Educational Technology for TEFL

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Abstract

This article is written from a language teacher's point of view on how to make use of educational technology in English teaching. The following aspects were reviewed: the effective use of computers, steps in carrying out computer tasks, precautions in carrying out an online distance course, and available text materials, i.e, CALL, CD-ROMs and web sites. Examples of where computers do work are reported. These include CALL activities as well as the application of intranet and internet pedagogy in ESL/EFL classrooms. The appropriate use of educational technology in TEFL is also advocated.

As a language teacher, I am familiar with "language learning and language acquisition, communicative drills, pedagogical grammar, authentic materials, role-playing, etc." Since I have subscribed to Teachers of English as a Second Language Electronic List, I have been bombarded with these new terms-- "netters, intranet and internet pedagogy, digital learning, cyber lab, web page tutorial, teleseminar, virtual classrooms, electronic marking, robotic voices, etc." I began to ask myself, " Can I get away from this latest educational technology? If not, to what extent can I apply it to my class?"

I have recently come across a very interesting and informative article entitled " Where Computers Do Work." It is a report of six schools in the United States with lessons to teach the reader about computer technology. The article emphasizes the fact that "The most important is that technology is not magic.

Money matters far less than the dedication and innovative spirit of the teachers in these classrooms" (Wagner et al: 1996, 82). The following lessons from the six schools that use computers are also provided:

Lesson 1: It's not the PCs that matter. It's how they're used.

Lesson 2: Let students learn at their own pace.

Lesson 3: E-mail can be more than chatter.

Lesson 4: Technology can help special kids, too.

Lesson 5: Unleash teachers to be creative.

Lesson 6: Use the internet the right way.

Most of these lessons correspond with the philosophy of self-directed learning-- the philosophy that has been adopted and implemented at Chulalongkorn University

Language Institute (CULI). We believe that technology cannot substitute a good language teacher but it can supplement and facilitate our teaching. Bearing this in mind, I tested CALL activities with twenty-two first-year Science students attending the Foundation English Course I at Chulalongkorn University in 1991. The students felt that these activities helped them to improve vocabulary and reading skills as well as grammar. Apart from these linguistic skills, the CALL activities enabled them to co-operate, use a word processor and learn more about the world. Among the various activities, songs were the students' favorite (Prapphal, 1992).

I also tried to incorporate the use of e-mail to the Foundation English Course II at CULI in December 1996. The participants were twenty-five first-year Economics students. To encourage a group work project, I divided my students into small groups. Each group had to e-mail to me in English to describe what they were going to do during their holidays. The language focus was on " Future Tense". They had to use the structures they had studied in class in their e-mail. They were allowed to work at their own pace and choose the contents of their own interests. Although a formal evaluation was not carried out, an observation from the submitted task indicated that the students appeared to welcome the task.

At this stage, I have decided to explore more on how to use computers to assist me in making my students become more involved with English so that they can get more exposure to the target language. This, in turn, will help them to **acquire** English as Krashen (1985) suggested. In addition, I hope that the activities will help them to cope with the great amount of information in an era of information technology

as well as the period of globalization and internationalization.

Therefore, I have conducted a document research via e-mail to learn about intranet and internet pedagogy and I have gained a lot of insights from educators, language teachers and media specialists. Some of them are reported below.

A.   Learning and Cognition

To facilitate learning and develop cognitive growth, Cunningham (1996 : 540) provided instructional principles that can be applied to CALL activities as follows:

"Anchor all learning activities to a larger task or problem. The learner should clearly perceive and accept the relevance of the specific learning activities in relation to the task complex. Support the learner in developing ownership for the overall problem. Solicit problems from the learner and use those as the stimulus for learning activities, or establish a problem such that the learners will readily adopt the problem as their own. Design an authentic task . An authentic learning environment is one in which the cognitive demands are consistent with the demands in the environment for which the learner is being prepared. Design the task and the learning environment to reflect the complexity of the environment in which they must function after the learning has occurred. Design the learning environment to support and challenge the learners' thinking. Encourage testing ideas against alternative views and alternative contexts. Provide opportunity for and support reflection on both the learning content and process."

B.   Steps in Carrying out Computer Tasks

Following Cunningham's theory and the Hubbard model, Sergeant (1996) proposed these "Golden rules for task setting."

