

ICT and Language Teaching in the Moroccan EFL Classroom: Perceptions, Obstacles and Strategies

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Abstract: *The paper at hand presents a research study, carried out in three public high schools in Rabat, Morocco, which aims at exploring the perceptions of students and teachers as to the use of e-learning Learning tools in the language classroom, the challenges they meet and approaches to practically enhance the pedagogical use of e-learning tools in language teaching. The study, adopting qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, interviewed 30 English teachers and administered a five-point Likert scale questionnaire with 40 high school EFL learners. A coding system was used to analyze the qualitative data and the Microsoft Excel program was used for the quantitative data; the main techniques used here were percentages and mean scores. The study has come out with the findings that both the teachers and learners have the perception that ICT integration in EFL learning helps the latter control and determine their learning processes, that it paves the way for a diversification of activities and course content, nurtures intrinsic motivation for learning, empowers students to interact effectively with others, develops crucial study and research skills, and facilitates the task for teachers to have more student-centered and content-based forms of teaching. However, many students and teachers have reported that excessive use of ICT may stand to the detriment of language learning. The paper also investigates three types of challenges that stand in the way of ICT success, technical, administrative and pedagogical. The main obstacles reported are marginally less technologically sophisticated facilities, unreliable and outdated technology, little and poor experience of teachers with technology compared to students, a significant need for time required by instructors to adapt their instructions for electronic transmission of knowledge, and the lack of local e-learning resources to administer real-time classes and electronic assessments. The principal conclusion of the study is that ICT has been proven to open the language teaching classroom onto newer horizons and that it needs to be integrated in the language classroom. However, another conclusion is that teachers and learners' confidence in using technology should be raised; training, time and electronic resources could be the best remedies in this respect for better, long-term language learners.*

Keywords: EFL classroom, CLIL, ICT, perception, challenges, strategy/approach.

1. Introduction

Electronic content, be it text messages, audio, photos or video files, is transmitted across cell phones and on social network pages in huge amounts every second. Easily accessible internet connection and affordable smart phones have made communication easier than ever in human history; "e-mails, instant messaging, chat rooms, Usenet groups, blogs and wikis have revolutionized the way we share information and communicate with each other" (Tanweer, M. 2011).

Language pedagogy, language learning and language use have been significantly influenced by the brisk evolution of ICTs (ibid). In fact, ICT introduction into the language teaching classroom has provided "more interactive and learner-centered classroom environment" (Chou, C. (2010)). This has led in itself to the emergence of various learning management systems that have pushed language instructors to adopt them for successful knowledge transmission. Chou, C. (2010) claims that, attempting to explore the ICT use in their classrooms, "language educators are interested in research-based evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of e-learning tools". They are also more interested to know the "perceptions of language learners" on the effectiveness of ICT in language education and the obstacles they face while learning through these electronic machines. However, very little research has endeavored to answer the question of how to overcome these challenges.

Throughout the national conferences, especially MATE 2015 conference, there has been an overwhelming consent

that ICTs should be used in the language classroom, mainly EFL here, in Morocco. The focus of the present study is on high school learners of English. Recent developments on ICT use in the EFL classroom have stressed to a high extent the integration of ICT in the Moroccan context. Of course this call brings into attention important issues: networking-based curriculum, web-based language tasks to meet the language learning modules, computer-based assessment, effective online feedback on students' work on the part of teachers, etc. This study targets the exploration of such perceptions on the part of both students and teachers; the use of e-learning teaching technologies, the challenges faced and the approaches to enhance the practical application of these technologies in the EFL classroom.

2. Research Questions

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

Question1: What are the perceptions of Moroccan high school EFL students and teachers concerning the use of ICT tools in the EFL classroom?

Question 2: What are the challenges that Moroccan high school EFL students and teachers face while using ICT in the EFL classroom?

Question 3: What are the potential approaches that the Moroccan EFL students and teachers can adopt to face such challenges in the ICT-integrated EFL classroom?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The study is based on a questionnaire and interviews administered to 40 high school (Baccalaureate) EFL students and 30 teachers selected randomly from different regions of Rabat, the Moroccan capital. Since the curriculum is the same, this is seen to pose no threat to the validity of the participant samples in the study. All the data has been collected during the months of March and April, 2015.

