

THE USE OF WEB-BASED APPLICATIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAMMES AT SELECTED MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a small-scale research conducted among some of the institutes of higher learning in Malaysia. The objective was to find out to what extent these institutes utilize the available Information Communication Technology (ICT) in the teaching and learning of English as well as for research purposes. The paper looks at the kinds of Internet activities that language instructors are normally engaged in during working hours as well as outside working hours. The paper also examines the kinds of problems commonly faced by language instructors in the use of web-based applications in the teaching and learning process. Finally, it suggests some measures to overcome these problems and to promote the use of ICT in a wider and more meaningful manner for ELT programmes.

Introduction

Information Technology (IT) has been the main agenda of the Malaysian government over the past five years or so. The government has provided every possible assistance and opportunity to all government and non-government agencies to promote the use of IT widely. It is the vision of the government to produce a hundred percent IT literate Malaysian society within the next 20 years. The effort to educate the Malaysian public therefore would naturally start from the education system. The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Malaysia started a programmes called Computer Literacy in the mid 90's. Several schools throughout the country were selected to participate in this pilot programmes. At the moment, the MOE is in the process of setting up several smart schools in the country where IT will be the main agenda. In line with this development in Information Technology, all the tertiary institutions in the country also began to give prominence to Computers and Information Technology. We can safely say that most universities and colleges have the state-of-the-art information technology equipment for the use of their staff and students.

As Crossman (in Khan 1997) highlights, “the web and its Internet parent carry more information than has ever before been gathered in any form” and anyone who has access to this great wealth of information has the edge to compete with the rest of the world. However, how and to what extent these facilities are used to enhance the teaching and learning process, especially in the area of English language teaching and learning is the scope of this paper. The reason why instructors at tertiary institutions were selected for this study is because at present a large number of language teachers for secondary schools are trained at these institutions and if they are not exposed to CALL and ICT during their teacher training, obviously they will not be able to exploit the great potential of IT in language teaching at school level.

Methodology

The primary source of data for this research was via a set of questionnaires. To obtain further information, instructors from the institutions were randomly selected and interviewed. Questionnaires were distributed to English language instructors currently employed at public and private higher institutions of learning. These institutions include the National University of Malaysia, National Technology University, International Islamic University and Inti College. However, the response was not encouraging enough. Only a small number of questionnaires were duly filled and returned.

The Scope of the Research:

This research primarily investigated the following:

- Use of web-based applications by language teachers in terms of types, purpose and frequency
- The kind of Internet activities teachers normally engage in
- The extent of Internet usage in language teaching
- Problems faced by teachers when using web-based applications in ELT

Computing Activities among English Language Lecturers and Instructors

Of the 52 respondents who provided input for this research, 84.6% owned a computer at home and 82.7% were provided with computers in their rooms at the workplace. The small numbers of instructors who do not possess computers at their workplaces are tutors or language teachers. It is a common practice among tertiary institutes in Malaysia to provide computers for lecturers only. If computers are to be fully exploited for educa-

tional purposes at tertiary institutions, this kind of discrimination should be avoided and all teachers regardless of their academic qualifications or seniority should be provided with personal computers.

The research very clearly indicated that most instructors regarded the computer as a glorified typewriter as 94.2% used it mainly for word processing. However, it is also very interesting to note that 98.1% are familiar with and use Internet browser software such as Explorer and Netscape. This indeed is a very positive sign that instructors do use the Internet facilities made available to them. E-mail is growing in popularity as the most effective way of communicating both within the institutions and also with the outside world. This too, is widely used by language instructors as 98.1% have indicated that they do use this application frequently. This seems to coincide with the findings of the 1993 survey conducted by the Bank Street College of Education which reveals a wide variety of ways telecommunications technology is used in K-12 education. (Honey and Henriquez, 1993):

- Slightly less than half of these educators have Internet access, which is supplied most frequently by a university computer or educational service.
- Internet services are used almost twice as often for professional activities as for student learning activities.
- Sending e-mail is the most common use of the Internet, followed by accessing news and bulletin boards and gaining access to remote computers.

