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SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

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eLEARNING IN EFL: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

This paper investigates certain problems encountered when technology-based instruction is employed in teaching English as a foreign language. Three EFL specialists from Saudi Arabia are interviewed and their insights on solving those problems are presented. Many academics feel ill-equipped to utilize new technologies in teaching because they are technophobes who fear or dislike technology or do not have sufficient experience in employing computer applications. Other academics found technology-based teaching time-consuming, leading to increased workload, and demanding high levels of technical support. Solutions to face the reluctance to engage in electronic forms of teaching include the provision of instructional support to provide faculty with the necessary technical skills, changing college policies to consider teaching with technology an activity for which faculty receive credit, improving the reward system to motivate faculty to better productivity and higher performance, and addressing critical work-related issues, such as workload.

Key words: EFL, technology, Higher Education

Introduction

The needs to positively respond to changes in higher education, keep costs down and provide high-quality programs represent challenges to higher education worldwide. The implementation of technology in higher education has the potential to contribute to facing these challenges. Technology-based education has been implemented to extend teaching beyond the physical campus and to provide alternative delivery methods. The purpose of this paper is to review the

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perceptions of three college professors who have implemented various types of technology-based instruction in the field of teaching English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia.

Global and social changes are imposing rapid and significant transformations on higher education institutions. Responding positively to such changes and continuing to provide a sufficient atmosphere for learning represent a challenge to those institutions. The occurrence of transformations within higher education should not be subject to questioning. How we can participate in and benefit from such transformations should be our focus in the sense that, "Those institutions that are successful in establishing administrative and academic frameworks within which rapid technological change and adaptation can occur will survive and those who stubbornly adhere to archaic styles of management and decision-making will not" (Huff, 2000, p. 635).

The idea that there is a need to engage with new learning technologies in higher education has become clear in the views of many educators. Some educators think that embracing technology in teaching has become a must. Tearle et al., for example, state "it is no longer possible to opt out" (1999, p. 14). Furthermore, DiPiro (1999, p. 171) contends that "With these [technological] developments it may no longer be reasonable that a professional school can expect to remain competitive even within a well defined, isolated geographic area by providing instruction by traditional methods." More particularly, computers have been used as viable alternatives for delivery of instruction in different educational settings. The rapidly developing computer industry helped establish computers as an instructional medium. Increased computer speed and memory, the introduction of multimedia functions and the development of graphical user interfaces helped teachers plan and achieve many educational goals (Hokanson & Hooper, 2000).

Benefits of tech in education

Researchers in different fields related to educational technology reported many encouraging outcomes for the implementation of technology in learning and teaching. The following are some of the positive points reported in the literature:

1. Teaching with technology helped emphasize the skills-based model of teaching and minimize the lecture model of teaching. "By shifting faculty time and energy to technology and by reducing the labor-intensive nature of the traditional model of instruction, academic institutions can transfer the focus of learning to students who will be able to engage in self-paced and self-directed learning activities" (Bartscherer, 1999, p. 6)
2. Various types of technology made education more active and learner-centered and thus "enable the students to take greater responsibility for their own learning, and give them the power to fulfill that responsibility" (Sosabowski et al., 1998, p. 2).

3. Computer-mediated discussions tend to be more diverse (multiple topics are discussed) and more inclusive (more students are involved) than face-to-face interactions (Harasim, et al., 1997; Weisskircha & Milburnb, 2003).
4. Computer-mediated discussions offer more opportunities for interactive and collaborative activities among members of the learning community (Poling, 1994; Fessakis, 2004).
5. Students have constant access to course materials published on the World Wide Web (Kilian, C. 1996; Carpi, 2001).
6. Various technology-enhanced tools can motivate students and stimulate their interest in the learning process (Mereba, 2003).
7. Technology-based instruction can change the type of relationship between students and professors in which students appreciate the role of their instructors as coaches not as gatekeepers (Sliwa, 1994; Chrzanowski, 2002).

