SCAFFOLDING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING WITH INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In this early part of the 21st century, information communication technology (ICT) has become integral part of language learning and teaching, and the ways ICT is being used in classrooms all over the world have become diverse and central to language practice. This is the time when digital tools and technologies have become normal in daily life, but not so much in the world of education. However, digital tools have long been used in the world of education, and particularly language teaching. Central in the field of computer assisted language learning (CALL), digital tools or ICT tools form a core part of English language teaching. This paper attempts to describe how ICT can be utilized to aid a learner in the acquisition of English language. The paper also explores innovative approaches that can be put in place by the teachers in English language teaching to meet the needs of a modern generation of English Language learners who are exposed to an increasingly globalised world.

KEYWORDS: Information and Communication Technology, Computer Assisted Language Learning, English Language Teaching, English as Foreign language, English as Second language

INTRODUCTION

English is reportedly the most commonly 'learned' second language around the world[1]. It is neither possible nor appropriate to apply the same methodology of English language teaching to all learners, who have different objectives, environments and learning needs. The variations are of several kinds, relating to social situation (language policy, language environment, linguistic and cultural attitudes, economic and ideological factors, etc.), educational organization (instructional objectives, constraints of time and resources, administrative efficiency, class-size, classroom ethos, etc.), teacher-related factors (status, training, belief, autonomy, skill, etc.), and learner-related factors (age, aspirations, previous learning experience, attitudes to learning, etc.). Recent findings added new factors and categories such as varied learning styles, communication strategies, personality factors, and psychological processes. However, it is difficult to determine dependencies between contextual factors and instructional methods. Many of the factors tend suspiciously to fit different slots in different taxonomies.

In this scenario, each situation results in or leads to a certain approach to English language learning and these circumstances dictate the introduction and appropriate implementation of modern technologies. It is also evident that while technology has transformed learning, it can also reinforce linguistic, social and cultural hegemonies.[2] For example, technology enhanced language learning is most successful when technology is integrated into the activity and where it is used as a supplementary tool.[3] It is also agreed that ICT facilitates collaboration and serves a personalized, scaffold

learning[4]. It is also recognized that computer assisted language learning, supports independent, self-paced learning via assessable assets such as language games and drilled activities. Technology enhanced language learning is effective because it offers immediate feedback to the learner as well as to the teacher.[5]

Evidence suggests that there can be significant variability in practitioner and pupil confidence with ICT[6]. However, there is unequal access to the technology and there are still digital divides, both in countries[7] hence, a one-size-fits-all approach to using technology is not practical. Linguists have demonstrated that there is no one best method for everyone in all contexts, and that no one teaching method is inferior to the others and that different methods are best for different teaching contexts.

Use of technology for English language learning does not appear to be restricted to any particular age group. Learners are familiar with ICT and use it innovatively within the early years. In many contexts, learners are being exposed to a range of technologies from a very early age in the home. And by the time they join a school for formal education they develop some digital skills that enable them to participate in technology-driven activities[8]

Technology continues to be used for all sorts of specific language learning activities, such as oral practice and reading and writing skills development. Sequences of content-driven, language-based activities culminate in the acquisition or practice of new skill such as an oral presentation, or a specific task like writing a letter or essay. Children might engage in a teacher-led question and answer session, watch a video, research using books and the internet, take part in a role play or debate and experience any number of other activities in preparation for the final task. Throughout, learners are engaged in 'blended learning'.

The question of when it is the best time to start learning English is a much-debated subject. Kirsch suggests the following[9]:

- Research into the optimum age for language learning is inconclusive

- An early start has a positive impact on children's attitudes

- The only advantage of an early start is the total amount of time spent actively on learning a language.

Globalization of trade and the predominance of English have led to changes in language education policies in many countries and English language teaching is being introduced in primary schools. Within a politically charged educational environment, the creation of a well-educated, English speaking workforce may lead to economic upturn in the country. For Parents, proficiency in English is the number one priority and synonymous with success in academics and economic prosperity in career. As a result, children now begin their study of English at primary level.

