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Digital Learning in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

In today's world; by means of growing technological improvements and innovations; life is now easier than it was before. As it can be witnessed in every corner of the society, the classrooms are also affected by digitalized world. Accordingly, the term 'digital learning' took its place in education world. It can be defined as any instructional practice that is effectively using technology to strengthen the student learning experience (Alliance for Excellent Education 2012). The aim of this paper is to put some theoretical information on digital learning into consideration by reviewing some studies in this field. As a result of this study, it is realized that the future learning is digital and it affects not only the learning procedure but also the learners and the teachers as a whole.

1. Introduction

Technology makes a positive effect not only on social life but also on education. Since technology becomes increasingly prevalent within educational settings, there emerges an expectation for educators to utilize digital tools to support classroom teaching and learning. However, the rapidly changing technological innovations about the education make it harder for the teachers (Kingsley, 2007). Technology changes so fast that it is almost impossible to follow for the teachers. Nonetheless, although most teachers throughout the world still use chalk and blackboard, technological devices are used frequently in language teaching classrooms all over the world to provide supplementary practice in language courses.

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In the following section, a brief review of research on the issue is presented to explore the utilizing technology in language classrooms and it is aimed to put forward several examples of digital learning.

2. Research on Utilization of Technology

In this section, the studies about utilizing technology in EFL classrooms are reviewed. Among these researches, while one study (Kiraz & Ozdemir, 2006) focuses on teachers' side, another one (Gabriel et al., 2012) focuses on learners' side of technology usage in classrooms. One of them (Weitz et al., 2006) examines the usage of Tablet PCs in classrooms, the others (Motteram& Sharma, 2009; Siekmann, 1998; Weber, 2001; Bloch, 2009; Thurstun, 1996; Laborda, 2009; Tsai, 2006; Tilfarlioglu, 2011) analyze some technologies which can be used in EFL classrooms.

After the appraisal of technology integration programs in schools and universities, it is noticed that the existence of technology does not guarantee its utilization in the classroom environment. Considering the factors which affect the technology utilization, Kiraz & Ozdemir (2006) focus on the factors of technology acceptance among teachers. They attempted to create a model that was compatible with their hypothesized model by collecting data from surveys completed by 320 pre-service teachers. The results showed that the new model was consistent with the hypothesized model and also it was concluded that different educational ideologies may have different effects on teachers' technology acceptance. Another factor about using technology in classroom is learners' views and perceptions. Based on surveys and focus group interviews of first-year students and professors at a primarily undergraduate Canadian university, Gabriel et al. (2012) explores the gaps and intersections between students' uses and expectations for digital technologies while learning inside the classroom and socializing outside the classroom, and the instructional uses, expectations and concerns of their professors. They concluded with recommendations for uses of digital technologies that go beyond information transmission.

Along with the development of technological devices, computer, as the most used device, has undergone a considerable change in time. A Tablet PC is one the most modern face of computers in today's world. With the purpose of evaluating the usefulness of Tablet PCs for university professors, Weitz et al. (2006) conducted a project with sixty-four professors who were provided with tablet PCs and were trained in their use. It was observed that only a fraction of faculty professors are motivated to use tablet technology and generally, participating faculty did indeed use tablet functionality in their classes and were convinced that this use resulted in a meaningful impact on teaching and learning.

Technology, offering a great deal of options to the teachers, is a key to open a brand new door to the classrooms. Among these options, Web tools are one of the most useful innovations in classrooms. Exploring the role that Web 2.0 technologies can play in enhancing language learning development, Motteram & Sharma (2009) showed that the use of technologies is changing our understanding of the profession of language education. The second study about Web 2.0 technology (Tilfarlioglu, 2011) aimed to determine undergraduate and high school students' attitudes towards the use of English in this technology. Based on quantitative design, this study included 534 students out of randomly selected 550 participants from 6 different universities and 3 high schools in Turkey and Iraq. It was concluded that Web 2.0 technologies serve as a good learning tool in which the learners find the opportunity to practice language in a real-like atmosphere. Another study about web is based on WebCT (Web Course Tools), which is a multi-faceted program created at the University of British Columbia that allows educators to customize an existing suite of tools to their individual needs and content. Siekmann (1998) briefly introduces the main tools of WebCT, describes possible applications in language learning, and discusses their potential and limitations. Moreover, the role of the teacher in WebCT is examined in terms of course development as well as in terms of different teaching modes. Considering the options technology provides, Webquestsare a very common in language teaching and it is one of the best ways of using Web resources to research a variety of topics. In his study, Laborda (2009) presents a practical background for using webquests, mainly orally. The study provides a real example to facilitate the understanding of the theoretical concepts. Another study about Webquest was conducted in an institute located in northern Taiwan. In this study, Tsai (2006) investigated the potential role of a Webquest module as a supplement to EFL instruction. The participants of the study were 44 college students enrolled in EFL reading course. The Likert-type attitudinal scores of a researcher-developed survey for students are examined. It was revealed that students had an overall positive attitude and perception toward their performance on both vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension toward Webquest learning. A significantly positive correlation was found between student motivation and perception on vocabulary and reading. On the other hand, a low correlation was found between student motivation and student perception on grammar learning.

Concordancing programs which have been used in literary and mostly religious text analysis for decades are alternative programs to use in an EFL classroom. In his study, Weber (2001) used a concordance- and genre-based approach to academic essay writing for non-native students. It was aimed to teach undergraduate law students to write formal legal essays. Students identified structural characteristics and used concordances to explore possible correlations between the generic structures and particular lexical items. Another study about concordancing program is based on helping students to choose reporting verbs appropriately. Bloch (2009) asked the students to make lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical choices based on a preset number of criteria related to the writers' choice of reporting verbs. Bloch (2009) discusses how the implementation of the concordancing site was integrated with the teaching of grammar and vocabulary in an academic writing class. Finally, Thurstun (1996) intended to teach most common academic vocabulary items using concordancing program. The program was used to determine the frequency of the usage of items. Thurstun (1996) pointed out that since the mode of presentation is new, students should be instructed to look at the words surrounding the term, familiarize with the pattern and practice the key terms creating their own writing.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

From this review, some conclusions can be reached. Firstly, technology usage can be affected by several factors. As the main part of teaching process, teachers' and learners' perceptions about technology are of great value. In order to receive as much aid as possible from the technology, it is required to train the teachers and give supplementary instruction to the learners about the technological material. Secondly, using technology does not mean using the old computer to teach a lesson. Recently, computers have advanced substantially. Using new kind of computers such as TabletPCs can have a meaningful effect on learning. Thirdly, technology offers many options to the teachers to use in their classrooms to enhance teaching process. Web technologies are proved to be a good teaching tool in classrooms. By virtue of Web 2.0 technologies, learners are able to practice the language in a real-like atmosphere. Moreover, Webquests have a positive impact to learners especially on vocabulary acquisition and reading skills, despite the negative effect on grammar learning. Next, as an old program to analyze literary and mostly religious texts, concordancing programs can be used effectively in language teaching. Supposing that the essential instructions are given to the students, it serves as an important aid in language classroom especially about teaching vocabulary and writing.

To sum up, with the light of these conclusions, it can be recommended that technology must be regarded as an adaptable aid rather than a complicated tool to change the lessons completely. Therefore, technology should be implemented to traditional courses to make it more effective and up-to-date.

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