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The Benefits of a Digital Language Lab in Secondary Schools EFL in Saudi Arabia

Dr. Yousef Hamad A. Al-Maini
College of Languages & Translation, Imam University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
Corresponding author email id: yalmaini@hotmail.com

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Abstract **– The emergence of ICT has rapidly altered the nature of teaching and learning across all educational sectors around the globe; researchers have identified it as a promising tool, encouraging its use in the teaching of all subjects including EFL. This article considers the potential of this powerful tool for assisting teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in state-run boys' secondary schools in Saudi Arabia, based on observations and interviews with students and teachers conducted during a case study exploration of attitudes and processes currently affecting EFL in Al-Riyadh district. It was found that most teachers perceived the use of ICT special language lab as beneficial to learning and teaching, in particular in reducing classroom teaching time and improving the monitoring of students' progress. Teachers also believed that language lab provided a greater variety of teaching and learning strategies, e.g. teachers created blogs to teach their students cooperative writing techniques, and encouraged students to upload useful learning applications on their smart phones. Teachers believed that students were more engaged when using technology, and that ICT helped the students to become more independent learners. However, there were several obstacles such as lack of budget, lack of access, lack of confidence when using ICT, and poor training.**

Keywords **– English Lab, Saudi Arabia, Foreign Language, Teaching ICT.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Computer technology has been used in language teaching since the 1980s (Vi, 2005) although of technology in a broader sense has always been present, with analogue technology representing an important phase in computer laboratory development. The implementation of ICT in English language teaching has made it possible for teachers and students to interact with one another in the classroom, and has also assisted them to enrich, h the learning experience through access to online material, authentic material and repeated practice (Meurant, 2011; Vi, 2005).

Although there has only been limited work previously on the uptake of ICT in Saudi Arabia, Hakeem (2007), in her study about ICT adoption in teaching English for specific purposes argued that it is necessary when attempting to adopt a new idea from abroad to consider the impact of cultural and social forces and their appropriately. She argued that, despite the availability of technology and the government urge for reform, teachers and students were reluctant to adopt ICT. She attributed this to Saudi Arabia's reserved attitude toward technological presentation. One of the aims in carrying out this research was to understand how, and why, teachers use ICT, and to compare use in Saudi Arabia with elsewhere in the wider literature.

Our world is witnessing a technological revolution in the field of information and communication. This article considers the potential of a digital Language Lab for assisting teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in state-run boys' secondary schools in Saudi Arabia, based on the findings of a case study exploration of attitudes and processes currently affecting EFL in Al-Qaseem Area. It sheds light on some difficulties facing the use of this tool in these schools and how the headteachers and teachers are responding to these difficulties. It refers to the view that new thinking by government and teachers is needed to allow Saudi s-

-chools to enhance language teaching by exploiting this digital technology.

Additionally, a digital Language Lab has been designed from the ground up for ease of use, so that non-technical users can quickly master the system with minimal training.

II. The Present Study: Context, Methods and Participants

The curriculum in Saudi secondary schools is centrally prescribed and textbooks are standardized; that the Education Ministry (EM) in theory espouses a communicative approach, but in practice the curriculum is overcrowded, with a lot of artificial exercises and exams that rely heavily on memorization, so it does not promote authentic communication.

What follows is based on an interpretive, qualitative study carried out in Al-Riyadh district, in the centre of Saudi Arabia, to explore the teaching of English as a foreign language by using the digital language lab. An intensive case study was carried out in two secondary schools containing around 800 students, age 15-18 years, distributed in three years or grades and more than 100 students were interviewed, and 25 classroom observations carried out, covering all three years of study.