Pre-planning

1. Find out who is good with computers in your class and give them a rating out of five.
2. Negotiate with your students close to the beginning of the course if possible how many times a week they would like to use the computer room.
3. If you are sharing a class with other teachers, liaise with them frequently about what students are doing.
4. At the beginning of the course, establish that the students will be engaging in an ongoing dialogue with you about CALL. At the end of the couse, they will be filling in a questionnaire.

Planning

1. Use a variety of programs.
2. When planning your lesson, before deciding to use CALL, evaluate the benefits of spending that half an hour in the classroom doing something else.

Pre-computer Room

Spend some time before going to the computer room to explain your rationale for each activity.

Computer Room

1. In the computer room, be an active participant and offer help where needed.
2. Encourage students to take notes in the computer room.
3. It is essential while using the Word Processor to discuss the benefits of collaborative writing/portfolio writing.

Post-Computer Room

Spend some time after the computer room activity to answer the questions."

His suggestions should be very helpful to language teachers, especially to the "net newbies", who want to introduce computers to their teaching and learning process.

C.   An Online Distance Course

As regards an online distance course, Tillyer (1996:1) warns teachers that there are many precautions in doing this. Some of them are cited below.

"1. The pay is the same (or less) as for regular courses, but you have to spend a lot more time preparing, even if you don't have to learn the system.
2. Typically, the school makes you pay for your own telephone and Internet access.
3. Some of the new distance education formats are really unfriendly and "cold" and it is hard to promote a sense of educational community in such circumstance...
4. You have to deal with students who might be unfamiliar with the technology as well as with the subject matter. This takes more time and care for which you are not compensated.
5. Many distance education programs require prospective teachers to take a "training course" which is unpaid and for which the teacher has to pay all the expenses in terms of access and telephone....
6. Administrators and others can "observe" your class without your knowing and without your permission.
7. You generally have to put all your materials up on the Web and put them in HTML yourself..."

D.   Text Materials

As far as text materials are concerned, teachers can obtain teaching and learning materials from various sources like CALL, CD-ROMs, archive files, web pages and web sites. Concerning software programs, Seaver (1997:1) suggests these guidelines in evaluating software.

"1.   If software will be used for practice on specific language points/skills and teachers are unlikely to put time and effort into authoring their own exercises, then software with good pre-existing content is needed.

2.   If software will be used by creative teachers as a basis for group work, then general use programs such as encyclopedias, spreadsheets, games, or internet access are probably most suitable.

3.   If software will be used by teachers to give students practice on specific language points/skills covered in class, then authorable software will be needed.

4.   The level of language necessary to use the software should not exceed the language abilities of the students who will use it."

Some of the frequently mentioned software programs and websites are as follows:

Authoring programs:
Authorware, Multimedia ToolBook, Authoring Suite, INCALIS, QuickTime Movies

CALL: Question Mark, ChoiceMaster, GapMaster, MatchMaster, Wordstore, Wordattack, Cloze-Maker, Markin, Storyboard, Fast Food, Idea-Fisher, Inspiration,

Proteus, English Tutor, English Discoveries, Calico, Dustin, Ellis

CD-ROMs: Encarta, Capitalism, Discovery Dinosaurs, Cinemania'96, WordSmart (Smartek), Our Times (Vicarious), SpeechWorks, TriplePlay Plus, English Plus, Grammar CD's, the Mentor,English Discoveries MOSAIC, UNYSIS, CELIA,TOEFL EXPLORER, TOEIC, TOEFL Mentor CD, ResumeMaker

Software for Teaching over the Net:
WebCT (Web Course Tools), the Virtual English Language Center, Language Plus

Online Tutoring:
FirstClass

ESL Discussion Center:
Dave's ESL Cafe on the Web

Language Testing on WWW:
QuestionMark, Cambridge, IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC, Computerized placement tests (LOPT, TOPE)

Even though there are a lot of available materials, the "input" cannot become the "intake" unless language teachers know how to design activities suitable and relevant to their students' needs and interests and make them involved with the tasks. Some intranet and internet tasks do work because the teachers are creative and have the innovative mind. Some of the activities experimented with ESL/EFL students are given below.

E.   Activities that Work

1.   Gapmaster and the Chinese Horoscope

Sergeant (1996) imported a text about the Chinese horoscope into GapMaster. He asked the students to find a list of the words which describe the animals of the Chinese horoscope. Each student worked with a partner or two partners and tried to find as many words as possible to describe each animal and typed them into the gaps. They were informed to make notes so that they could compare their answers in class.