Graphic presentation software such as Power Point, Scala and Macromedia are quite widely used by English language instructors as 67.3% use these for teaching. Other web-based and non web-based applications such as html software, Authorware, Frontpage, Dreamweaver, authoring systems, video and sound editing software and Dbase are hardly used by the respondents.

The two main reasons why the above-mentioned applications are not popular among language instructors are:

- firstly they do not see the potential of these applications in enhancing their teaching due to lack of exposure.
- The second reason is there are very limited training facilities for these instructors in this area of Computer Assisted Language Learning.

Internet Activities of Instructors

One of the factors, which encourages instructors to use the most recent technologies and innovations in their classes, is the availability of such technologies and the ease of access to them. The study revealed that only 50% of the respondents actually had subscribed to an Internet service provider. This clearly shows that a large number of instructors are yet to be convinced that the information, services and platforms available via the Internet can help them to deliver their lessons more effectively. Most of the respondents stated that they only used the Internet facility provided by their institutions for all their activities. This too, indicates that most instructors use the Internet not because of its usefulness but because it is already there at their workplace and it is also absolutely free.

When asked how often they used the Internet facility and for what specific purposes, 44% said that they visited various websites frequently. Another 46% stated that they visited websites but less frequently. This clearly shows that more than half of the respondents seldom exploited the information super highway to bring a great wealth of knowledge and new meaning to the process of language learning and teaching. However, 82.7% stated that they used the e-mail very frequently and 53.8% indicated that they also sent and received files and data via e-mail very frequently. This indeed is a positive and effective use of technology.

Reasons for Visiting Websites

From the information gathered, it is evident that at least half of the instructors who responded to the questionnaire used the Internet facilities quite frequently. The next most pertinent question is, for what specific purpose are they using this facility? Gathering data or conducting specific research seems to be the purpose of most respondents (92.3%).

This again is a very positive indication that instructors are aware that there is a wealth of knowledge in the area of language teaching and learning in the World Wide Web. Many also stated that they look for new ideas, lesson plans and even downloadable language teaching software from the web. At the same time 80% also stated that they often do general data gathering by browsing the web. This seems to be a leisure activity which is often carried out when the instructors are free.

Only 26.9% stated that they used the Internet to try out some language exercises found in ELT web sites. This is an area which needs attention. Those instructors who frequently visited web sites dedicated to English language teaching and learning mentioned that they found some very interesting exercises and activities that could be downloaded,

modified and carried out in their classes. This, in fact, is a great boon to teachers teaching in isolated rural schools who are often desperately looking for ideas and help. Teachers were also using the Internet to look for certain services such as sending greetings and paying bills (61.5%), to get up-to-date global news, for entertainment (73.1%), and for online shopping (15.4%). Even though some of these activities are not directly linked to language teaching and learning, they do provide teachers with a wealth of information and general knowledge.

Language Teaching and the Internet

Of the respondents who participated in this research, 59.6% are currently teaching TESL related courses, 48.1% are teaching English for general purposes, 42.3% teach ESP and 50% are involved in the teaching of English for academic purposes. Their experience ranged from 1 to 20 years with 50% of them having not less than 10 years of teaching experience. This clearly indicates that all the respondents are experienced language teachers and are familiar with the needs and constraints of ELT in Malaysia.

Asked about the kinds of Internet activities that they used in their teaching, 78.8% responded by saying that they instructed their students to visit websites to gather various kinds of data, 71.2% said that they communicate with their students via e-mail. Another 55.8% said that they received their students' work via e-mail. A small number of teachers assigned their students to visit language websites for language practice (34.6%). Only a very small number had instructed their students to subscribe to relevant newsgroups (11.5%) and join relevant discussion groups. Activities such as developing webpages for web-based language learning, delivering on-line lecture notes and providing on-line forums are carried out by a small number of teachers (32.7%).

