

BALANCING ICT WITH THE FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION IN THE EFL CLASSROOM: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of a survey of EFL teachers' attitudes towards the appropriate amount of ICT in the EFL classroom to keep the balance between technology and face-to-face classroom interaction. The data analysis has shown that teachers identify a lack of technology rather than a danger of its supplanting the traditional teacher-student classroom interaction. In addition, the teacher's age seems to be a factor in their attitude towards the appropriate amount of ICT per lesson. The youngest and oldest participants in the research appeared to be the most active IT users while those in the middle age bracket limit their usage of ICT to a few times per month. Surprisingly, the majority of teachers cited the fear of ICT taking up too much classroom time. Hence the predominant number of participants believe that the optimal amount of ICT should comprise about 10-20 per cent of lesson time.

Key words: Information & Communication Technology (ICT), EFL, classroom interaction, balance, teachers' attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

Within the last few decades technology has penetrated into nearly all spheres of our life. Comparing the present-day situation with the past, it is difficult to believe that people could live without mobile phones, computers, electronic dictionaries and other similar electronic devices that assist all sorts of human activity. And because the education sector needs to keep up with the rest of modern society, it is impossible for it to dispense with Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Nowadays every reputable educational establishment is equipped with computers and has access to the Internet.

The introduction of ICT into the EFL classroom has revealed the unlimited possibilities for the participants of the educational process. Learners have received opportunities to practice their language with native speakers while teachers have obtained access to a huge number of teaching ideas and resources. Without doubt technology allows teachers to produce learning materials that are more authentic and better suited to student needs.

However, together with all the advantages, the implementation of ICT into the EFL curriculum raises numerous problems. Among them is the difficulty in finding the right balance between the usage of ICT and teacher-student interaction. It is especially difficult for those teachers who depend more heavily on teaching with ICT, as overuse of technology could easily undermine any lesson. For example, a teacher may be going to conduct a lesson dependent on ICT. The lesson starts with the teacher typing a greeting on their computer and displaying it on a screen with the help of an overhead projector. While the picture is displayed on the screen the teacher turns on the audio file to sound the greeting. The next step of the lesson is the presentation of the lesson aims. For that purpose the teacher uses a Power Point presentation. In addition the lesson aims are sent in the form of a text message to the students' mobile phones so that students are able to use them throughout the lesson. After that the home task is sent to the teacher's email address.

Students are randomly divided into three groups. In those groups they play a warm up game taken from the Internet. The results of the game are posted by the teacher on the group's Facebook page. Then the students have a few minutes to comment on their results and the game in general. Later on the teacher shows a video followed by an audio file with the questions. Students record the questions on their voice recorders together with their answers to the questions and e-mail their answers to the teacher. The rest of the lesson is conducted in this manner.

Of course this is an exaggeration, however some teachers may like the idea while others would consider that there is too little face-to-face interaction and too much technology. There is no ultimate answer as to what is the appropriate amount of ICT in an EFL lesson. Moreover there will always be variation because every teacher has his/her own

approach to technology, as well as each mastering its use at different speeds (Cuban, 1986). However there should also be standards, and some use of ICT will be supported by the majority of ESL teachers. The goal of this current research is to find out to what degree ICT is used by the modern EFL teacher.

METHODOLOGY

To answer the question of the appropriate balance of ICT and teacher-student classroom interaction, a number of university ESL teachers were invited to participate in a survey to clarify the way they used ICT in their classrooms, and how much time they devoted to ICT-centered activities. Therefore the research questions were whether ICT overtakes the amount of face-to-face in-class interaction, and whether the current availability of ICT meets the EFL teachers' needs.

To answer these questions, a semi-structured attitudes questionnaire was issued to teachers in one of the language pedagogical universities in Kazakhstan. The questionnaire included ten questions about the use of ICT in the ESL classroom and was e-mailed to 34 female EFL teachers with mixed socio-cultural background, ranging from 24 to 56 years old.

Besides the standard choice of answers suggested by the researcher, contributors also had the option of adding their own answer or comment. Firstly, EFL teachers were asked to indicate the ICT technologies they employed in teaching. Among the possible answer choices were: Power Point, Audacity, Web Quest, Hot Potatoes, Podcast, Blog, and Moodle. The teachers were also asked to state the frequency at which they used ICT, its purpose, and the amount of time they would like to devote to using ICT in future.

Within two weeks all the completed questionnaires were mailed back to the researcher and were then grouped according to the participant's age, resulting in four groups: 24-29 years old (Group A), 30-39 years old (Group B), 40-49 years old (Group C), and 50-56 years old (Group D). The answers were initially calculated within each group, and after that the overall group results were compared.

RESULTS

From 34 respondents – 9 were assigned to Group A. Their answers suggested that these teachers employed almost all the options listed in the questionnaire, giving priority to Power Point presentations and Moodle. Group B (11 respondents) and Group C (7 respondents) had largely similar answers with Power Point presentations being the leading technology. Nevertheless the second most popular technology for Group B was Moodle, while Group C gave preference to Audacity. All the respondents in Group D (7 respondents) used Power Point presentations with only one teacher using Moodle.