2.   Storyboard and Culture Learning

Sergeant (1996) used Storyboard to encourage students maximize anthentic communication and practice skills by using cultural differences. The students were allowed to provide the textual input. For example, one student a described a festival, "Throwing Beans Ceremony", which is held on the third of February every year in Japan. On this day the father of the family puts on a mask which his children have made in their kindergarten. When the wife and children throw beans at the father, they shout, "Good luck in, devils out." After the ritual the family eats beans together. The number of the eaten beans correspond with their age.

3.   Pen-Pals Projects

Foster (1996) started the project, "Where in the World Did My Ancestors Originate" which involves students in finding where in the world their ancestors lived. The project was set up to be used as a get acquainted activity integrating geography, language arts, math, social studies, and computer technology. There are two main parts in the project. Part One allows students to create a home page on the internet after researching the country in which their ancestors lived. The students have an opportunity to collaborate with a student from that country to compare lifestyles, cultures, etc. Part Two of the project allows students to create a home page of their own community. Participants were four to six graders from around the world.

4.   Technoclasses and ESP

Tillyer (1996) suggested incorporating online activities into a business oriented language program. One useful activity is to pair the class with another class or classes and have them do simulations by e-mail. For example, one class can be the seller and the other class the buyer. All negotiations are done by e-mail. The roles change at the end of a specified time. At a more advanced level, the students can write progress reports on their project for their teacher.

5.   CNN News and Cooperative Learning

Davidson (1996) employed CNN website in his advanced class. He gave half of his students the story, "Kevorkian Death Toll Reaches 40 with Californian Woman" and the other half he gave the story, "Marijuana Movement Gets Boost from California Campaign." Each group looked up new vocabulary words, discussed the story among themselves and thought up comprehension questions. Then he took the stories away. The students partnered up and exchanged their stories with a member of the other group. After that group one asked group two comprehension questions and vice versa. He finally had a group discussion of the topics.

6.   Student Newspapers

Houston (1996) started a student newspaper with her writing class. She told the students that the best writing would be published for the newspaper. She assigned class

writing topics suitable for the newspaper. Then, she asked students in a specific class to take charge and select senior editor, copy editor, art editor, sports editor, travel editor, recipes editor, news editor, people editor, etc. among themselves. She gave some extra credit for specific newspaper tasks. Using after-class time, she taught her students Pagemaker to scan and lay out the article.

7. Audio-Video-Based Media Tasks

Sackett (1997) simulated the integration of the media. He supplemented PBS and cable television programming with materials from the networks' websites. For homework he assigned websites to research for upcoming broadcasts. Through classroom activities, he helped students to prepare for viewing the program. Then for homework, he assigned the program to watch. He followed-up on it in class again. He claimed that the students were able to access information in text-based and audio-video-based media and discussed and wrote about it.

8. Virtual Classrooms

Hudson (1996) tried to use the internet in language teaching. His target participants to join his virtual classroom project were intermediate-level English language classes in different countries. This allowed students studying in different countries to communicate with each other. The same course materials were used.

The afore-mentioned activities seem to work because the teachers appear to focus on the learners , not on the computers. They encourage cooperation, interaction and self-directed learning. The tasks are authentic and require real language experiences with meaningful purposes. Even though the pedagogical applications of the intranet and internet are at their premature stages, especially in Thailand, they appear to be profitable if computers are properly used as Wagner et al (1996 : 93) advocated:

"Computers don't always result in higher test scores, and they certainly can't turn a failing school system around by themselves. Before investing, ask yourself what you expect computers to do for your school. If the answer is simply to teach keyboard skills, a room full of refurbished machines may be adequate. If you hope to weave software into the general curriculum, computers in each classroom work best. And if you want computers to overcome poor teaching, overcrowded classrooms or unmotivated students, forget the whole thing."

This article reviews the possible application of information technology to the teaching and learning of English. Various aspects of the effective use of computers are pointed out. Although computers have been employed as a tool in language teaching, language teachers cannot accomplish their goal if the use of computers is not appropriate. In other words, the teachers must be trained and know how to apply it to suit their language classes. Their students must know how to use the software programs which must be relevant to their needs and interests. In addition, the language must not be too complicated or too simple. It should be at the level of "I+1" in Krashen's term. Therefore, technology should be viewed as another tool for language teachers. Whether it can provide the greatest benefit for enchancing instruction or not depends on the teacher's attitude understanding, dedication and innovative mind.

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