The ages of the students range between 17 and 20 whereas those of teachers between 30 and 46. Table 1 below summarizes all information related to the participants in the study.

Table 1: participants in the study

Students	Institute: Public High school	Gender: M: 23 F: 17	Age: 17 - 20	Repeater Yes: 5 No: 35
Teachers	Institute: Public High school	Gender: M: 17 F: 13	Age: 30 - 46	_____

3.2. Instruments

For the questionnaire, both close and open-ended questions were distributed to students; they were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale their degree of agreement on 26 statements related to the three main variables in the study: their perceptions, challenges and approaches to ICT use in the EFL classroom. An interview was conducted with teachers who were asked to answer eight questions related to their perceptions on ICT in the EFL classroom and the challenges they face and strategies to overcome them.

3.3. Procedure

Most teachers have been contacted via email, and were asked to administer the questionnaires to their students. After the collection of questionnaire data, interviews were carried out with them both the teachers and students voluntarily participated in the study after the explanation of its objectives and terms such as ICT, etc. to them. Most of the questionnaires were administered to the students by their own teachers, but a significant number has been returned via email as well.

4. Data Analysis

Given the primarily exploratory nature of the study, the main tool used in the analysis of the data has been Microsoft Excel software. The principal quantitative measures used were percentages. No more statistical measures have been used since the study aspires to discern the main tendencies in perception, challenge consciousness and appropriate approaches to the ICT use in the EFL classroom. For the qualitative data analysis, classification and association have been used to group the responses into main trends and tendencies to find out the perceptions, challenges and strategies for the use of ICT in the EFL classroom.

5. Findings and Discussion

After the collection of data, two main Excel sheets for the quantitative data and one for the categorization of the participants' perceptions, challenges and approaches were created. The first section below summarizes and presents the main frequently repeated perceptions about the use of ICT in the EFL classroom.

5.1 Perceptions

The first question in the two questionnaires administered to both students and teachers concerns their perception of the use of ICT in the EFL classroom. The overwhelming agreement among the two categories of participants stresses their awareness of the importance of using ICT in the classroom. The following quotes could be the best examples of their perceptions.

Students:

"...our generation is familiar with ICT, so why not use it in the classroom..."

"...it makes you learn new things everyday"

"...for me, it is enjoyable and entertaining in the class, we exchange our research results."

"We learn new things from the internet, and we share it in the class(room), so it helps the teacher as well"

Teachers:

"The learners stay focused, and they are more involved in the learning process"

"Yes it is important because it mainly facilitates the learning process. It gets the teachers from the old fashioned ways of teaching. And therefore they feel they are doing new things."

"Yes, It makes the learning process more effective since we can save time, energy and money"

"ICT has become an important tool in facilitating English learning. ICT optimizes the learning process of the language and renders the material of teaching more attractive and appealing."

A generally positive attitude has been generated out of the above comments by both EFL learners and teachers towards the importance of ICT tools in classroom-based language teaching/learning. In fact, all the participant teachers confirmed that they did not learn English using ICT during their study years. Such an awareness and positive attitude towards the use of ICT in the modern EFL classroom unveils the growing awareness of the teachers of its usefulness in the teaching/learning process today. Previous research has found out that ICT *"can help students take ownership of their learning, make them autonomous and confident in their learning, enable introvert students interact freely, acquire valuable study and time management skills with better intrinsic impetus for learning and teachers can have a more student-centered form of learning"* (Melor, Maimun & Chua Pin, 2009). In fact there has been a repetition of the terms "save time", "more interactive" and "motivating" by 09/20 teachers, almost 50% of the latter. However, a significant number of the participant teachers showed their discomfort with "relying too much on ICT."

