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CURRENT CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING ONLINE ESL WRITING COURSES

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ABSTRACT

Introducing and implementing online teaching methods naturally comes with its fair share of challenges in various forms and guises. These are in fact part and parcel of the process and teachers who intend to introduce online and other technical means of teaching to a context that is yet to be familiarized with these concepts should consider these difficulties prior to planning their lessons. This is a reflection paper on a previous study conducted to evaluate an ESL writing assisting tool jointly developed with the department of Computer Sciences. In the process, various challenges were predicted and documented. I have decided to thoroughly investigate the issues faced and if find out whether they were reported by other researchers working in similar contexts and from a wider perspective. The article describes these challenges, examines their potential negative impact on the learning process, and suggests feasible framework to overcome them.

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INTRODUCTION

Although technology in education is not a new concept to many learners nowadays given the emergence of the internet and social media platforms even in less developed countries, the same cannot be said to be true when it comes to technology in the language classroom everywhere. In this article, I will attempt to account for the challenges and difficulties I personally experienced when attempting to implement a new teaching approach in an ESL writing class in a Saudi university which included an added online tool that should in theory facilitate certain aspects of ESL writing. In this article, advantages of technology in education in general and ESL writing in particular will be investigated and related to my context. This will be followed by developing a theoretical framework which takes into account all of these challenges and the objectives of integrating technology into ESL writing classes. Such a framework is developed with reference to the particular needs of the educational context on which an earlier experiment involving using an online educational software was carried out.

Literature Review: Advantages and Challenges of Technology in ESL Writing

Technology in education in general has been steadily growing all over the world. (Marek, 2009) In fact, the overwhelming majority of research reported that students positively viewed technology in their classes and they genuinely believe they felt more engaged and involved in the process of learning (Lai, Zhao and Wang 2011) The literature is equally abundant with examples of implementing various and diverse ESL writing programs in both developed and developing settings. One common theme in writing classes these days are online blogs and online writing courses. According to Kim (2004), there is a growing pressure on departments all over the world to offer online writing courses. This comes at the expense of limited pedagogies that underlie effective ways to respond to students' drafts. There is also a question about teacher-student communication online especially when more than one instructor responds to students' writing. According to Kim (ibid), students may become increasingly concerned about diminishing conventional response such as handwritten comments on drafts and face-to-face comments on writing. It must be acknowledged that despite the pressure to offer online writing courses, they are not without their challenges, more than concerns teacher-student conventional communication noted above.

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Gouge (2009) for instance mentions that computer technology in humanist disciplines including ESL composition distills boredom and fear among experts for the fundamental yet consistent fear of technology and what it brings to the mix, i.e. the time, attention and other valuable resources that need to be put in classes. This seems to be a never-ending complaint even in contexts with rigorous and long-established technology advances in educational backgrounds as in the US in Gouge's case. She nevertheless still acknowledges the need for all composition professionals to pay attention to the relationship between technology and literacy in the US.

appealing to many learners who value privacy, this very feature in fact contravenes the principles of communicative language learning where more interaction between the classroom members is always encouraged. Gouge (2009) believes that technology should not structure our writing programs even if these programs were restructured to incorporate the best uses of new technologies. It seems that many writing teachers still have legitimate concerns about the amount of work and time required as well as the potential outcome of such a radical move toward technology especially when traditional classrooms seem to be effective.

The screenshot displays the SUCCINCT Online Collocation Checker interface. At the top left is the SUCCINCT logo and the text 'Online Collocation Checker.'. Navigation links for 'Home', 'About Us', and 'Contact Us' are in the top right. A 'User Login' section on the right contains input fields for 'User Name' and 'Password', a 'SIGN IN' button, and links for 'Sign up' and 'forget password'. A 'SEARCH SECTION' in the middle features a text input field 'Please enter sentence' and a 'Check' button. Below this is a 'SEARCH OPTIONS' section with radio buttons for 'General Search' (Bing, Google) and 'Academic Sources Only' (Jstor, Google Scholar). An 'Advanced Options' section includes 'Other search Website' (yahoo, msn) and 'Other Domains' (.edu, .com, .uk, .sa). Annotations with arrows point to the 'User Login' section, the 'SEARCH OPTIONS' section, and the 'Advanced Options' section, with text boxes explaining their functions.