III. Literature Review

The CLT approach was developed in the 1970s from a concept that perceived language as a system for communication, and its aim was to develop learners‘ communicative competence (Hymes 1971; Halliday 1973; Richards and Rodgers 2001). Harmer (2001) stated that there are two aspects of CLT: what to teach and how to teach. The _what to teach‘ aspects of this approach place more importance on language functions than on structures. The second aspect, _how to teach‘, states that the classroom interactions should involve meaningful activities which create opportunities for practising real communication in order to develop a student‘s knowledge and skills. However, Littlewood (1981) argued that in order to achieve the communicative purpose of teaching and learning a language, CLT should pay systematic attention to both functional and structural aspects of language.

Within such an approach, computer technology potentially has immense value, both as a source of “comprehensible input” (Krashen and Terrell, 1983) and as a medium for shaping and disseminating output which promotes fluency, encourages syntactic language processing and affords students opportunities to receive feedback from others (Swain, 1985).

Chomsky's linguistic theory differentiates two aspects of language, _competence‘ and _performance‘. According to him, competence consists of the principal knowledge of the grammatical system of a language, and such knowledge makes it possible for a user of a language to generate and comprehend an unlimited set of sentences out of a limited set of rules, while performance, according to Chomsky, refers to the use of the underlying knowledge to communicate (Newby 2011). This idea, however, was criticised by Hymes (1972) for ignoring the social elements of language. Hymes points out that Chomsky's linguistics theory does not account for socio-cultural factors or differential competence in a heterogeneous speech community, and therefore Chomsky's view of performance is an incomplete reflection of competence.

The Internet has enormous potential in language teaching, as a resource for EFL, and as a means for communication between the EFL communities. It provides realistic, authentic native-speaker models of the

language (text) and on-line radio broadcasts (audio). The Internet also offers language-learning curricula. Teachers can find information and materials on all kinds of subject matter, lesson plans, supplemental activities and many other various forms of assistance. Students can find information in English on their specific subjects, that is, English for specific purposes (ESP). For example, students in the scientific stream can find sites dedicated exclusively to English for science, full of exercises, tasks, etc (Tinio, E-ASEAN Task, & UNDP Asia Pacific Development Information Programme, 2003)).

Moreover, since language is an evolving entity, the Internet, with its enormous growth rate, allows easy updating of materials and information and thus, provides English language teachers and students with up-to-the-minute language and knowledge.

The Internet is a powerful tool for communication between teachers and students, among teachers and among students. In the Saudi context, it offers a cheap and convenient way of communication. Students can make friends with other native speakers without the need to travel abroad. They can have English-speaking 'keypal' friends with whom to practise their writing and reading skills, just like having normal penpal friends, though in a faster and cheaper way. For example, one of the students interviewed indicated that he is still in contact with his British friends by e-mail and messenger, and this has improved his English skills.

IV. STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

In considering whether to deploy the new technologies, teachers will take account of the specific learning that students achieve, and the motivation of students who use the new technologies for learning (Balanskat, A., Blamire, R., and Kefala, S. 2006).

ICT is often seen as having an additional attraction, in the form of motivation. In Saudi Arabia, most secondary school students have positive attitudes and are confident in the use of leT and feel that ICT supports significant progress in their education (Oyaid, 2010). Oyaid conducted a survey of 270 secondary school students from six secondary state schools in Riyadh to explore the students' use of ICT inside and outside the school. She found that 73% of students used the Internet to search for information for learning and other purposes at least once a month. They also visited discussion rooms and received emails. In general, students more frequently used

Word processing and Internet searching than other activities such as game playing, downloading and drawing.

My fieldwork in Al-Riyadh district, Saudi Arabia, provided evidence that new technologies can develop students' interest in learning activities and lead them to devote more time and attention to these activities than in regular classes. Moreover, they increase their confidence in their abilities. This in part is due to the spontaneously receptive attitude that a large number of them adopt toward any activity in which technology plays a role. For instance, a student expressed the view that it would be helpful to use the school's ICT laboratory for English language, and suggested that the teacher could guide students to English language web sites. He added,

"*Every semester, students ask the head teacher to provide their school by English labs which will enable them to use them in learning English effectively*".

Another student said,

"*The benefit for us is that we want to develop both listening skills. The lab will help us to talk English very well*".