Over the last two decades, there has been a perceptible change in the way technology is integrated into personal lives. Technology has been used for dissemination of information, whereas modern learners have become proficient in creating and developing content for a wide variety of purposes, for example blogs, forums and wikis. Moreover, learners are largely interested in selecting, sifting, showcasing and sharing information with friends, family and peers. Gradually, teachers have also adapted their methodology to reflect the changing nature in utilization of technology.

The change from a 'reading information' to a 'reading and writing information' has encouraged teachers to alter their teaching methods to engage tech-savvy learners who are involved in content duration in an expanding arena. When

students write or speak for a broader and more international audience, they pay more attention to polishing their work, think more deeply about the content they produce, and consider cultural norms more thoughtfully.[10]

Some studies suggest that children learn best by hearing language being modeled by skilled teachers, and use language in productive activities. In some contexts, children are exposed early to reading, learning sounds and the explicit teaching of grammar. Clearly, it makes little sense to be teaching reading and writing in a second language when these skills are not achieved in a first language. In many contexts, schools are measured by how many children pass academic exams, which may necessitate and encourage a 'teaching to the test' mentality amongst teachers. However, this could mean that the more important aspects of learning are neglected.

Developing Oral Proficiency

When native speakers of English are immersed in learning English, the development of oral competency naturally tends to precede a more specific focus on reading and writing. However, in case of non-native speakers of English, the decision is more complex. A useful framework for viewing learning English as a foreign language can be seen in Figure.[11]
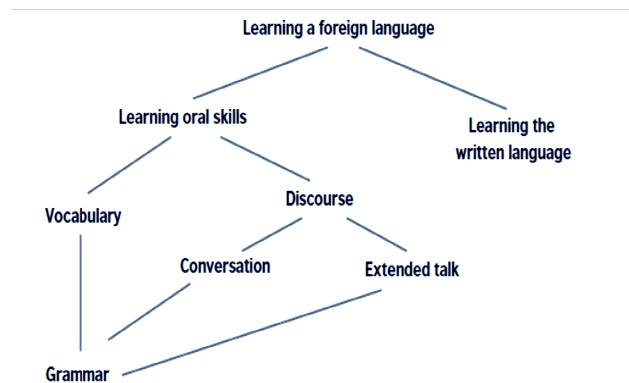
Figure 1

Cameron separates learning the written language, because it not only comes later in a child's development, but also writing needs to be explicitly taught by the teacher. Also, for the young language learner, language is presented, practiced and learned through speaking and listening. As the result of activities that take place in the class, children learn the meaning of words and grammar 'emerge[s] from the space between words anddiscourse'[12] and supports the development of meaning.

Learners acquire language through the classroom activities such as use of songs, rhymes and traditional stories. Authentic oral models via recorded songs, talking electronic books, podcasts and video clips also help learners with pronunciation, as well as acquisition of new vocabulary. Technology allows the children to record themselves for playback later, and the ability to listen and play back recordings helps identification of grammatical errors and inaccuracy in pronunciation.

Developing Reading and Writing

Reading and writing are interdependent. Reading makes the writer.[13] The children who were taught reading, can decode, but fail to comprehend or appreciate the aim or objective of a piece of text. This is too often the case for children learning English as a foreign language.

This occurs when reading is forcibly taught or taught too early and becomes a purely mechanical process.

Reading is compromised by lack of access to interesting and engaging texts. The internet helps in such a case, where texts which are sophisticated for many learners of English, can be found. There are websites on the web where a wide variety of texts can be found. For example, Simple English Wikipedia (http://simple.wikipedia.org/) has texts with a high content level.

Wordle (www.wordle.net) offers texts and activities that promote the interface between reading and writing. This displays word clusters that frequently occur in a text. Teachers can use Wordle, to help children compare texts and analyse the style of writing or focus on key vocabulary.

