EXPLORING THE USE OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY IN EFL TEACHING:
A CASE STUDY OF PRIMARY EDUCATION
IN THE SOUTH REGION OF ECUADOR

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Abstract

This study explores the use of educational technology for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) at 10 state schools in the South of Ecuador. It aims to find out the current state of the use of technology in English classrooms. The research combines both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather information about the use of technology in the teaching-learning process. The main instruments applied were teachers' and students' surveys and observation sheets. One hundred and fifty students and fifteen teachers took part in the surveys and were observed once a week during a period of four months.

The findings confirm that technology is not commonly used in state schools of the south region of Ecuador or, if used, it is not adequately applied. For this reason, in order to develop students' performance of all four language skills it is necessary to integrate technology tools combined with appropriate teaching strategies in EFL classrooms.

Key words: EFL teaching; educational technology; Ecuadorian primary education.

1. Introduction

The development of new technologies has extended many opportunities in assisting language learning at all levels of education, especially through the use of Web 2.0, which implies that information is meant to be shared (Pelet, 2014). In fact, technology is widely used nowadays in order to improve the education system at all levels, which means that its effective use, combined with professional learning, can promote and enhance collaboration in foreign language teaching. However, in some developing countries such as Ecuador, the use of educational technology still needs to be explored in order to take advantage of the enormous benefits that it provides in the teaching-learning process.

Considering the great importance of English learning worldwide, the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education (2014) established new regulations for teaching English as a compulsory subject in the curriculum of public and private schools starting in 2016. In addition, technology plays an important role in the educational field; hence, it is indispensable to conduct research into the quality of English language teaching at this level, especially into the use of technological tools to be applied in the classroom.

This study will explore the use of educational technology in EFL teaching, particularly YouTube videos, Padlet, podcasts and Prezi, which are commonly applied by English teachers in order to develop students' language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) because of their free access and the facilities they provide to users. According to Kasapoglu-Akyol (2010), the use of technological tools is very important because EFL students who use the Internet for searching for information and communication purposes usually get better academic results.

In this concern, the purpose of this study is to find out the current situation of the use of technology in English classrooms to remark that a clear diagnosis about the use of technology will help educators become more familiar with the significant role it plays in the teaching-learning process. Additionally, the use of instructional technology will allow teachers to have more dynamic and interactive EFL classes as well as students to be better prepared for this ever-changing world that we live in.

2. Literature review

2.1. Integrating technology in education

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are very important in the field of education because they can change the environment of the classroom and allow the subject matter to become more accessible to the learner (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). For this reason, EFL teachers must decide how - and how not - to use technology in the classroom (Morgan, 2008). In this regard, integrating technology into classroom instruction involves more than just teaching computer skills, it demands that educators look for means of innovation in order to encourage students' engagement and build up their learning; therefore, one way to accomplish this important aim is the use of instructional technology in an effective way.

Some theoretical and empirical studies have been carried out to confirm that the use of ICTs in the teaching and learning process is crucial. It has been demonstrated that the use of technology motivates students' interest in the contents to be studied (Mayora, 2006, as cited

in Ilter, 2009). In this concern, Ilter (2009 p. 136) states that "technology might be one of the factors that affect students' attitude positively in the teaching-learning process". Furthermore, according to O'Dwyer, Russell, Bebell, and Tucker-Seeley (2005), technology allows students to develop critical thinking skills, high levels of understanding and solve problems.

Technology and English language education are very closely related (Singhal, 1997). If we go back to the past, various educational institutions used to provide classes in language laboratories that enabled learners to implement technology devices where teachers monitored students' interaction. Although the use of technology was very positive in the learning process, it slowly became unattractive and boring (Singhal, 1997). Currently, the use of technology in the classroom has opened up new possibilities for language education through the web generations that positively contribute to the teaching-learning process. The first one developed was Web 1.0, which was used to send messages through a unidirectional system (Ban & Summers, 2010). Later, Web 2.0 opened a platform that allowed interaction, collaboration and better communication. Nowadays, Web 3.0 offers the possibility to search for required information in an organized way; it also suggests other content related to the proposed topic (Miranda, Gualtieri & Coccia, 2010).

Different technological tools are applied to help English language students improve their learning skills. The tools that are worth mentioning comprise English language learning websites, Computer-Assisted Language Learning programs, presentation software, electronic dictionaries, chatting and email messaging programs, CD-players, and learning video-clips (Nomass, 2013). The positive outcomes of the tools listed above can only be possible with appropriate methodology and teachers' management applied in the classroom.

2.2. Advantages and disadvantages of the use of technology in EFL teaching

Nowadays, the use of technology in the classroom becomes a necessity in learning a foreign language because of the benefits that both teachers and students can obtain during the teaching and learning process. For that reason, teachers of English as a foreign language need to improve their way of teaching in order to catch students' attention. In this context, it can be said that for every advantage technology brings, it also shows some disadvantages at the same time (Riasati, Allahyar & Tan, 2012).

