

The Use of Technological Tools in the EFL Class

ÁLVARO BONILLA LYNCH

JORGE LUIS ESPINOZA CAMPOS

Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje
Universidad Nacional (Costa Rica)

Abstract

The purpose of this presentation is to show the results of a study in order to address three issues regarding language teaching methodologies in Costa Rica. First, what are the similarities and differences of language teaching and learning processes between a traditional classroom and using technology in the class? Second, are there any changes in the roles of teachers and students when they are in a different teaching environment from traditional classroom? Lastly, how to fulfill the need of research studies that point out the benefits of implementing the use of technological resources when teaching a foreign language in Costa Rica? Finding the answers to these issues may diminish the gap that prevails in some teachers and institutions in regards the use of technology in the language class.

Key words: teaching methodologies, language class, learning strategies, foreign language, technology

Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es mostrar los resultados de un estudio realizado con el fin de abordar tres aspectos en relación con las metodologías de la enseñanza de la lengua en Costa Rica. Primero, ¿cuáles son las semejanzas y diferencias en la enseñanza de la lengua y en los procesos de aprendizaje entre un aula tradicional y una que utiliza la tecnología? Segundo, ¿ocurren cambios en los roles de profesores y estudiantes cuando se encuentran en un ambiente de enseñanza diferente del aula tradicional? Por último, ¿cómo llenan la carencia de estudios investigativos que destaquen los beneficios de la puesta en práctica del uso de recursos tecnológicos en la enseñanza de una lengua extranjera en Costa Rica? La respuesta a estas inquietudes permitiría disminuir la brecha que prevalece en algunos docentes e instituciones con respecto al uso de las tecnologías en la clase de idioma.

Palabras claves: metodologías de enseñanza, clase de idioma, estrategias de aprendizaje, lengua extranjera, tecnología

Introduction

According to different studies, technology has become an essential tool in any learning environment, and this is the case when learning a foreign language. Teachers and instructors must be well trained in order to implement the different technological resources in order to create a more integrated and interactive class. Due to this, students expect more dynamic classes in which technology plays an important role, and teachers should take advantage of all the technological input students bring to the class. However, some teachers have limitations when implementing the use of technology in their classes since some of them do not have the required knowledge for using the technological components or because the institutions lack of the different resources (i.e. language labs, multimedia, internet access, etc.).

Therefore, in Costa Rica for the past two decades, public higher education institutions have been making an effort to train professors and integrate technology in their curriculum. For these reasons, teachers and students need to adjust themselves to use technology in the language class. Solis (2009) gives emphasis to “the use of technology to facilitate teaching and learning could be included in any course” (p. 388).

This study pretends to find how the use of technology in the language class helps students

to improve their language proficiency. Also this work emphasizes the different ways that teachers use to incorporate technology. To make this work useful for both foreign language students and professors the main goals of this study are: to explore how students adjust themselves to learn English with the aid of technology, to know the ways the instructors make use of the technological resources available, to find out how the teacher’s role changes when implementing technology in the language class and to find out the advantages and disadvantages of using technology in the EFL class. All this can be summarized with what Nancy Kassebaum’s quote “There can be infinite uses of the computer and of new age technology, but if the teachers themselves are not able to bring it into the classroom and make it work, then it fails” (as cited in Rao, 2012, p.1).

The Importance of Using Technology in the Language Class

Originally “when someone mentions technology in the language classroom, your first impulse is to think about computer technology, mostly because computers have so pervaded our daily home and workplace contexts” (Brown, 2001, p.143). As a matter of fact, computer technology is the greatest technological tool to empower students’ language learning because with computers learners can access different applications like internet, email, software, games, speech processing, digital videos among others which gives them the access to different authentic materials, sources and tools that will motivate them to learn and use English. For this reason, David Warlick said “we need technology in every class-

room and in every student and teacher's hand because it is the pen and paper of our time, and it is the lens through which we experience much of our world" (as cited in Rao, 2012, p.1). There are many advantages in using technology in the language class. For example, it makes the learner more interested about the subject, it decreases learning time, and it provides opportunities to learn in non-traditional ways. The resources for teaching have significantly changed and technology is transforming the way students learn. Students show more interest in classes in which technology is used as a primarily resource than those that use the traditional methods. In higher education settings this is not the exception. There is more and more evidence that using technology tools in EFL classes at university level increases language improvement. This is true in the case of the different programs that Universidad Nacional and Universidad de Costa Rica have included technology in their classes. Costa Rica's educational programs have been adapting their curriculum in order to implement the use of technological resources in the classes. Through different studies it is seen that there are differences between traditional classroom environments and classes where technology is used. Since, in most of the cases, students show more interest when technology is implemented in their classes, there is not a doubt that incorporating this tool increases students' language improvement. Richards and Renandya (2002) affirms that language teachers are exploring the potential the new technology has to offer to language learning, "we should not lose sight of the fact that it is the teacher, not the technology, who determines the quality of the learning that takes place in the classroom (p. 361).

