An Exploration of Teachers' and Learners' Perceptions and Use of ICT in EFL Classrooms: The Case of Moroccan High Schools

Khalid SOUSSI
The National Institute of Telecommunications
Rabat, Morocco

Abstract

This study aspires to explore the attitudes of students and teachers vis a vis the general computer assisted language learning (CALL) in the English language classroom, the obstacles and the solutions perceived to better use information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. 30 English teachers and 40 high school EFL learners have been interviewed and asked to fill in a five-point Likert scale questionnaire. The software Excel has been used to carry out the main statistical measures: mean scores and percentages. The results of the study support the claims advanced in previous research literature that the integration of ICT in the EFL classroom enriches the motivation of both teachers and students, facilitates the learning process and enriches the classroom interaction. Nevertheless, the paper has also found out that there are many challenges that hamper the full integration and use of ICT in the Moroccan EFL classroom. The latter have been categorized into three main categories: administrative, technical and human.

Keywords: attitudes, challenges, EFL, electronic resources, ICT, perceptions

1. Introduction

The Moroccan Education Reform Chart, set in the early years of the twenty first century, has shed considerable light on the importance of the English language for the country's education, among other aspects. Moreover, it also stresses the need to master educational technology use on the part of the instructors and learners as well.

No one can deny the fact that the learners nowadays have access to electronic content, via mobile phones, tablets, PCs, etc, more than any other time in human history. More and more time is spent online through chatting rooms, social media and video streaming websites. This fast evolution has brought a radical change to the EFL classrooms (Tanweer, 2011). This "more interactive and learner-centered classroom environment" (Chou, 2010) has paved the way for new classroom interaction approaches. A considerable number of researchers claim that the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have changed the approaches and their effectiveness to language teaching. Such effectiveness from the standpoint of the teachers has also gained important attention recently, but the obstacles that stand in the way of its implementation have not drawn as much attention.

In Morocco, witnessed during national and international conferences, there has been an overwhelming agreement on the part of the decision makers in the educational environment that ICTs should be implemented in the EFL classroom, and the present paper is set within this context. The study aspires to explore the perceptions of both students and teachers, their use of e-learning technologies, their challenges and difficulties met in the use of ICTs for e-learning opportunities in the EFL classroom. These objectives have been turned into the following empirical questions.

2. Research Questions

Based on the goals mentioned above, the study purports to answer the questions below:

A.   To what extent do Moroccan high school EFL teachers and students perceive the importance of ICT implementation in the classroom?

B.   To what extent is the implementation of ICTs in the Moroccan EFL classroom a straightforward and trouble free process?

C.   What are the possible methods and strategies that teachers and students suggest to effectively use ICTs in the Moroccan EFL classroom?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The data of the study emanates from a questionnaire designed and distributed to 30 teachers and 40 Moroccan EFL learners in high schools in the capital, Rabat, in April 2015. All the high schools follow the same national curriculum. Table 1 presents additional information about the subjects of the study.

Table 1 *participants in the study*

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

3.2. Instruments

The questionnaires used in the study comprise open-ended and close-ended questions for both groups of subjects; a five-point Likert scale has been used for the measurement of their dis/agreement on the following variables: their perceptions, challenges and approaches to ICT use in the EFL classroom. Open-ended questions were mainly concerned with their perceived challenges and suggested solutions to the various obstacles in the implementation of ICTs in the classroom.

3.3. Data collection

All the students participating in the study had to fill in the questionnaires in class under the supervision of their teachers. All the instructions and objectives of the questionnaires were explained in classrooms by the teacher to make sure their students understood all questions as well as the significance of choosing their answers. A considerable number of the latter turned the filled questionnaires via email.

3.4. Data Analysis

The main statistical analysis tool used was the Excel software. All the answers of both groups of participants were fed into the software. Recourse was made to percentages and graphical representations since the study aspires to measure the extents to which ICT implementation and use is perceived, its obstacles and the types of propositions the participants advance for a better ICT use in the EFL classroom. These measures allow classifying and grouping the most important findings in the participants' feedback.

4. Findings and Discussion

After collecting the subjects' answers, there was a need to categorize them into three groups: perceptions, obstacles and approaches. The next subsection is a presentation of the most important perceptions of ICT in the EFL classroom.

4.1 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.