Through a variety of communicative and interactive activities, effective use of technology can help foreign language learners strengthen their linguistic skills and learning attitude, as well as build their self-instruction strategies and self-confidence (Lai & Kritsonis, 2006). In this concern, Dudeney and Hockly (2008) mention that technology is significant in

the EFL classroom because it provides new ways of practising language and endorses students' performance. In addition, Barani, Mazandarani, and Rezaie (2010) also explain that through the use of media teachers have the chance to expose students to multiple input sources and can enrich their language learning experience instead of becoming dependent on their teacher's dialect or idiolect.

On the other hand, Abunowara (2016) declares that there are some disadvantages teachers face when using technology in the EFL classroom. One of them is that it takes time and involves making a big effort to look for authentic materials since teachers need to spend time learning constantly, changing software programs and trying to find effective ways of using new technology. In addition, some students are unable to gain access to technology (Kruse, 2001b; as cited in O'Donoghue et al., 2004). For this reason, Lai and Kritsonis (2006) state that it is necessary that both teachers and students should have at least basic technological knowledge before using it in order to assist language teaching and learning.

Despite the advantages and disadvantages that the use of technology may generate, EFL teachers should know that they need technology in order to serve digital natives in a more meaningful and comprehensive way (Merç, 2015).

3. Study

3.1. Participants and methodology

The total number of participants involved were 150 students and 15 teachers; all Spanish native speakers from 10 state schools. The students involved in this study ranged in age from 10 to 12 years old, which denotes primary education in the Ecuadorian educational system. The participants were observed once a week over a period of four months. Students' English level was quite heterogeneous since some students had the opportunity to take extra hours.

The qualitative and quantitative approaches were applied to analyze teachers' and students' perceptions related to the use of technology in the EFL classroom as well as to determine the tool with the highest frequency of use. For this purpose, the main instruments were teachers and students' surveys and observation sheets that included open-ended and close-ended questions, which were used in order to collect data about the frequency of technology use in the teaching-learning process.

In addition, English classes were observed in order to explore the use of technological tools and see how they were applied by English teachers in their lessons as well as to find out the facilities available at the institutions that participated in this study.

After gathering the data, they were tabulated using Excel tables and then analyzed in order to obtain statistics about the real situation that Ecuador has been facing for the recent years regarding the use of technologies in EFL teaching.

3.2. Results and discussion

3.2.1. Teacher technology use

The results obtained from the teachers and students' surveys are shown and analyzed below.

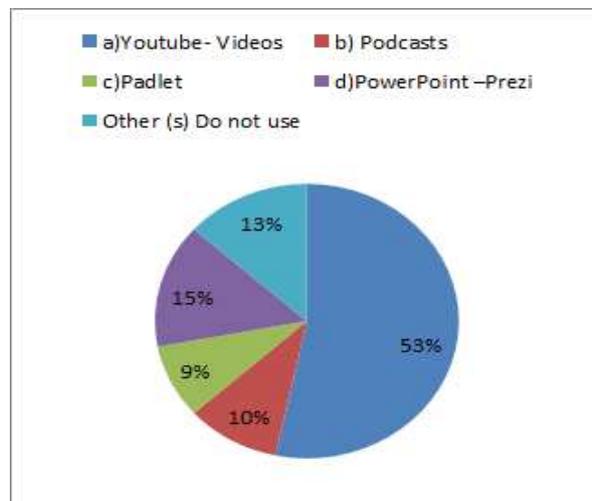Table 1. Use of technology for teaching English as a foreign language

	Students	%	Teachers	%
YES	19	13%	5	33.3%
NO	131	87%	10	66.7%
TOTAL	**150**	**100%**	**15**	**100**

Table 1 indicates the percentage of the use of technology for teaching English as a foreign language according to the teachers and students' perceptions. It was found out that the majority of both students and teachers do not use technology in the classroom because the institution does not provide them with enough technological material and teachers are not sufficiently trained to use it on daily basis. This aspect may affect students' performance during the academic year, which demonstrates that teachers have been using traditional teaching approaches that may slow down the development of communicative competence in the target language.

Additionally, only a third of teachers mentioned that they use technology to teach English lessons once a week because they can see more effectiveness in the teaching-learning process and just a limited number of them indicated that they incorporate technology in their lessons with a frequency of two or three months. In this context, it was observed that teachers who applied technology in their lessons had to use an English lab that provided only basic technological programs with no Internet connection.

The aforementioned results significantly affect the quality of language learning because sound use of technology can increase and develop students' outcomes, self-esteem and attitude (Lei & Zhao, 2007). In addition, the educational process can be more productive if technology is effectively used in the classroom.