Technology and the Role of the Teacher

"Technology is just a tool (...), the teacher is the most important." Bill Gates (as cited in Rao, 2012, p. 1). In any learning environment teachers must play the role of facilitators of the learning process, they should allow students to experiment with the language by themselves. Teachers should understand that technology is just a "tool" in which students have the opportunity to expand their language practice in different environments and not only in the classroom by itself. Teacher must become creative and "modern" when using technological resources in class, because they cannot just be dependent to them, instruction is necessary, too. Besides, instructors must be well trained in order to be able to use technology in the best way. If teachers are properly taught how to use technology before they enter a real classroom, their technological skills will increase, and their likelihood to use technology in the classroom will improve. Studies have shown that when teachers attend educational technology courses that emphasize technology use skills as part of the curriculum, the teachers' computer self-efficacy improves (Koh & Frick, 2009, p. 214). When students are able to use technology in class the generational gap is diminished and teachers are seen as part of their daily life. In an era in which technology is an everyday issue for adolescents and young adults, the fact that technology should be implemented by teachers in their classes is a

must. For these reasons, language teachers need to find the right ways to give students their feedback in order to help them to increase their linguistic level. According to Sokolik teachers need to be aware of the things that technology can't do well. She mentions five things like: appropriate translation, providing appropriate feedback to learners, voice recognition, grammar checking and essay marking (as cited in Murcia, 2001, p.478- 480). In our opinion, professors must have in their minds the pros and cons of using technological tools in the EFL class to fulfill their role as language facilitators successfully.

Learners and Technology

The most important aspect about using technology in the class is how students are able to incorporate it in their learning process. Through time it is seen that students feel more confident in using different technological resources in their language classes, since they are immersed in era in which technology plays an important role in their lives, they adjust themselves in order to use this resource in their learning environment. Most students benefit from it, even when they are at home, for example students are able to continue their practices or communicate with other peers when doubts arise, so technology becomes a type of tutor for the students. At the same time, technology helps students to learn at their own pace. (Gulley, 2003, p.1).

There is evidence that technology favors those students who are shy of present difficulties in interacting in class with their peers, Nunan (1999) stated that "interactive visual media which computers provided seem to have a unique instructional capability for topics that involve social situations or problem solving, such as interpersonal solving, foreign language or second language learning" (p.26).

These facts make technology a useful tool for students and help their learning practices to become more interesting and challenging, not only for acquiring a second language but also to be able to reinforce their technological skills. Students can get various authentic reading materials either at school or from home by connecting to the Internet. And, those materials can be accessed 24 hours a day. In a word, technology also provides the interdisciplinary and multicultural learning opportunities for students to carry out their independent studies. Learning a language is a continuous process as well as technology, this let us to understand that both processes can become together to improve students' language skills and make them to feel that language classes are becoming part of their daily lives. As stated by (Kopfler et al., 2009) "learners construct their understanding not just through interaction with the material, but also through collaboratively constructing new knowledge with their peers" (p. 13).

Relevance of the Study

According to Nancy Kassebaum, a current U.S. Senator "there can be infinite uses of the computer and of new age technology, but if the teachers themselves

are not able to bring it into the classroom and make it work, then it fails.” Therefore for this research it is very important to find out what use language teachers give to the technological tools at UNA classrooms and how that it is influencing the students’ learning of the target language.

Methodology Used

To carry out this study, a questionnaire with five questions was administered to 20 professors of the English department of UNA to find out the ways they use the technological tools in their classes, the advantages and limitations that technology could cause and the results they have gotten using the technological components in their lessons.

Objectives of the study

- To explore how students adjust themselves to learn English with the aid of technology.
- To know the ways the instructors make use of the technological resources available.
- To find out how the teacher’s role changes when implementing technology in the language class.
- To find out the advantages and disadvantages of using technology in the EFL class.

Survey Questions:

1. How often do you use technological equipment in the classroom?
a) Once a week b) never c) seldom d) every two weeks e) every class
2. Are there any changes in the teaching-learning processes when you use the technological tools in the classroom?
No (reasons were not provided)
Yes
3. What are the differences between language teaching and learning when you incorporate the technological tools to the English lessons?
4. What are the advantages of using technology in the English class?
5. Which limitations have you encountered when using the technological tools?

Answers to the Survey

Question 1 How often do you use technological equipment in the classroom?

Interestingly, the professors only chose two options as it is shown in the graph. 27, 27% selected that every class and 72,73% stated that once a week. This option got a higher percentage due to the fact that at UNA there are many courses of one session per week which consists of three or four hours.

Question 2 Are there any changes in the teaching-learning processes when you use the technological tools in the classroom? Yes/No

In this question the majority of the professors provided an affirmative answer, 81,82% of them responded yes and surprisingly 18,18% answered that the use of the technological tools does not cause changes in the teaching and learning processes.