Methods of implementing elearning

The three professors used an open source online environment to carry out their teaching. They used www.makkahelearning.net, an educational website that one of the surveyed professors built in 2001. They decided to use this particular website because of its good quality and flexibility, higher reliability and practical accessibility. At the beginning of the semester the three professors create separate spaces for the courses they teach and make basic information (course description, textbook required, grades distribution, etc.) available for students to review. Throughout the semester they use the online environment to post the lecture contents, the main points to be discussed in the coming lecture & the reading articles & some questions to raise interest in the topic. To encourage students to interact with one another, the three professors open a news forum for placing important announcements about tests. They also opened discussion forums for posting extra information related to the topics discussed, activities and exercises. Students are required to sign up and participate in these forums.

Reasons for implementing elearning

In response to the new educational milieu that technology created in the field of teaching English as a foreign language, the three surveyed professors agreed that employing computers facilitated their teaching career. Professor A mentioned he had decided to teach with computers because "successful instruction is based on communication and interaction. It is not lecture and note-taking any more. Computer-based instruction can effectively enhance learning." Professor B stated that the advantage of using computers to help with "delivery of instruction" is what encouraged him to embrace elearning. Professor C believed that using computers in the two processes of teaching and learning "saves time and effort for both the

teacher and the learner and where things can be transferred, delivered, and done in a short time and with less effort."

The implementation of various types of technology as educational tools to facilitate teaching is a pedagogical practice based on theoretical grounds. The points that the three professors talked about (enhancing communication and interaction, smoothing the progress of delivery of instruction, and saving time and effort) are outcomes of the new educational setting that technology established. Many previous studies found that such implementation can create new horizons for students to learn and for teachers to deliver the subject matter. In this sense, technology has been used to play a potentially rich role in teaching and learning that "defined variously by what the teacher has available, has had time to learn, or can find an appropriate use for, and by what students have access to, are familiar with, and are willing to use" (Stahlke & Nyce, 1996, p. 47).

In addition, the three professors believe that elearning is similarly beneficial for students from different perspectives. Professor A mentioned that the benefits which students get from studying with elearning "are unlimited, but the most important one is interactivity." Likewise, Professor C observed that students who study English as a foreign language where elearning is incorporated become "more interested and active in learning. They show readiness to learn more, do more exercises, engage in extra work, and as a result, be better learners." Professor B stated that "elearning can lead to many more benefits [such as] to help students access learning materials whenever they like, to have access to electronic materials used in class (e.g. PowerPoint presentations) and to discuss issues related to their course online."

These benefits reported by the three surveyed elearning practitioners in the field of teaching English at this university have been emphasized by other elearning practitioners as well as learning theorists. A prominent trend in learning theory that has gained increasing significance recently contends that the use of a variety of pedagogical strategies encourages reflective practice which means more interaction between students and their teachers and among the students themselves (Newby et al., 2000). Elearning has been found to be a good tool for engaging students in different activities and making them interested in receiving information. Interactive learning is effective because it involves the learner in constructing ideas as a result of experiences (Von Glaserfeld, 1995). Teaching students with technology facilitated their interaction with the course subject matter and helped them to develop process skills and attitudes alongside knowledge and understanding (Coyle, 2004). The views expressed by the three Saudi professors gain increasing credibility because higher education in Saudi Arabia is moving towards making the necessary steps to facilitate the diffusion of elearning. These views, along with the views of other Saudi elearning practitioners, can be the basis of any plans for development related to spreading the utilization of elearning in teaching college students.

Difficulties in employing technology

Along with the enthusiasm related to implementing new learning technologies, higher education institutions, faculty and students faced multiple technology-related difficulties. Educators who first used technology-based instruction faced obstacles because the whole educational setting was subject to change. For example, Professor B found multiple problems when employing elearning to teach English to Saudi students. He stated,

> *Some students don not have access to the Internet. Some other students do not know how to use computers. I always ask them at the beginning of the semester if using online materials would be a problem to them. The answer is always 'NO.' However, towards the end of the semester, they start complaining. Some of them just ask their colleagues to print out materials for them. This is why I tend to use elearning to the minimum (i.e. crucial resources for the course can be obtained by other conventional means).*

Professor A attributed most of the technology-related difficulties to technophobia where both teachers and students react passively to the newly presented educational setting. Previous studies indicated that introducing technology in education even in developed countries encountered many problems because "many academics have had no training and little experience in the use of communications and information technology as an educational tool" (Dearing, 1997, p. 36). Furthermore, Professor C pointed to several administrative factors that could contribute to minimizing the benefit from implementing elearning. In particular, he referred to obstacles related to "using up-to-date technology, maintenance problems, budget problems, and little space assigned for extra labs."