Figure 1. Technological tools used in the English classroom

As regards the types of technological tools used in the English classrooms, students mentioned that the most popular ones used with high frequency by teachers were YouTube-based videos (53.17%). Other tools that were commonly used were PowerPoint and Prezi presentations (15%), while podcasts and Padlet were far less popular. These results were corroborated by teachers' opinions, in which YouTube videos were the most popular tools used during the lessons because students considered them very motivating for learning English as a foreign language. According to Hamilton (2010), videos help to catch students' interest since the majority of EFL learners are featured by native speakers offering different dialects and accents that help students improve the listening and speaking skills.

The results mentioned above tend to demonstrate that teachers show poor knowledge of other types of technological tools or little enthusiasm about making the class more attractive for students. In addition, teachers are not aware of the benefits of using podcasts, Padlet or Prezi in the classroom. By extension, it implies that they are not trained in this field and they do not see the contribution of technology to make classes more interesting. Using podcasting in language education in both theory and practice provides many advantages because it can help teachers enhance students' English skills. In this regard, Rosell-Aguilar (2007) remarks that podcasting can support principles promoted by different theories of learning, such as the use of authentic materials, informal and lifelong learning, the use of learning objects and just-in-time teaching. Furthermore, students improve their pronunciation, listening and speaking abilities and become more aware of cross-cultural customs (Stanley, 2006; Lee, 2009, Powel, 2006). Another technological tool that can be used in the EFL

classroom is Padlet, which can help teachers provoke students to eager participation with authentic, stimulating, and motivating content (Baida, 2014). However, this important device has been underused as it is shown in Figure 1.

Table 2. Perception of effectiveness of the use of technology to improve English language knowledge

	Students	**%**
YES	134	89%
NO	16	11%
TOTAL	150	**100%**

When students were asked about their perception of effectiveness of the usage of technological tools to improve English language proficiency, almost 90% considered them really productive for their learning process; they also affirmed that through the use of technology they can achieve better academic results.

Teachers likewise confirm that the application of technology in the classroom is extremely important for students to improve their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills at a higher level. In fact, the use of technology also makes the lessons more efficient (Kasapoglu-Akyol, 2010).

3.2.2. Students' and teachers' perceptions of technology use

Most students claimed that they are not afraid of working with technology; in fact, they would welcome its usage. They also pointed out that technology allows them immediate access to information, which facilitates the learning process inside and outside the classroom.

When teachers were asked to express their feelings regarding this aspect, some of them mentioned that they avoid applying technological tools because they consider them difficult to use; this fact was confirmed while observing the English lessons, during which teachers were struggling with the basic devices that the institution provided. For this reason, they would like to be trained in the use of educational technological tools in order to feel more competent as educators. In order to do so, teachers need to deepen their knowledge on how to use technology in order to integrate it in the teaching process (Almerich et al., 2016), otherwise, they will not be able to implement it in their daily educational practice (BuabengAndoh, 2012; Guzman & Nussbaum, 2009; Kabakci Yurdakul & Coklar, 2014;

Markauskaite, 2007; Okojie, Olinzock, & Okojie-Boulder, 2006; Wastiau et al., 2013, as cited in Almerich et al., 2016).

4. Conclusions and recommendations for the future

This paper has attempted to present the current situation of the use of technology in English classrooms in the south region of Ecuador. The findings of this case study show that teachers do not use technological tools to teach English because they do not have enough facilities to incorporate them in the EFL classroom. As a consequence, they use traditional methods that do not have such great impact on students' performance.

Teachers show poor knowledge of other types of technological tools and little enthusiasm to make their English classes more attractive for students. In fact, the main resource used in the classroom is the student's textbook, which demonstrates their preference for traditional printed material.

YouTube-based videos, Power Point and Prezi presentations were the most common tools used by teachers in their English classes, while podcasts and Padlet were applied much less frequently even though they offer great opportunities in the teaching-learning process.

Students feel motivated and interested in using the technological tools in classrooms in general because they enable them to learn more effectively according to their individual needs in an interactive way and, therefore, students' curiosity arises. Additionally, technology provides teachers and students with a dynamic learning process; however, they do not take full advantage of it.

Technological tools are recommended to be used by teachers as supplementary resources because thanks to them students can learn the English language more easily; additionally, effective use of technology gives teachers the opportunity to show students how thousands of activities and games bring dynamics and fun into the classroom.

More training for teachers in how to use technological tools for teaching English as a foreign language is needed because in this way the traditional teaching process will be replaced by more dynamic, interactive and collaborative approaches.

Educational institutions should provide teachers with sufficient technological devices in order to get the expected academic results, which will inspire both students and teachers to participate more actively in the teaching-learning process.

When planning lessons based on technological tools, it is highly recommended that teachers consider students' level, age, contents, learning styles and teaching methods to develop their English skills. In this regard, free and user-friendly software programs such as

Padlet and Prezi are recommended for improving reading and writing skills, while podcasts and YouTube are suitable for development of listening and speaking skills in a fast, simple, and productive way.

Finally, more effective educational interventions are needed in the EFL classrooms because in this way the potential of educational technology to support the teaching learning process can be deeply researched.

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