GUIDELINES FOR INTERNET-BASED TEACHING

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Abstract

This paper presents clear pedagogical guidelines for using the Internet in TESOL by drawing on the key findings of a case study carried out in 2004-5 at Intercollege (http://www.intercollege.ac.cy/) Nicosia, Cyprus. The case study described how ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teachers endeavoured to utilize the Internet in their language classes in an ICT (Information and Communications Technology) language laboratory.

1. Introduction

In this paper I will discuss some key background literature on the Internet (section 2) and outline the methods' orientation of this case-study research (section 3). A sample of teacher interview data in section 4 provides evidence of the way teacher attitudes changed negatively during the study. In section 5 I assert that lack of sound pedagogy was the principal reason why teachers' attitudes changed and in section 6 I provide some practical pedagogical guidelines for teachers wishing to use the Internet. Examples of how these guidelines might be operationalised are presented in section 7.

2. Background literature

The Internet being mainly a free resource is increasingly being used in TESOL, and the exponential growth of ESOL websites is, I suppose, a testament to how important the Internet has become. Yet realising the potential of this exciting and constantly expanding medium is not a straightforward undertaking.

There seems to be disagreement in the literature regarding the effectiveness of the Internet. Appertaining to the effectiveness of the Internet, a lot of contemporary Internet-germane literature appears to be advancing the claim that Internet-use is advantageous for learning. Frey (2002: 1-4) for instance states that the Internet is awash with activities that offer many new ways of teaching and learning, and asserts that even the most Luddite of university scholars now realise the potential applications of technology. By means of illustration Morrison (2002: 1-7) holds that the wealth of information available on the Web affords teachers and learners access to language learning resources like never before. John de Szendeffy (1998: 1-4) holds the belief that "no matter what you think of the World Wide Web as a teaching resource, it will play a grand role in the education of your students".

There is, however, a growing research consensus that appears somewhat *sceptical* apropos Internet classroom usage. Warschauer (2003: 1-2) has the opinion that the introduction of computers, "the flashy or gleaming new machine in the classroom", and the Internet in the eyes of its supporters has represented the pinnacle of modernity yet the bold promises made by its proponents were very often followed by erratic and disappointing diffusion. In addition, Warschauer (2003: 1-2) holds the belief that there has certainly been no shortage of bold claims about how computers will revolutionise the classroom, transforming the teacher from the stereotypic *cliché*, "sage on the stage" to the new and equally hackneyed "guide on the side". Moreover Warschauer (2003: 1-2) asserts that there is a 'belief' that learners will become 'autonomous' and 'goal-directed', classrooms will become centres of "collaborative and critical" inquiry, and technology will have finally transformed schools to match the needs of the information society.

A lot of Internet-relevant literature also asserts that there is lack of sound Internet pedagogy (the word appears to be used in a *method-of-teaching* sense). Wood (1999: 1) for instance, provides an overview of Internet sites that could be helpful in the ESOL classroom. He deems that a preponderance pedagogical books, articles, and 'exhortations' about the educational significance of the Internet often turn out to be little more than lengthy lists of Web page addresses (URLs). It is held by Wood (1999: 1) that "what is often missing from the huge array of Internet materials for pedagogic purposes is any clear identification of the new pedagogical opportunities that the Internet offers". Wood, in my opinion, appears to be bringing forward the idea that there is a lack of advice on how to use such Internet sites. Kuechler (1996) and LeLoup and Ponterio (2000), however, appear to be postulating that teachers using the Web have to make use of their skills/knowledge. The implication being that this is demanding and may not necessarily lead to higher levels of learning and teaching. Kuechler (1996) holds that "the use of modern information technology in college teaching should be driven by the pedagogical imagination of the instructor" and that "more toys (more sophisticated hardware) will not necessarily make better classes". LeLoup and Ponterio (2000: 5-6) hold that ultimately it is incumbent upon foreign language teachers to integrate the Internet into the curriculum in a pedagogically sound and meaningful way.