From the above data, it is very clear that most of the teachers are not fully exploiting the capabilities of the Internet for language teaching purposes. At university level, data gathering is a very common practice among students. Even without instructions from their lecturers, students would browse the web for information for their assignments. It is rather common to find students indiscriminately plagiarizing essays and articles. As for the widespread use of e-mail to communicate with their students, it is a good start and many of the teachers use this facility not only to communicate but also to help students develop their ability to write through the process writing approach. According to many, this is a popular exercise as it provides an authentic environment and it also enables students to have constant discussions with their teachers and to monitor the development of their own writing. If the necessary environment is created, authentic language communication activities such as e-mail communications, forum discussions, chit-chatting between non-native and native speakers of English, can take place in a

virtual environment, making language learning more meaningful and more productive. Besides this, a virtual language learning environment is also capable of accommodating all kinds of learners as they would be working at their own pace. As Lee (2000) observes, these multimedia networked, computerized language lessons known as integrative CALL “provides a range of informational, communicative, and publishing tools that are potentially available to every student.”

Exchanging files and documents via e-mail is another interesting development in ELT. One of the most common and widespread problems among English teachers, immaterial of where and what level of English Language teaching they are involved in, is the lack of networking and information sharing among teachers. This practice of sharing files and documents via e-mail can create a professional bond and networking among teachers. This will greatly benefit teachers, especially those in isolated rural schools.

Evidently, only a small number of teachers actually assign their students to specific websites to try out English language exercises found there. It is encouraging to see that instructors are aware of these facilities and are already trying them out. It is only a matter of time before more from the profession benefit from these platforms. Teachers and teacher trainees should be trained to acquire networking skills. This will enable them to build their own network, which will establish the professional communication that is increasingly needed among teachers. Networking includes synchronous and asynchronous communications (Warschauer and Healy, 1998). The former is like a chat media while the latter is similar to e-mail communication. Another important fact is that, the trainee teachers who are exposed to Internet facilities in turn might make use of them with the students at school level. Encouraging students to subscribe to newsgroups and discussion groups is also another step in the right direction. Networking provides authentic communication between learners and their correspondents. As mentioned earlier, the teaching profession greatly lacks networking and information sharing. This will be a thing of the past if more teachers join these news and discussion groups and engage in professional chats and forums.

One very important finding from this study is that, 90.4% of the participants have indicated that they would advocate greater use of the Internet in language teaching. This is a very healthy sign that there is awareness among our lecturers and teachers of the importance of IT in language learning.

Problems Faced in the Use of Web-based Applications

From the feedback received, both via questionnaire as well as the interviews, it is probable that there is growing interest among English language instructors at the tertiary

level to familiarize themselves with the various web-based applications. However, there are several problems and issues that need to be addressed if these facilities are to be fully exploited by language teachers, not only at the tertiary level but also at all levels of English language teaching. Some of these problems are as follows:

■ **Technical hitches**

Most of the universities and colleges in Malaysia connect to the Internet via the ISDN line and they maintain both LAN and WAN facilities. Due to the large volume of traffic on the Internet there is often this problem of net congestion and the data flow is sometimes reduced to a trickle. This often puts off the users as they have to wait for a long time to browse a page or download a document (S.A. Rashid, 1999). The e-mail facility, which has become a vital communication portal, is often rendered useless due to problems with the local server. For new users this could be very frustrating and many give up using these conveniences in their language teaching.

■ **Lack of networking**

As mentioned elsewhere in this paper, teachers in general work in isolation. Unlike other professions, they seldom have a proper network to share ideas and experiences. Due to this lack of networking, English language instructors and teachers are often ignorant of the latest technological developments which can greatly improve their language lessons. However, there is hope that with the rapid development in IT and the continued effort on the part of government agencies such as MIMOS there will be better networking among teachers in the near future. The formation of web sites such as CikguNet in Malaysia is a definite step towards creating this much needed networking. Another level of networking is between the instructor and the learner. Warschauer and Kern (2000) introduced the term "network-based language teaching," which could be the next most positive development in language teaching and learning.

■ **Time constraints**

Learning to use computer applications, especially for first timers, could be a very time consuming affair. Many lecturers, tutors and teachers lose interest in CALL and web-based learning after an initial stage of enthusiasm due to the longer hours they have to spend mastering the software before they can develop their own lessons. Very often they have to acquire this new knowledge during their limited and precious leisure time as they are often overworked.