The students, on their part, showed a significant interest and a very positive eagerness to have more ICT content and use

in their classrooms. It seems that they prefer to “break away” a little from the course book; terms like “more entertaining”, “enjoyable” and “we prefer/like ICT” have been very frequently reiterated in the data collected. More interestingly, almost 70% of the students “preferred” teachers who use ICT in the classroom (35/40). This only reflects the high need for learning from the latest digital knowledge sources such as internet videos, PowerPoint presentations, making their own videos, etc. this only generates more pressure on the educators and syllabus designers to include more ICT use inside and outside the EFL classroom.

The last finding aligns with previous research. Smith, E. H. (2000) claims that “*computers will not replace teachers, but teachers who use computers will, inevitably, replace teachers who do not*”. Another interesting finding is that the participating students do by no means reject the all-traditional way of teaching, the one based solely on the designed course book. In fact, 30% (11/40) showed some reluctance in using ICT for their EFL learning. The reasons for this reluctance are discussed section 7.2 on challenges below. However, it is still significant in itself to find out that even in the youngest generations there are still some learners who are not so enthusiastic about using modern ICTs for EFL learning. Last but not least, ICT is not very trusted as far as assessment is concerned; both teachers and students expressed their “comfort” using paper and a pen throughout test and exam periods. However, they acknowledge that the “*easy and time-saving*” nature of ICT makes of it a very useful tool in the EFL classroom.

5.2 Challenges and Recommendations

Melor, Maimun & Chua Pin, (ibid) put forward that while “*debate rages hotly over the advantages and shortcomings of using technology in a myriad of ways in all walks of life, language teachers struggle to catch up or keep up with the heap of newly invented digital gadgets to effectively adopt them for their own agenda of language pedagogy*”. The present study has revealed a variety of obstacles that have been broadly grouped under three main categories: administrative, technical and pedagogical.

5.2.1. Administration

Tanveer, M (2011) points out in a similar study that the “*Lack of e-learning resources for all classrooms*” and “*lack of full-time staff to monitor the electronic equipments* are the main challenges cited by the participants in this regard”. In addition to that, the subjects in the present study also mentioned that “*the absence of technical resources such as data shows and internet connection in the classrooms*” are the main obstacles in using ICT. In third place comes “the misuse of ICT tools by the students even when the teacher brings his own materials. This wastes a lot of time.”, added one participant. In the fourth place comes the lack of teacher and student training on the use of ICT tools for language learning on the part of the school administrations. It also seems that the administrative teams are not fully aware of the importance and need to integrate ICT in EFL classrooms. This could be the best quotation from one teacher: “Some school headmasters put many obstacles for teachers when they ask for access to facilities such as internet rooms or

data shows”. As a strategy, the participants suggested that teachers think “every school should provide enough equipments in order to encourage teachers to include ICT in their teaching activities, and provide computers, internet and data shows”. Another participant claims that “Last but not least, teachers should be assisted in many ways by the ministry by providing them with computers that most of them cannot afford for the reason that their wages cannot cover extra expenses. For me, this is the main reason for the slow use of ICT use in Moroccan schools.” The responsibility part of the education administration is highly stressed by teachers. The following section tackles the technical aspect of such responsibility.

5.2.2. Technology

Both students and teachers in the study expressed their need for more training on the use of ICT to better tune it to the classroom interaction processes. In the first place, most teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with their technical skills such as “downloading videos sometimes does not work”, or the fact that “there is a lack of technical training in the school for both students and teachers”. Another participant points out a very interesting fact: “there are no electronic resources for the school even when you have your computer, and the students like to use electronic material”. All in all, the technical challenge has been very frequently cited in the participants’ responses.

The participants suggested primarily the need for training classes or training workshops for students and teachers, the need for more electronic resources, and the need for more technical tools and gadgets to fully benefit from ICT.

5.2.3. Pedagogy

For the best pedagogical approaches and outcomes in the classroom, the administrative environment and technical facilities should meet the expected requirements. In Tanveer (ibid), lecturers reported “*spending a substantial amount of time and effort restructuring web-based language activities to adopt for online delivery for students with very limited educational background and digital competencies*”. Many participants in the present study stress the amount of time “wasted” due to the lack of technical tools or electronic resources. The teachers are highly motivated to integrate ICT for better classroom management, time management, but it turned out to play havoc on time management itself. One can easily imagine the negative effects of this fact on the target language skills and content in the EFL classroom.