This would enable students to use the Internet in that laboratory to serve as a medium for experiences and presenting creative work. While students can peruse the information on the Net, they can also use it as a platform for their own work such as writing composition, or short stories. In addition, this will keep students focused on learning through discreet observation and listening, and through PC desktop management.

A number of students similarly had the idea that their learning would be facilitated if they had the opportunity to use a language laboratory. For example, one student said that "Labs will make you love the subject and that will force you to learn". Another expressed the same idea, placing language laboratories in the context of a more varied and interesting approach to language teaching generally. He said,

"*I think if our teacher tries to use ICT in teaching English, he will make us like it as a favourite subject*".

One of the main benefits of a digital lab is that students have more opportunities to speak- through recording activities and pairing. Shy students appreciate having the privacy of headphones and an electronic call button to ask for discreet support.

The Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, through the Tatweer project, aims to improve the teaching and learning environment inside the classroom and in schools more generally. Additionally, it aims to increase the effectiveness of the teaching process, improving output by providing the necessary facilities in the school environment and integrating learners into teaching and learning process (Modhi AlOsami, 2011, Al-Mukhallafi, 2014, Al-Ghamdi, 2018).

V. CONSTRAINING FACTORS

A number of factors seem at present to prevent Saudi schools from exploiting the potential of digital language laboratory facilities in teaching EFL. Among them, a major issue is budget and resource constraints. Despite the Saudi government's espoused commitment to exploiting new technologies to enhance teaching and learning, progress is slow. Although many schools have a "learning centre" (LC) equipped with computers, available for teaching any subject, computer resources are insufficient for the numbers of students, network linkage is incomplete, and some schools are housed in leased buildings (a temporary expedient to cope with rapid quantitative development) that do not even have an LC. In the centralized Saudi education system, schools do not have autonomy to raise or allocate funds, so any plan to install a language lab would require Ministry approval (involving lengthy bureaucratic delays) and funding. One head teacher interviewed expressed his frustration when he took the initiative to contact a Sony representative in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to draw up a plan for a language lab, forwarded the plan and costs to the Ministry, and waited several months before receiving notification that project was rejected on financial grounds.

Lack of access to resources, including access from home, and shortage of machines at school, is an obvious barrier that may discourage teachers from integrating ICT into their teaching. Teachers need to have access to computers in order to prepare for lessons. In a study of Greek teachers, Fragkouli (2006) stated that lack of computers, and the location of computer labs, was the main reason for teachers choosing not to use ICT regularly when teaching. In a study conducted on student teachers in UK, Hammond et al. (2009) suggested difficulties in access to ICT were barriers to ICT integration, particular given the diffidence that some student

teachers manifest when asking for access. Pelgrum (2001) found that the most common obstacle mentioned by teachers in their use of ICT was too few accessible computers. Similarly, Coogan (2005), in a New Zealand based study noted that while students had access to the Internet in the library, teachers needed access in their classrooms. In their study on the use of ICT in Malaysian smart schools, Hamzah et al. (2009) concluded that teachers complained about the shortage of facilities and computers in school classrooms. These computers were also old and slow. They also complained that a small number of the computer labs were far from classrooms and needed to be booked ahead of time. Moreover, Hennessy et al. (2010) stated that teachers in Africa identified unreliable equipment, electricity and access to the Internet as barriers to ICT use. Thus, there is a generally reported problem with accessibility. Hakeem (2007) found access and 30*Chapter two: Uterature Review* lack of availability of enough computers for all the students in the lab a barrier to uptake, especially as the computer lab was not available most of the time for classroom use. Lack of hardware and software play a major role in teachers avoiding integrating technology into their teaching (Birch & Burnett, 2009; Jones & Kelley, 2003; Surry et aI., 2005). In Saudi Arabia, AI Wehaibi et al. (2008) conducted a cross-sectional survey with a sample of 504 faculty members at four Saudi universities, to examine the barriers to their adoption of the Internet. The authors found the major barrier reported by the faculty was limited access to the Internet, which included references to frequent disconnections and poor connection quality.