3. About the case study

The global research aim of the case study was to describe and interpret the key issues six Intercollege ESOL teachers faced over a five-to-seven-month period using the Internet. The global research aim also had two associated strands: firstly, to analyse how and/or why such issues affected teacher awareness of using the Internet and secondly, to determine how such issues might be addressed. In this research it was the teacher who was the focus of the study, and the purpose was to analyse qualitatively through semi-structured interviews carried out at one-to-two-month intervals how teacher awareness changed. Other data were also used to inform teacher interviews; these data were derived from a student questionnaire, follow-up structured student interviews, a teacher-student classroom observation, a semi-structured interview with the Head of the Languages Department and sample of teachers' Internet lessons. As this research was a case study within an interpretative paradigm, it was held that the research paradigm would suggest discovering and interpreting the personal stories.

The issues that were addressed in the data analysis were grounded in the research data. Data were collected comprehensively with an open mind, and as the study progressed data were continually examined for patterns. Key themes were ascertained from the data first and then a link was established, if possible, with issues discussed in the literature. Moreover, no assumption was made that data would pertain conveniently to one issue; rather, it was held that some data might correlate to several issues. In order to identify key hypotheses to be analysed further, an analysis of how teacher opinion changed during the interview period was undertaken. A key theme that emerged during the study and discernible in all the data was teachers becoming increasingly *alive* to the implications of certain drawbacks of Internet-ESOL lab use. Teachers in their first interview had initially appeared mainly positive about Internet use, however as interviews progressed they seemed to have more jaundiced attitudes. Initial teacher enthusiasm about using the Internet resonated with literature on the attractions of Internet as a teaching resource, as exemplified in, Frey (2002: 1-4), Morrison (2002 1-7). Yet, the heightened teacher awareness regarding perceived drawbacks of using the Internet in subsequent interviews (i.e. attitudinal changes) applied to literature on scepticism about Internet use e.g. Warschauer (2003: 1-2).

4. Sample of interview data

The data sample below provides an example of teacher attitudinal change. The transcript code below comprises three parts: (1) interviewee teacher number (T1 to T6); (2) semi-structured interview number (1 to 4); (3) interview question number (numbers ranged from 1 to 30). The italics followed by a transcript code are the actual words used by the teacher.

4.1. Teacher one sample data

The way negative student comments about lab-lessons presented in the account below had changed T1's ostensibly enthusiastic initial outlook to a more critical and less animated stance, point to what T1 had been doing in the lab (i.e. her Internet lesson pedagogy) may have militated against her students' language-learning expectations. This hypothesis resonates with Laurillard (2002: 202). Asserted lack of appreciation from students for the time T1 had put into preparing lessons also may have raised critical awareness.

In her first interview, which was undertaken a few weeks after using the lab for the first time, T1 seemed to be 'ablaze' with enthusiasm about using the Internet. For instance, she stated that she had felt the lab was a *very good alternative to traditional face-to-face teaching, especially at the end of the semester* (T1/1/06). She held that she *loves using the lab* (T1/1/09) and said that she was *very excited about using it* (T1/1/09). She 'pontificated' that *the variety of Internet exercises available can help to address students' different learning styles* (T1/1/10) and that her students *enjoyed using the lab* (T1/1/12). Moreover, she seemed to be 'selling out' as a 'traditional' ESOL teacher when she deliberated over the benefits of using the lab in comparison to the then 'seemingly passé' non-ICT classroom. For example she expressed the view that: *instead of me giving the exercises out, the Web sites do it. They are given the answers. It builds up autonomous learning; they don't need the teacher. We teachers are so vain we want to be the ones that transmit knowledge* (T1/1/11-13). She also mentioned using the Internet helped her to teach her students language and computer skills i.e. *things that they are going to use for the rest*

of their lives (T1/1/08). However, approximately two months later in interview 2, there was a feeling that the 'novelty factor' might have been 'wearing off' and that her students had appeared critical of Internet lesson materials i.e. she changed tact: *The first time it was exciting for them, now some of them say that they feel the teacher is lazy because they are doing the work and the teacher sits and monitors them, they don't realise that I have spent three to four hours preparing the lesson* (T1/02/07).