Faculty members engaged in web-based instruction have complained that the process of developing web-based course materials is time-consuming and demands high levels of technical support and in most cases leads to an increase in their workload (Cravener, 1999). Different work obligations may force faculty, in many cases, to stick to traditional methods of teaching. "For academics already struggling to keep up with increased administrative demands, teaching loads and research pressures, learning technology can be a formidable, time-consuming area to further sap their limited energies" (Littlejohn,& Sclater, 1998, p. 1).

The three surveyed professors expressed similar views about their elearning practice with respect to the need for prolonged time to develop course materials. Professor A mentioned that "we [elearning practitioners] spend a lot of time collecting materials and putting them in the appropriate design, but this is only in the initial stages. In other words, it gets much easier as the faculty members get used to it." Moreover, the extensive time associated with developing materials for courses taught online forced some elearning practitioners to reuse the same course

materials. Professor B stated that "It's true that I can reuse the same materials, but I still feel that web-based instruction requires more time/effort where technical knowledge/support is always necessary." Professor C takes this a step further and suggests that professors who teach similar courses should work together in developing the course materials. He stated, "This process [developing course materials] needs time and effort. A teacher might need weeks to develop one course online. I believe this problem can be overcome if two or three teachers work together and each one develops part of the course."

Causes of hesitation

Many researchers in the field observed that in spite of the widespread implementation of technology-based education, many faculty members avoid participating in any form of electronic teaching (Olcott & Wright, 1995). The three professors whose views are analyzed here confirmed the presence of this problem. They think there are three main reasons behind this reluctance to engage in electronic forms of teaching: change resistance, technophobia and insufficient computer skills. Professor B stated that "Resistance to change is, in my view, the main reason [for avoiding elearning as an instructional method]. Some professors are not very computer literate, and some others underestimate the effort/time needed to implement elearning & prefer to stick to what they are used to doing. To convince them to embrace teaching with technology, I think, they need to (a) see how effectively elearning is employed and (b) have very good support in at least their early attempts to implement elearning."

Professor A emphasized technophobia as an influential factor that can hinder a wide range of professors from teaching with technology. Technophobia is defined, according to the Miriam Webster dictionary, as "fear or dislike of advanced technology or complex devices and especially computers." Technophobes fear or dislike technology because technology changes the environment they live in and may cause them to feel insecurity and anxiety. Academics become technophobic when they resist technology-based changes that might undermine their professional status because they do not trust unproven technological innovations (Spratt et al., 2000).

Insufficient technology-related skills is a key factor why many academics hesitate to use electronic forms of teaching that normally require a wide range of abilities. Some researchers in the field observed that "The academic staff often lack even basic IT skills and as a consequence feel ill-equipped to utilize these new technologies in their teaching and in the provision of learning support material" (Sosabowski et al., 1998: 4). Professor C emphasized this point as a discouraging factor against implementing elearning. He stated, "Well, I think some professors are not familiar with the advantages of this technology in the field of teaching. They do not want to learn new things and believe this technology is for the new generation." To acquire the necessary skills to build a web-based instructional project, faculty members need to learn the basics of web publishing, graphic

design, audio and video file management, and other related skills. If they do not have such skills, which is often the case, they have to make efforts to attend training sessions that can swallow up their time that the faculty can use to engage in other university-requested activities like publishing and committee meetings (Williams & Peters, 1997).