Question 3 What are the differences between language teaching and learning when you incorporate the technological tools to the English lessons?

This question is a follow up of question 2 to see which reasons instructors provided to justify their previous answer. The instructors who selected the yes option in question 2 gave the following reasons:

- A. Students can use their creativity.
- B. Learners show more interest towards the subject.
- C. Teachers develop different teaching strategies and techniques.
- D. The lessons become more motivating for the students.
- E. The instructor can monitor students' work easily when the language lab is used.
- F. Students pay more attention.
- G. The lessons become more direct.
- H. Students work more motivated.

Unfortunately, the professor who marked no did not provide any reasons.

Question 4 What are the advantages of using technology in the English class?

The professors mentioned different advantages based on the use that they have given to the technological tools in their lessons. Some advantages that they mentioned are:

- A. Lessons are more dynamic.
- B. There is more interaction in the class.
- C. It is easier for the instructor to monitor work and to give feedback.
- D. Students can concentrate more.
- E. Students can learn by themselves using their own methods.
- F. Students can be exposed to more variety of accents and cultural aspects.
- G. Students understand the audio material better.
- H. Learners can access authentic materials to listen to different accents and practice English with other people.

- I. Easy access to information and to different learning tools.
- J. Students put more effort to learn.

Question 5 Which limitations have you encountered when using the technological tools?

- A. Sometimes it is hard to make the lessons interactive.
- B. Students and instructors have difficulties to use the equipment.
- C. There is not enough time to work in the lab.
- D. It is common to experience technical difficulties.
- E. Making good use of some technological tools takes a lot of class time.
- F. Tools outdate really quickly
- G. Some students don't understand the content well.
- H. Some students rely on more on the technological tools than on the teacher.

Conclusions and Findings

Through the literature review and the study that was carried out to the UNA teachers we got some interesting findings. First, we confirmed that most of the English teachers use technology in their lessons at least once a week, some of them do it in a more complex way using specific software, online tools, and others limit it to the use of the TV, the boom box and the language lab for those courses that have lab time. Most of the professors surveyed agreed that the use of technological tools in the language class changes the teaching and learning processes in a positive way. Of course it is important to know that as professors we need to be careful with the use of technology since in some cases it can take a lot of time and the learners may not achieve the objectives of the course program. In addition, most teachers are very motivated with the advantages that technology brings to the language classroom. They mentioned that it makes the lessons more interactive and motivating for the students and this is good because students participate more actively, understand better and eases the teachers' role. According to (Schacter, 2001) when technology is used as a learning tool, students' attitudes towards learning and their own self-concept improved consistently" (as cited in Gassell, 2008, p. 2). However, professors know that technology can cause some technical difficulties and that it changes their role. Therefore, we cannot deny that well-trained instructors are necessary in order to have classes that are appealing and worth for the learners. It is not only using technology because it is "trendy" or "in fashion", but because it increases learners positive attitudes towards the learning process and language is used effectively. Learners at the same time need to know what is expected from them and the reasons why technology is used in classes, not for entertainment but for helping their learning to be more accessible and updated for them. This means that the use of the technological tools in the EFL has contributed positively to the development of both the teachers and the learners.

Bibliography

- Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. Second Edition. New York: Pearson Education.
- Gassell, C. (2008). *Benefits of Technology in Today's Classrooms*. Retrieved from: http://edtech2.boisestate.edu/gasellc/metportfolio/assignments/Synthesis%20Paper_Gasell.pdf
- Groff, J., Haas, J., Klopfer, E. & Osterweil, S. (2009). *Using the Technology of Today in the Classroom today*. Retrieved from: http://education.mit.edu/papers/GamesSimsSocNets_EdArcade.pdf
- Gulley, K. (2003). *Pros and Cons of Computer Technology in the Classroom*. Sacramento: California State University.
- Koh, J. H. L. & Frick, T. W. (2009). Instructor and student classroom interactions during technology skills instruction for facilitating preservice teachers' computer self-efficacy. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 40 (2), 211-228.
- Murcia, M. C. (2001). *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. Third Edition. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Nunan, D. (1999). *Second language teaching & learning*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Renandya, W. & Richards, J. (2002). *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*. United States of America: Cambridge University Press.
- Rao, A. (2012, March 1). *10 Educational Technology Quotes*. *Teachbytes.com*. Retrieved on June 3, 2013 from: <http://teachbytes.com/2012/03/01/10-educational-technology-quotes/>
- Solís, M. (2009). Graduates' Degree of Satisfaction with the MA Program in Teaching English as Foreign Language at the University of Costa Rica. *Revista de Lenguas Modernas*, 10. Retrieved from: <http://www.latindex.ucr.ac.cr/mod001-25.php>