets for lessons integrating the technology. To ease the teachers' problems of knowing what to use or not to use, they are also given the practice of evaluating both language learning software and language learning web sites. It is hoped that with this training, they will be able to make their own decisions in the future as to what can and cannot be used to meet the needs of their students. In addition, they are also exposed to the theories and practice of integrating computer technology in the classroom. In fact some even had the opportunity of integrating the technology for their micro teaching sessions. With this extensive exposure to the technology, majority of

the students expressed their readiness and confidence of integrating the technology in their lessons.

WILLINGNESS TO INTEGRATE THE TECHNOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

The results of the survey show that the majority of the teacher-trainees expressed their willingness and readiness and even confidence of integrating the technology in their language learning classrooms. Among the computer facilities rated high in their confidence/readiness list are:

1. adopting of word processing tool in the writing tasks which include the use of spelling and grammar checker and thesaurus
2. using email for class projects and as a communication tool for both teachers and students
3. integrating language learning web sites in their teaching using selected language learning software as enrichment materials
4. using the computer facilities to prepare motivating language learning worksheets
5. using the Internet as a material resource
6. preparing lessons using PowerPoint

The tasks rated low in their confidence/readiness list are:

1. developing their own language learning software for specific group of students
2. developing their own language learning web site for specific group of students
3. developing their own language learning programs using software such as AuthorWare, Macromedia Flash.

Based on the response to their confidence level in integrating the technology in the classroom, the results show that any computer skills requiring them to build their own program/website/software received low ratings among the teacher-trainees. Most teacher-trainees stated time being the factor for their lack of confidence or unwillingness to use these tools whereas the former skills, according to them, require less preparation time. With the exception of the three points stated above, the results clearly show that more teacher-trainees are more willing to integrate more computer skills in their language learning and language teaching classroom. Having said that, let us look at what actually happened during the 6 weeks training practice that they did.

COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY USED DURING PRACTICAL TRAINING

These teacher-trainees have such positive attitudes towards the integration of the technology in the classroom. However, these positive attitudes did not match with what actually happened during their 6 weeks training practice. When a survey on their actual integration/use of the technology in the classroom is carried out, the results obtained were disheartening. All the willingness, readiness and confidence of integrating the technology in their language learning classroom were not put into practice. Why is this so?

Based on the results obtained, majority of the teacher-trainees reported having the opportunity to use the computer only for the preparation of motivating language learning worksheets and for obtaining useful information from the Internet as supplementary materials used in the classroom. Only 4 teacher-trainees reported integrating the technology through using language learning software, language learning web site, PowerPoint and word processing tool to help the learners with their writing. With such poor results in their use of the technology in the classroom, several issues need to be addressed.

FACTORS AFFECTING DECISIONS TO INTEGRATE COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

Availability of the technology in the classrooms

The results of the survey show that the main reason for the lack of integration of the technology in the classroom is due to availability of the hardware for use. In 26 schools that these teacher-trainees had been assigned to, only 4 schools are properly equipped with a computer laboratory where students and teachers can use them. Even then, access to these computer laboratories is restricted. The other 22 schools that these teacher-trainees went to either have only one stand-alone PC sitting at one corner of the staff room for teachers' use, or there is a computer somewhere in the school but the teacher-trainees have no access to it, or they do not have one accessible to the trainees. This brings us to the second factor affecting the decision to use the technology.

Accessibility

For the technology to be integrated in the language classroom there is no denying that accessibility to the technology is one of the major issues that need to be addressed. For example, are desktop or laptop computers available for personal use and access for the teachers and the students? Students' access to computers had been reported as being one of the major hurdles holding teachers back from integrating the technology. Many classrooms may have only one computer for a class of forty or more students. Even if there is a computer laboratory, it is usually dominated by the teacher in charge of the room who usually acts as gatekeeper or use of it is so restricted that users have to go to all ends just to get the chance to bring the students into the laboratory. Also, the teacher in charge of the computer laboratory usually "stand guard" over the lab making sure that it is used in the way he/she wants it to be used. Their idea of utility may or may not coincide with that of the teacher-trainees. Thus, the gatekeeper is literally a hurdle that the teacher-trainees have to jump over in order to use the laboratory and being "outsiders" in the schools, usually the teacher-trainees

choose not to bother to make a fuss.

In addition to the above, another factor withholding the teacher-trainees from integrating the "more- interesting" computer-related activities in the classroom is accessibility to the Internet. Accessibility to the Internet is still a DREAM to many schools and teachers. Very limited number of schools have computers connected to the Internet and those that are, have so many rules and conditions of use tied to them that using them becomes an exercise in political correctness instead of the act of discovery it should be.

Attitude

Integrating the technology in the classroom is a matter of attitude. Attitude here refers to both the teacher-trainees' and the attitudes of the rest of the teaching staff in the school. Once they are bogged down with so many teaching hours and the pressure of handling some real students with real needs and the list of challenges facing these teacher-trainees can go on and on, all their desire or even confidence in integrating the technology especially when the reality strikes that the technology is lacking in the schools, dissipate. For those who are still willing to integrate the technology they are faced with yet another hurdle of having to accept the attitude of the technology illiterate teachers who are quite scornful of the "modern worship of technology".

Support for teachers

If not the single most important ingredient for good teaching, it is close to it. It is a universally recognised prerequisite. Support includes everything from effective pre-service training to consistent access to information, knowledge and resources to sufficient opportunities for broader professional development. Unfortunately, for a variety of enduring reasons, support in all these areas has alluded too many teachers for too long in too many countries in the world. For those engaged in the integration of the technology in the classrooms reported not getting much support from the others in the schools. They reported needing someone to "hold their hands" in the process of integrating the technology, just in case something goes wrong in the process.

They need someone in the school who are literate enough to show them what, why, when, and how because what they have learned is too far removed from the reality in the real world.

CONCLUSION

Having discussed the actual training received by the teacher-trainees, the amount of exposure given to them, their attitudes towards integrating the technology in the classrooms and the factors withholding them from integrating it in the classroom, where do we go from here? So, the much-debated issue of teachers lacking the training to integrate the technology in the classroom is not the critical factor determining its integration in this case. In fact availability and accessibility to the technology should be addressed as much as the training. So what will happen to these so-called well-trained computer-literate teachers in the future if they are unable to put into practice the skills and knowledge they have of the technology? And with the fast advancement of the technology, and not having the training ground to put their knowledge into practice, will the training and exposure given to them put to waste?

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