In interview 3, about two months after interview 2, there was more qualitative negative feedback. This was epitomised in T1's third interview i.e. when asked what kind of feedback she had been getting from her students regarding her lessons, she responded: *Some of my students are especially outspoken, they feel it's a waste of time* (T1/3/01). By interview 4 (i.e. carried out about one month after interview 3), T1 stated, with regard to the twenty percent of students who stated in the questionnaire that they had liked using the Internet a little or not at all, that: *maybe they don't like using the computer for language learning, it's a huge percentage, so it would affect me, I would tend to use it less* (T1/4/02).

5. What caused raised awareness of the drawbacks of Internet?

Teachers' Internet lessons and observation data provided a precious data source that enabled me to assert that pedagogical development lies at the heart of Internet use. In this context it implies incorporating elements of traditional non-ICT and ICT teaching i.e. using the Internet as a 'tool' for learning. Moreover it is my interpretation that teachers' inability to use more appropriate Internet pedagogy was the most likely cause of teacher perceived student rejection, teacher hesitancy regarding being able to measure student improvement and teacher raised awareness of the drawbacks of Internet usage.

6. Discussion

Below I present some hands-on practical guidelines derived from the case study for teachers wishing to use the Internet (possibly in an ICT language lab) and then give some lesson examples of how these guidelines could be observed.

6.1. Have clear lesson aims and then look for suitable sites: *don't get caught in the Web*

Have aims that are perspicuously reflected in lesson materials; not stating lesson aims might be confusing for students. Even though, this may, at first sight appear obvious advice to any teacher, teachers preparing Internet lessons may lose sight of this seemingly fundamental TESOL lesson-planning principle. This could be a consequence and drawback of using the Internet. Also, consider to what degree your lesson aims determine the sites chosen and to what extent lesson sites have determined lesson aims. With regard to the latter, a weakness of this approach is that unsuitable sites may be used as a basis for determining lesson aims and teachers may lose sight of how to inextricably link sites to course content.

6.2. Explain to students how their Internet lesson will relate to their course in general: *don't lose sight of this fundamental TESOL principle*

Teachers should tangibly relate Internet lesson materials to college exams/tests; in this way teachers might be more able to measure attainment. This guideline is particularly important if teachers intend to use the Internet regularly. A possible outcome of not perceiving a higher rate of language acquisition is it increases teachers' awareness of the drawbacks of using the ESOL Internet. Moreover, students may want to see a clear connection between what they do in their Internet lessons and on what they will be tested. Also, relate the Internet lesson to the course in general. Windeatt *et al*. (2002: 11) for instance hold, with regard to post-Internet-lesson-lab work, that 'anything done in the computer room should be transferable back to the normal classroom'. Moreover, Windeatt *et al*. maintain (2002: 11) that students should have something physical to take away with them so that they have a record for follow-up work or end-of-course revision. Students therefore may need hard-copy lesson handouts as well as electronic-version handouts to accompany their Internet use.

6.3. Use technology to reinforce existing practice: *students want a teacher to teach them, they don't want a guide on the side*

Technology should be used in a way that reinforces existing non-ICT practice i.e. the teacher should remain *the teacher* and not become just *the facilitator*. Moreover, why should teachers relinquish their age-old role? Internet lessons that have the highest potential for learning are probably where teachers have a planned amalgam of non-ICT and ICT roles, and students have timed chunks of autonomous ICT study. The content of the non-ICT part of the lesson should relate clearly to the ICT part. Introducing autonomous learning without addressing the learning experience and expectations of students may lead to a degree of student resistance i.e. students may expect to be taught traditionally, and so may not identify with being *autonomous* learners. Furthermore, relying wholly on interactive, self-correcting ESOL Internet activities may lead to a compromise of teachers' control/regulation of the lesson i.e. maybe students expect to be controlled/monitored by the teacher and not the Internet.