Even the limited ICT facilities currently available are underused in EFL, due to teachers' difficulty in incorporating new thinking and materials into a tight and overburdened schedule. Interviewed teachers seemed to view use of a language laboratory or even the existing LC as an extra chore to be fitted in, in addition to the existing class schedule, rather than as an alternative. Moreover, they perceived the purpose of such facilities as purely to add “fun” to lessons; they did not anticipate learning games and, on the contrary, feared a breakdown in discipline.

Added to these factors was a degree of reluctance that appeared to be due to lack of skill and confidence in using ICT, especially among older teachers who had not used it in their pre-service education and training.

Lack of effective training programmes relating to the use of technology was a further obstacle. Teachers seem to generally want to learn how to use technology in their classrooms, but lack of opportunities can hold them back (Bingimlas, 2009; Ropp, 1999). Lack of effective training and experience can be considered one of the main reasons why teachers do not use technology in their teaching Oimoyiannisa & Komisb, 2007; Goktas et aI., 2009).

In the light of these obstacles, clearly significant financial, technical and training support would be needed to allow the majority of Saudi schools to exploit the benefits of digital technologies such as the recent language laboratory solutions, to enhance teaching and learning in EFL.

VI. CONCLUSION

The new technologies present stimulating opportunities for improving education and possibly making it less expensive. In the field of EFL, for example, digital laboratories affording Internet access can support the communicative approach to language teaching with access to authentic native-speaker models of L2 use, resources for teachers, and opportunities for students to communicate across communities. It is clear that change will happen and it is important to keep in mind that the way we teach today is neither the only nor the

best way. Saudi EFL teachers are trying to cope with a centrally prescribed, overloaded curriculum, by clinging to a traditional grammar-translation approach and failing to exploit technology where it is available; students find this approach demotivating and not conducive to confident use of the language.

It was found the majority of teachers were divided into two kinds; extended users of ICT and restricted users of ICT. Extended users saw opportunities to use ICT in situations that other teachers did not and developed resilience when overcoming difficulties. They initiate use even when access is not readily available; i.e. they seek to extend use by bringing their own devices into the classroom. Restricted ICT users were the majority among the study participants. Their use was seen as routine, for example the use of projection devices and the recording of grades only. They would use ICT when expected, but tended not to seek out resources, or get round access and other difficulties.

Also, it was found that most teachers perceived the use of ICT to be very beneficial for teaching, for the classroom environment and for students learning and motivation. Teachers believed, also, that ICT helped them to prepare better teaching materials, as it enabled efficiency when presenting materials, fostered variety in teaching and learning strategies, and saved time in the classroom, as teachers were able to prepare their materials in advance. In the classroom environment, most teachers felt that ICT made classroom time more enjoyable and facilitated interactivity. Regarding the benefits of ICT for students' learning, the research showed that teachers agreed that students learnt more when using ICT, were more engaged, and that ICT helped students to become learners that are more independent. About half of the teachers interviewed believed that ICT was effective and helped to reinforce learning.

In addition to teacher attitudes, major constraints on the use of digital technology in EFL in Saudi schools are lack of resources, lack of access and schools' lack of autonomy in decision-making. Exploitation of new technologies and teaching methods requires acceleration of government resourcing plans, and teachers training in the technologies and their educational applications.

I also suggest that, in order to maximize the resources available to schools, cooperation should be encouraged so that schools share and exchange resources. This would not only benefit the students, but might help to foster collegial relations and contribute in the development of a professional culture.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Dr. Yousef Hamad Al-Maini is a Ph-D holder in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from University of East Anglia (UEA) in the UK. He is working as an Assistant Professor at College of Languages & Translation in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He is working as a Reviewer for many journals. P.O. Box 93752, Riyadh 11683, Saudi Arabia, Office Phone Number: 00966-112585312.
email id: yalmaini@hotmail.com