4.1.1. Learners' perceptions

The majority of the young learners stressed the fact that they are familiar with the new communication technologies and that they spend significant time on them everyday; moreover, most of them insisted on the following three main facts:

a.   The need and desire to use them in the EFL classroom.

b.   ICTs helps them learn many "new things" everyday in language outside the classroom

c.   When used in the classroom, ICTs provide a very enjoyable, entertaining environment for the exchange of ideas and research results.

d.   ICTs help the teacher as well since the learners bring a lot of interesting content for them and share it in the classroom.

4.1.2. Teachers' perception

The first striking finding of the study is that only a third of the interviewed teachers use ICTs in their EFL classrooms. The next section will try to explain the reasons behind this unwillingness and reluctance to use them. However, the following points are an attempt to summarize the teachers' perceptions of the importance of ICT use in their classrooms:

a.   ICTs attract the attention of learners and keeps them focused and more involved in the learning interactions and activities.

b.   They save significant time, energy and money for teachers

c.   They facilitate the learning and teaching processes and bring new materials to the classroom.

d.

As one of the interviewed teachers says, *"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."*

The overwhelming agreement among teachers in the above quotation and statements on the need and importance of ICTs in the EFL classroom is considerably noticeable. Even if the teachers generally confirm that they did not grow up using ICTs for language learning, they stress the need for its implementation and its usefulness for their young learners. A significant number of researchers advance that the use of ICT in language learning can render the learning process rich and independent of the formal classroom processes, develop autonomy in learners, help them interact more freely, manage their skills and develop student-centered habits (Melor, Maimun & Pin, 2009). A percentage of 50% of teachers in the study used terms like: *"more interactive", "motivating", "modern" and "saving time"*.

The high school students equally toed the same line; the vast majority (89.5%) reflected an undeniable need for the use of ICTs and online content in their classrooms. The following terms: "break away" (from the course book), "more entertaining", "enjoyable" and "we prefer ICT (to the course book)" are but some of the highly repeated expressions undermining their keen desire to learn EFL via ICT. As to their attitudes towards the teachers using ICT, a majority of almost 70% (35/40) "preferred" and "liked" teachers using the latter in their classrooms. These findings highlight a new trend among the younger generations to incorporate ICTs in the EFL syllabus design, teaching methods and content selection.

The abovementioned finding only toes the same line of previous research. Smith (2000) puts it elegantly in the following words, *"computers will not replace teachers, but teachers who use computers will, inevitably, replace teachers who do not"*. This should by no means hint at the idea of a total replacement of the books. Nevertheless, 30% of the learners showed a significant reluctance to rely on ICT in EFL learning. This educational challenge is discussed below in section 7. So interesting and worth investigation is the fact that among the younger generations, many still not following the general trend.

In the last place, by no means least important, both the teachers and the students expressed their disinclination in using ICTs for language learning evaluation; it seems that the traditional pen, drafting and exam sheets constitute the "comfortable", elemental bits and pieces of a test or exam long inculcated in the mental representation of learners and teachers alike, even though both of them recognize the time-saving attributes of ICTs in the EFL classrooms.

5. Challenges

A considerable number of researchers have exchanged views on the advantages and drawbacks of modern life, including language teaching. Melor, Maimun and Pin (2009) advance that *"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 data of the study suggest that three main categories of challenges face the use of ICT in the EFL classrooms.

Tanveer (2011) puts forward that the participants in his study reported two main obstacles in the way of CALL: the lack of electronic resources and the lack of permanent administrative staff to monitor the use of the different technologies.

In the present study, the subjects mentioned "the absence of technical resources" such WIFI and cellular connections, data show hardware and computer units as the main challenges for successful CALL classrooms. Add to it, both the teachers and learners attest to the fact that many teachers' use of the different ICTs still remains inadequate and untenable. This "wastes a lot of time" added one participant. In the third place comes the agreement among both teachers and students that both categories need more training on the use of electronic resources such as the language banks, live video streaming, monitoring classroom activities using dedicated software or simple PowerPoint or Prezi presentations on different aspects of EFL teaching and learning. Last but not least, the managing boards and individuals should adopt positive attitudes towards the use of the copious ICTs in the language classrooms. The availability of data shows or internet connection in *"one particular classroom in the institution should remain something of the past"*, as one teacher put it.

The teachers and learners came up with many solutions to this hurdle; the vast majority required that:
- Schools need equipped spaces, such as labs, dedicated to ICT for language teaching
- Provide computers, internet, data shows and multimedia spaces.
- "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."
Teachers do overwhelmingly stress the responsibility part of the educational authorities

and administrations.