Table 1: The Popularity of the Different ICT among the Certain Age Groups of the EFL Teachers

ICT Name	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D
Total # of respondents/ group	9	11	7	7
Power Point Presentation	9	11	7	7
Audacity	3	1	4	
Web Quest	1			
Hot Potatoes	2		1	
Blog		1	1	
Moodle	5	5	1	1

As regards the frequency of ICT usage by the teachers, 26 respondents used technology from one to three times per week while the other eight respondents used a computer only a few times during the month. Among these eight respondents, four were assigned to Group B. Concerning lesson time devoted to ICT in Group B, the predominant number of respondents spent only ten minutes, the majority of Group A spent 50 minutes, and the majority of Group D 30 minutes.

Hence we can see that the ESL teachers aged from 30 to 39 years are the least active users of ICT in the classroom. However Group B's responses about the desired proportion of ICT suggest that they would like to devote up to 60 per cent of their classroom time to technology-centered activities. At the same time Group D is satisfied with the

current situation, and the answers of Group A vary from 30 to 80 per cent. And the majority of Group C would like to reduce the amount of ICT by up to 20 per cent.

Table 2: The Correlation between the Current and Desired ICT Usage in the EFL Classroom

Percentage of time of ICT/lesson	Group A		Group B		Group C		Group D	
	Spend	Want to spend	Spend	Want to spend	Spend	Want to spend	Spend	Want to spend
10-20%	1		7	1	1	5		
30-40%	2	3	1	4	6		5	4
50-60%	1	3	2	6		1	2	3
70-80%	5	3	1			1		
90-100%								

As to the obstacles to achieving the desired amount of ICT, the majority of respondents point out the limited availability of computer labs. To receive access to the computer centre, a teacher should book the room a month in advance. In addition, the use of the lab should be agreed with the university authorities. Another common obstacle to the usage of ICT by EFL teachers are electricity power cuts which occur frequently and cannot be predicted in advance. Such a situation forces many teachers from groups A, C and D to buy their own laptops, and because of their heavy weight teachers have to limit the amount of ICT to the current level.

On the other hand, a predominant number of respondents from all age groups accept that ICT motivates their students to better learning and helps them to approach new material, therefore if the university created better facilities then teachers would be keener to master new technology. In such cases, the initial research question about the optimal balance between ICT and face-to-face classroom interaction could possibly be raised again.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The results of current research suggest that students in Kazakhstan are more ready to be exposed to ICT-centered teaching than modern EFL teachers who may struggle with the gap between the students' needs and the limitations of the university. Summing up, modern EFL teachers identify a lack of ICT in their lessons, rather than any overuse of technology. For this reason, measures should be taken to provide teachers with more access to computer labs or similarly equipped classrooms because the teachers' responses demonstrate their eagerness to master ICT and employ more technology in EFL teaching.

In addition, students have a need for technology-centered learning to enhance their motivation. Here we can observe a substantial gap between the students' needs and expectations, and the teachers' access to relevant technology that can be solved only with the assistance of university officials, and not by teachers themselves. Because of the comparatively small amount of respondents and their mixed socio-cultural background, further research is needed to reduce the number of variables. At the same time, on the basis of current research, we can firmly state that the EFL sphere in Kazakhstan needs to be paid closer attention, and requires further development.

The impressive rise in the technology development has led to the development of a new trend in the modern education where teaching is somehow mediated with the ICT. According to Bingimlas (2009) the computers were first introduced into education in early 1980. Since then the teaching process has faced numerous changes in the methodologies due to the innovations in ICT (Warschauer, 1996). Whereas the primary goal of education is to prepare the young specialists for their future career where they will face with the necessity to demonstrate certain IT skills (Yelland, 2001) it is essential to integrate the teaching with technology. Bransford et al. (2000) reported that implementation of ICT has a positive influence on the learning outcomes. As far as technology occupied a secure position in education it led to the emergence of blended learning that facilitates the transformation of a traditional education into the e-learning (Driscoll, 2002). In line with other subject areas the ESL area is also adopting the new technologies.

It is believed that ICT could catalyze the second language learning by providing students with the authentic language resources (Moore, Moralez, & Carel, 1998). However, to achieve the desired effect the inconsistency of teachers'

beliefs should be overcome (Cuban, 1986). Warschauer and Whittaker (1997) point out the necessity to combine the usage of ICT with the basic pedagogical principals. According to them (Warschauer & Whittaker, 1997) the best learning could be resulted from teacher's combination of technology with an appropriate linguistic and cognitive load. Thus, human participation in the ICT-based classroom is crucial for the learning results (Burnett, 1986; Salmon, 2005).

Even though the large body of research reports that ICT improves the teaching process numerous papers suggest that the teachers have negative attitude towards the use of ICT and do not find them reliable and effective (Cuban, 1986; Midlane, 2005). The research also suggests that the experience with the use of ICT improves teachers' attitude towards the technologies in the classroom (McCain, et al., 1999). Even in case of limited resources it is still possible to modernize our lessons via mobile devices (Valk, Rashid, & Elder, 2010). Cunningham (1998) in his turn has worked out the list of criteria for the effective ICT mediated teaching approaching this issue from practical, pedagogical, political, philosophical, and personal issues.

Summing up the body of literature on the issue of the effectiveness of ICT in teaching we cannot find unity among the researchers. While the majority suggests that the new technology is the breakthrough in the education (Moore, Moralez, & Carel, 1998) and even insists on their essential role in the future workforce formation (Yelland, 2001) there is another group who indicate that ICT is not effective without human interaction (Burnett, 1986; Warschauer & Whittaker, 1997; Salmon, 2005).

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