The strongly recommended strategy for this aspect has been building the teachers’ and the learners’ ICT skills and creating banks of electronic resources in order to facilitate ICT use for pedagogical goals as well as the developing of the target language skills via ICT. When one takes into account the growing focus and calls for CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning e.g. (Marsh. D. 2008, 2008)), a good mastery of ICT in the EFL classroom would open newer horizons for both teachers and learners to access, select and make use of the fast-growing and limitless knowledge inhabiting cyberspace.

6. Discussion

ICT in the EFL classroom paves new ways for a new approach in curriculum and syllabus design as well. Tasks such as designing web-based language activities, adapting language tasks to suit module learning outcomes, electronic assessment of students' language skills would but take the EFL classroom experience to a richer, more interactive and learner-centered level. However, the introduction of new technology to the EFL classroom, one should be wary of the fact that it is "critical to ensure that there is a sound pedagogy behind the move, not just a desire to use new toys. Students can be overwhelmed with too much technology, or confused by badly used or badly setup technology" (Arabasz et al, 2003).

In fact, the key success element is the link between the desired language learning outcomes and the ICT use should always lay the foundations for any ICT use in the EFL classroom. This is what Arabasz et al. (ibid) call "the logic behind integrating e-learning tools in language pedagogy". Many researchers (Tanveer, ibid), in this regard, have reported the difficulty of how to integrate electronic content into the curriculum, apart from the private electronic banks that some schools and institutes have invested in so that their students can have on-site access to the content. This is an area worth a lot of further research.

The generally positive attitude on the part of teachers and students to the use of ICT in the EFL classroom has not been met with some hesitation and unwillingness. Some teachers claim the difficulty to control the learners' through the use of private laptops connected to internet in the classroom. This can easily be avoided if the school administrations also benefit from the latest technologies, such as jitters, to deactivate internet access over the education buildings and sites except via controlled access to pedagogical websites and networks. Another claim concerns the "overwhelming new content" brought by learners to the classroom. It is a given that the motivation of the learners does sometimes turn into an obstacle if it is not under constant moderation and balance by the teachers. Learners discover new information and "advanced knowledge" with respect to their curriculum, and this hampers the "course pace sometimes".

It is noteworthy as well to highlight the fact that most respondents of the study (28/40) still prefer to use the old chalk-and-talk method *in addition to* the new technologies. This goes hand in hand with findings of previous research; for instance, Tanveer (ibid) reports that many teachers still prefer a blended-teaching method where the traditional blackboard is still used with a variety of "e-learning tools such as Discussion Boards, Classroom Response System (CRS), Voting Pads, Moodle/Virtual Learning Environment, Blogs, etc". It is clear, however, that both students and teachers need a lot of encouragement, and technical and administrative mechanisms to make the best of ICT for a richer, "more entertaining and interactive classroom".

7. Conclusion

What is evident in this study is the highly needed of ICT integration into the EFL classroom. The fact that both

teachers and students are both comfortable and willing to use ICT in their classroom knowledge and language interactions stems from the fact that both already possess the basic skills needed for a mouse and a keyboard; however, more training, technical and administrative facilities are still required to better serve the EFL classroom, motivate the learners and adopt the widely recommended teaching/learning approaches such as CLIL and learner-centered pedagogies. No one can deny the fact that the younger generations today are in constant use of the latest technologies, so a tailoring of the EFL syllabi so that they could make use of the plethora of ICT equipment and the learners' zeal to use them in the classroom would only render the EFL classrooms more appealing and motivating.

Nevertheless, the challenges like technological scarcity, limited technical skills of some students and teachers, the lack of time and shortage of specific electronic resources, the lack of confidence to use ICT equipment, untrained teachers and students, etc hamper the full, useful exploitation of ICT. Considerable support is needed for teachers and students in terms of training, equipment, and time and digital resources.

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