The second type of challenges concerns the lack of technical training. Both students and teachers revealed their eagerness to make the best of the available ICT content and uses to enrich the EFL teaching/learning processes but also uncovered the lack of training and familiarity with the new ICTs. Some teachers confirmed that their teaching methods are more or less the same as those of their own teachers decades ago. They admitted that their computer skills are not satisfactory and that they cannot download videos or other electronic content for their classes, nay the use of different software for that matter. One participant claims that even when he intends to use online video streaming for listening and speaking objectives, the internet connection, desktops or equipped classrooms do not allow smooth and high quality classes. It is noteworthy in regard to reemphasize the fact that both learners and teachers stress the importance of technical training as a need for better ICT use in the EFL teaching. Both groups insisted on the need for training sessions and workshops on the use of various software, websites, blogs, as well as hardware tools to make part of the global trend in foreign language teaching and learning.

The weak and most of the time lacking, technical facilities in the Moroccan high schools play havoc on the pedagogical side of the teaching process. The waste of time has been the teachers' first complaint related to the unsatisfactorily available technological services in their high schools. The latter's requirements are that the administrations should develop the teachers' ICT skills; in fact, some of the teachers go as far as stating that ICT use should make part of the teacher trainee programs. Electronic bank creation and online resources, at the national level, have also been pointed out.

6. Discussion

The integration of ICTs in the teaching of EFL, as has been understood via the aforementioned results does not only reside in the teachers' or learners' ability to deal with the ever-growing flow of electronic data in the incessantly expanding cyberspace. It brings to light the roles of the modern curriculum and syllabus designers as well. The global tendency towards smart education now calls upon the decision makers to virtualise a great deal of the teaching and content; designing online tasks and practice drills and the training of educators to be able to produce their own content, tasks and teach their learners how to use them would no doubt lead to a richer, learner-based teaching methods focusing on eclectic approaches. This would foster learner autonomy, selection of interesting content, exposure to authentic content and unlimited educational resources.

The findings of the study go hand in hand with a number of others in many developing countries. For example, Taiwo (2004) claims that the success or failure of a teaching-learning situation in language acquisition depends considerably on the teacher. She recommends that

"teachers should upgrade and familiarize themselves in the use and application of ICT facilities in the acquisition of language education. The commitment and enthusiasm to the teaching and learning of English through the effective use of ICT should be of utmost importance not only to the curriculum planners and education policy makers but also the teachers and the learners of English".(p.4)

In a similar manner, Padurean and Margan (2009) claim that in most developing countries, access to internet is "often difficult and very poor when available". Some researchers have even revealed that some of the teachers interviewed have nurtured a certain "fear" of using technologies for EFL teaching. The latter advance that the use of ICTs could lead to a situation where the roles of teachers would be "replaced by computers", hence stepping back from any training or familiarity with technologies and relying solely on the course books. This stands in sharp contrast with eagerness of the Moroccan teacher and learner.

7. Conclusion

Nobody can deny the indispensable role of modern ICTs in the EFL teaching/learning environment. Given the increasingly wide access to the world wide web, user friendliness and 'smarter and smarter' electronic gadgets, abundant websites, webpages, blogs, and other electronic resources online, it is even imperative that the teachers join the more "addicted" young learners online and push the latter to spend more time using EFL in their virtual worlds.

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.

The present paper has shed light on the main obstacles to the use of ICTs in the Moroccan EFL classroom; the latter fall into three main categories: technical, administrative and human. More electronic resources, such as databases or resource banks are needed at the national level. More training of teachers and learners on the use of the various technologies is another important need, and the decision makers need to develop an awareness to the generally global tendency to make the future educational institutions "smart", which entails an abject need to have well-trained, technologically literate teachers.

One should not overlook the individual efforts and willingness of most teachers and learners to integrate ICTs in their EFL teaching/learning interaction as well. A great number of teachers have taken the initiative and contributed to the modern EFL teaching evolution through more interactive and online material integration in their syllabi, as many of them reported. One should not underestimate the investment of government and non-government agencies in the creation of human, logistic and technical facilities to reach these goals. The success of the MOOCS program, developed by the USA in the 2000s, in many developing countries could be the best example. As a person in charge of the program in the University of Yaoundé explains, *"MOOCs are a wonderful opportunity for a country as Cameroon where, every year, 50 000 young people ask to have access to higher education, for eight state universities and two virtual universities". (Jeune Afrique magazine, www.africatopsuccess.com).*

About the Author:
Dr. Khalid SOUSSI is a researcher of applied linguistics and education sciences at the faculty of education in Rabat, Morocco. He is currently an assistant professor at the National Institute of Post and Telecommunications in Rabat where he teaches a variety of courses ranging from English to mass media and society.

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