Another argument for combining traditional with ICT, is the possibility of unreliable Internet connection i.e. this may rationalise the need to incorporate non-ICT elements in lessons. If there is no or very slow Internet (site) connection, the teacher would not have to cancel the lesson, she could concentrate on the non-ICT lesson elements. Finally, a lot of ESOL Internet activities seem to be narrowing the foreign language curriculum to mainly grammar and vocabulary practice. However, the main drive of non-Internet related foreign language curricula is to broaden the scope of activity by engaging with communication and intercultural learning. This was a strong argument to consider combining ICT and non-ICT teaching. Combing ICT with non-ICT is in accord with Albaugh (1997 stated in Jones 2004: 17) who attaches weight to teachers tending to "adopt a new technology when that technology helps them to do what they are currently doing better".

6.4. Choose suitable sites level-wise and topic-wise: *if you're not critical of the site content, your students will be critical*

Finding suitable course-relevant Internet lesson sites can be a difficult undertaking. Godwin-Jones (1999: 12-16) for instance holds the opinion that a troublesome issue with Internet-use is locating desirable websites that are appropriate in terms of language level, media format, interest and reliable information. Furthermore, it will be very time consuming to search/choose suitable lesson sites and prepare lesson handouts in Word or PowerPoint format. Teachers should always pre-screen sites sufficiently well to prepare pro-actively for student questions, and if necessary teach something. This also suggests that teachers should not relinquish their traditional *deliverer-of-content* role. Unfortunately, there seems to be a lack of ESOL-publisher editorial support i.e. there is a dearth of appropriately pre-screened textbook-complementary ESOL-Internet exercises. Also, try to find sites with comparable vocabulary to which the students have been exposed in their non-ICT classes. One drawback of some interactive sites is that students may not be doing them properly e.g. students can find the answer to sites without reading anything. Windeatt *et al*. (2000: 10) state referring to Internet usage, that in some cases, before beginning an activity on the computer, it will be necessary to pre-teach vocabulary, or a specific function or structure. Long lists of ESOL resources do not seem to help teachers much. This suggests that teachers require more than just categorised hand-picked Internet lists or lists of well-known ESOL homepages; teachers need effective pedagogical guidance on how to use the Internet materials.

6.5. How many sites should an Internet lesson have? How much time should a student spend on each site? *Find the balance*

Timing and sequencing of Internet-site materials is an important and complex lesson-planning issue.

- Do not rely on one lesson site just in case it does not work; use several reliable sites.
- Do not use too many sites; this encourages students to rush through the sites working less conscientiously. Having fewer sites and more teacher interaction (i.e. more non-ICT teaching) might lead to better teacher control over the regulation of learning.
- Beware of ELT-game sites; students will be drawn to game sites when they should be doing other tasks.
- Have a set of core Internet exercises for weaker students and additional exercises for students that finish earlier. Even though teachers have to devise ways of dealing with less able students in the non-ICT classroom, teachers may need more time to pre-screen and organise Internet materials so as to know which sites should be core for all students to cover, and which ones ought to be additional for more able students.

7. Practical application of guidelines

Sharing teacher lesson materials may be an efficacious way to reduce long-term training and support; in accord with Boshuizen and Wopereis (2003, 149), Potter and Mellar (2000, 35), Coles *et al*. (2000, 173). This also suggests that an *ancillary* role of a lab-coordinator should embrace monitoring teacher innovation and circulating effectual lesson plans to other teachers. Therefore an innovative example of how the above guidelines might be operationalised is

available on http://www.englishlab.intercol.edu/internetlessons/ (click '*an example of sound Internet pedagogy'*). Seven Internet lessons are also available on the site below NB these lessons are suitable for approximately beginner to lower-intermediate level. These lessons were written by Katarzyna Rysiewicz from Intercollege (http://www.englishlab.intercol.edu/internetlessons/).

Conclusion

As our understanding of how to use the Internet gets better, and more research findings are disseminated, the way we use it will improve. Internet use therefore may lead to enhanced learning, and this would fundamentally rationalise its use and future development. Moreover, it is doubtful that the use of the Internet in TESOL will be a 'passing fad': it is highly likely that *things will get better* i.e. technology use will improve as technological innovations worldwide are made. This would necessitate and vindicate a more committed approach from schools or colleges who may not be able to achieve learning/financial targets without it.

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