Such suggestions have been introduced in several previous studies. The problem of insufficient technical skills in building and maintaining web-based teaching materials, for example, can be eased through the provision of instructional support that has been considered a key factor for enhancing the level of technology-based education (Olcott & Wright, 1995). Instructional support "refers to the kind of support the institution provides for faculty members to develop and improve their instruction. It usually comes from people who have specialties in certain areas in which faculty members need training and assistance to conduct their teaching effectively" (Lee, 2001, p. 153). Instructional support is a basic part of the more comprehensive organizational support that higher education institutions offer. Previous research emphasized the relationship between how faculty members perceive the culture and climate of the organizational support and their attitude toward their job. It has been observed that that individuals' perception of organizational support is directly related to the level of their work motivation and commitment, which in turn can lead to improved job performance. Organizational support in the form of incentives was found crucial to motivate faculty members to engage in distance education (Jackson, 1994).

However, the university where the three professors work does not provide quality instructional support for elearning practitioners, which is a prominent discouraging factor. One of the suggested solutions for insufficient instructional support is that faculty members who have the necessary technical background help their colleagues and pool their expertise and resources. Professor C stated that "They [professors who avoid employing elearning as an instructional method] need to get involved in this field gradually. First, they have to teach a course which has been developed already by other colleagues for two or three semesters. Once they find it easy, they should get involved in the process of developing the course online." However, this can create a problem for faculty members who prefer to work alone. Besides, some academics think with the student mentality of 'just tell me what to do.' Well, there are no magic solutions to technology-related problems. A lack of interest and enthusiasm to develop the necessary skills make some faculty extremely dependent on others and accustomed to be spoon fed and told what to do (Williams & Peters, 1997).

A significant way to enhance the adoption and development of learning technologies is to address critical work-related issues, such as faculty motivation and IT skills and resources training, to overcome faculty reluctance to embrace learning technologies. Sosabowski et al. (1998) observed that faculty members who are not good at using tech in teaching tend to make an effort to develop some

technology-related skills to meet some administrative needs. More particularly, one of the critically encouraging or discouraging factors in the implementation of technology in teaching college students is whether or not the college policy considers teaching with technology an activity for which faculty should receive credit. Professors who work with technology have the problem of obtaining institutional recognition for their work.

The three surveyed professors have similar feelings that their employer failed to recognize and support their efforts with elearning. Professor A attributed the problem to the lack of understanding of the benefits of elearning. He stated, "almost all academic institutions in Saudi Arabia do not have the basic understanding of effective E-Learning. Hence, they do not provide the basic tools to support elearning." Professor B complained that UQU has not made enough effort to support or even recognize his endeavor in implementing elearning. He stated, "I think my employer has not noticed what I'm doing because elearning is not currently seriously on the agenda."

Higher education institutions have used rewards to motivate faculty to better productivity and higher performance. Reward systems include salary increases, fringe benefits, promotion and recognition. The incentives that higher education institutions offer and the activities they reward convey the organizational values of those institutions. The reluctance of faculty members to design and develop web-based instructional materials can be greatly reduced by offering appropriate incentives for such activities.

Accordingly, academics who are involved in web-based learning need their work to be recognized and supported. When higher education institutions fail to accommodate academics undertaking technology-based projects, those academics are discouraged and face a high degree of 'career risk' because "their innovative educational work caused them to turn aside from more conventionally recognized work tasks" and because the institutional reward systems in many colleges "are not in sync with alternative forms of delivery" (Wolcott, 1997, p. 17).

Conclusion

The implementation of elearning in the field of teaching English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia has encountered several problems. This paper has reviewed the perceptions of three Saudi college EFL professors on problems like insufficient technical skills that can prevent some professors from implementing elearning, the lack of motivation, the long time consumed when developing web-based materials, the reward system that doesn't give significant incentives for using technology in instruction. The suggestions that the three interviewed professors gave include providing academics with considerable instructional support, giving them encouraging incentives as a way to value their work, decreasing their workload, and taking their innovative work into account for

promotion and tenure. The interviewees contended that these suggested solutions to problems encountered when employing technology-based instruction aim to enhance teaching and facilitate the role of teachers so they are more capable of helping students to learn.

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