In addition, Digital texts and electronic books can be accessed on mobile phones or tablets will obviously inspire children to read. Many ICT devices that support text-to-speech synthesis offer effective oral-modeling. They also provide access to electronic dictionaries. Information Communication Technology affords young learners the opportunity to practice reading in a conducive environment. The immediate feedback from the software is beneficial to the learners.

Text Help's Fluency Tutor is a software tool that allows a reader to record reading of the text and offers a quiz to their comprehensive ability. The tool also helps a teacher to track and evaluate a learner's efforts in terms of pronunciation, hesitation, fluency, and accuracy. The learner can also review the immediate feedback by the teacher provided online. The software is also able to track a learner's progress as they read advanced texts, and presents it in the form of info graphics.

Other tools such as Pearson's Rapid Reading programme, offers speech recognition and immediate feedback to a learner as he/she reads a text into a microphone connected to a computer. The software corrects pronunciation errors, vocabulary errors to improve reading and speaking skills.

Such ICT tools are motivating for learners as they provide comprehensive feedback in private and as they can practice in a non-threatening environment. The effectiveness ICT tool to help a learner enhance reading skills lies in the relevance of the chosen texts. However, it is also to be noted that Technology motivates the learners to do things that they do not do in a classroom environment but may not offer enjoyment in reading. Reading must be purposeful and is a multi-layered, multi-modal process. Thus, chosen texts should be engaging, relevant, visual and explore a variety of genres in order to genuinely meet the needs of 21st century learners.[14]

The Spellchecker and Thesaurus built into word processors such as Microsoft Word can be tremendously useful for young learner. However, the learner should have taught conventions of mistake-marking[15] Integrated dictionaries and other tools will benefit more advanced learners of English.

Software tools such as Cricksoft's Write Online and Text Help's Read & Write Tutor offer features, such as text-to-speech conversion, word prediction and contextual alternative words, that can be inserted into a piece of writing with a mouse click.

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

Computers are non-judgmental and patient[16] and this makes them well-suited for repetitive language learning activities or tasks that offer provide immediate feedback to the user. In an EFL or ESL context, learners feel the advantage from vocabulary and grammar-based exercises, particularly those are based on voice input to assess correct pronunciation.

CALL software such as Rosetta stone is effective for swift acquisition of surface language. In Education City's 'Learn English' software, children are introduced to themed-based multi-modal activities. The narratives are woven around everyday situations such as school, family and playground, allowing children to learn contextualized vocabulary and simple grammatical rules through exercises. Meaning is made explicit through a family of characters set within familiar settings and typical storylines. This tool is successful as it offers complete audio-visual support and synchronous feedback to a user.

However, such tools made with a market in mind, are inevitably loaded with cultural artifacts. Teachers are required to carefully select content from one culture as this may confuse a learner's perception of standard form of English. The internet is a treasure trove of language learning games and activities, but teachers should also make their games and create activities for their learners. Language games and activities can be used to explore and acquire new language.[17]

CONCLUSIONS

Information and Communication Technology has a pivotal role to play in the implementation of English language teaching and learning. Various tools available in internet can aid a teacher in many ways inside the classroom, also when the leaners are on the move. Technological use is clearly situated and contextual; what works in one context may fail in another context. However, teachers will have to make their choices at customizing approaches and methods of delivery to meet the individual needs of their learners. English language teachers have plethora of opportunities to ensure their curriculum and teaching meet the needs of their 21st century ESL or EFL Classroom.

The utilization of ICTs in English language teaching is not yet fully explored. ICT offers language learners with invaluable linguistic competence. Additionally, the motivational value and flexibility of ICT in its use make it conducive with both slow and fast learners. On the other hand, the role of teacher is constantly changing and teachers need to get acclimatized with digital tools, to incorporate them into the delivery mechanism. Consequently, teachers will have to feel that ICT is an aid, not a threat, not to make the notion of the 'teacher' an obsolete term. Obviously, technology can never replace a teacher, but a teacher who does not welcome ICT to enhance teaching-learning process, shall be replaced by a teacher who uses technology inside the classroom. ICT becomes a means through which our students shall get exposed to outside world, widening their horizons of English language competence.

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