Warschauer (2002) study which reviews a teacher education development program known as Computers in English Language Teaching, funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and conducted in Egypt display similar findings. The investigates the role of technology and computer in language classrooms from this perspective which in many ways are parallel to that of the Saudi context in terms of linguistic background and access. Warschauer argues that a developmental approach is critical in the success of technology in language education programs. the study nonetheless acknowledges that Technology in education promotes many virtues within a language classroom including autonomous learning, collaborative learning and development of language learning strategies. However, Wrigley (1993) points out that although most online teaching programs do indeed promote autonomous learning and that makes them

Any introduction of an online program must take these concerns into consideration. Although the literature may view technology as an added or optional tool to assist language learning, research indicate that many students viewed technology as a critical added value to language education. Students who are engaged in technology-intensive language classrooms acquire both language skills as well as information and communication abilities.(Warschauer, 2002). Another traditional challenge of implementing technology in ESL composition is infrastructure and subsequently access. Gouge (2009) for example admits that sociopolitical background of certain educational contexts even within relatively advanced and prosperous countries like the US do affect students' access to computers and the internet. From ESL teachers' perspective, Baecher (2012) mentions the following challenges in ESL classes, lack of instructional time, wide variability in academic

and English needs, and the time spent on placement, testing and compliance of the program with mandates. Teachers also reported being overwhelmed by the low levels of literacy and the high academic demands from their respective authorities. All the above mentioned challenges are true in the case of this study. In fact, the formal non-academic tasks teachers are required to do in order to implement any new teaching methodology can act as a deterrent since it is particularly time and labor consuming, a point asserted by Baecher (2012) and Gouge (2009) among others.

A Proposed Implementation Framework

The literature suggests that students should be encouraged as early as possible to integrate and internalize various types of online and distance education programs in the modern language classroom. This is apparently the ideal solution to a problem that may have causes other than students' access to computers and the internet which is the case in this study. Gouge (2009) and Baecher (2012), having accounted for the reasons that make many traditional composition teachers object to a dramatic shift toward implementing a technology-based classroom proposes what she calls a 'hybrid' program which incorporates traditional campus-based writing program structures with a significant portion of the course being completed online. This solution minimizes objection to dramatic change in writing classes while benefit learners and professionals alike from the advantages of technology. The increasing use of relatively simple electronic tools such as emails, discussion boards and blogs, in everyday interaction with the internet can have an effect on ESL writing classes and should equally affect students' perception of implementing an online writing courses at a more tech-savvy level. This in fact is an advantage of the Internet that ESL teachers should try to utilize.

The literature also suggest that an overreliance on autonomous learning may jeopardize the very principles of communicative learning. (Wrigley, 1993) On balance, teachers should try to maintain a communicative aspect in their ESL writing classes while giving their students the opportunity to benefit from autonomous and interactive learning by implementing technological advances. With all the challenges and disadvantages of technology in ESL writing resonating in mind, the software developed is merely an assisting tool rather than a goal in itself. We identified certain aspects of ESL writing that are not covered by traditional teaching and learning methods and proposed a technology-based solution. Learners tend to use certain words in phrases and collocations randomly as long as they have similar meanings in their first language. This can be categorized under collocations or idiomatic language but there are no clear rules governing combing these words. A specialized search engine which acts like an advanced form of concordances and corpora was developed and tested (See Grami and Alkazemi, 2016). The following graph is a screenshot of the actual tool developed. In implementing the software in actual ESL writing classes, we experienced almost all of the challenges mentioned in the literature.

Our approach to tackle them was gradual and slow, a virtue which may not be present in every writing class but it seems the best solution to implement any new approach. We came to the conclusion that despite all the proven advantages of online learning tools, they are after all assisting tools better at targeting specific points rather than the main objective.

Conclusion

The literature indicates that technology in education - including in writing classes - has many positive and desired attributes including autonomous learning and the ability to receive customized feedback as well as giving teachers the chance to respond to and document individual needs of their students. However, the literature also mentions many challenges in implementing technology-based curriculum especially the amount of time and effort required. Researchers also suggested that technology should not shape our curriculum but we, as ESL teachers, should design our classes in a way that allow for successful integration of technology. There is no one simple clearly defined approach that fits all writing classes, teachers should assess their students' needs and use available technology to enhance the learning experience as effectively as possible. The experiment carried out to test and evaluate a assisting ESL writing tool was very informative. However, it must be also acknowledged that time and effort had to be devoted to implement such a new concept.

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