■ **Lack of interest and apprehension**

Another important factor why web-based applications and CALL have not gained much popularity among the language teaching fraternity of the tertiary institutions is the lack of interest among lecturers and tutors in IT and other technologies. Many of them feel that they can deliver their lessons effectively without “these technical gimmicks”. Until a whole new generation of technology-literate students graduate and become teachers, we will find many instructors who fear machines and believe they cannot enhance learning. This lack of interest and apprehension is generally due to the lack of information and knowledge. If teachers are given proper exposure, guidance and technical support they can develop interest and take on the challenges of the era.

Ways and Means to Enhance Language Teaching via Web-based Applications and CALL

As discussed earlier, a considerable percentage of teachers at the tertiary level do use some of the web-based applications in their teaching. However, whether they are fully exploiting the capabilities of these applications is a question that needs to be considered. From the feedback received we can see that many of the instructors only use the Internet for very general purposes such as locating information, communicating with students via e-mail and so on. There are so many other facilities such as using web-based software like Hot Potatoes to create language lessons, using e-mail to provide authentic writing exercises, creating discussion groups, conducting online forums and so on. To enable lecturers at the tertiary level to fully exploit the potential of web-based applications and CALL, the following steps can be taken by their respective institutes:

■ **Provide on-going training**

Teachers should be provided with on-going training on how to use the various computer applications that are related to teaching in general and English language teaching specifically. The training should be conducted in a flexible manner so that teachers can choose their own time to attend. Another interesting possibility is through the creation of self-access modules that enable teachers to learn on their own and only seek help when it is absolutely necessary. This mode of learning was tried out among undergraduate students of UKM and was found to be very successful.

■ **Have local experts offer courses on CALL and web-based learning**

The institutions should offer courses such as *Innovations and Technology in TESL*, *Web-based learning*, *Computer Assisted Language Learning* and so on at both the undergraduate as well as post-graduate levels. This will not only produce a genera-

tion of IT literate teachers but also enable the existing team of lecturers and tutors to be exposed to the latest developments in language teaching. If the institutions concerned have a faculty which specialises in IT, students from this faculty can be invited to do their industrial training or practicum with the Language Faculty or the Education Faculty. These students can be seconded to work on projects such as developing websites or other web-based applications in collaboration with language instructors. This can help both the parties concerned. However, we must remember that unlike printed material or text “information on the web is not subjected to the same quality control” (Cameron, 1998:4). Therefore, grammatical and spelling errors are frequent and teachers must be aware of these and be very selective about the materials accessed via the web.

■ **Organize professional discussions and demonstrations**

Tertiary institutions should also organize academic discussions and demonstrations on CALL, Web-based learning, IT etc on a regular basis. This would enable teachers to exchange views and be exposed to the latest developments. Workshops on how to use existing applications to develop lessons are very popular among teachers and therefore should be conducted very often.

■ **Provide all academic staff with the latest hardware**

As mentioned earlier, not all staff of the institutions are provided with computers and other hardware. Some instructors have been seen using hardware that is so obsolete that many applications cannot be run on it. This could be very frustrating for a young enthusiastic academician. Therefore, the institutions should replace the outdated, existing hardware with the latest available. If this is not financially feasible, they should at least set up state-of-the-art computer labs that are accessible to all academic staff.

Conclusion

The Internet is here to stay. It is already having a profound effect on the entire human race. Teachers will eventually harness the powers of this great tool and integrate it with their existing classroom practices. However, they need time and space to acclimatize to this new phenomenon. To quote Buchanan (1995)

“Teachers require time to become comfortable with the Internet at a personal and professional level before they will be comfortable integrating it into classroom activities. It is likely that teaching schedules and professional commitments will always make it difficult for teachers to find this time at school. It will be important for administration to provide flexibility and support to teachers who wish to bor-

row equipment to use at home. It may even be possible for schools to provide financial assistance for phone calls and to those teachers wishing to purchase equipment."

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