

The Role of Internet Technology in EFL Syllabus Design

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ABSTRACT— *The increasing use of technology, in addition to internet based learning and teaching has created a significant change in traditional language classrooms and inevitably in language syllabus. When making practical decisions about syllabus design, the possible factors that affect the teachability of a particular syllabus such as technologisation should be taken into consideration. It has been pointed out that material, learner, and teacher are decisive factors in a language syllabus design and implementation. In this paper the role of internet technology in modifying and affecting EFL syllabus design in the light of these factors will be investigated. It is argued that internet technology can provide diversified authentic EFL material which in turn motivates learners and enables teachers to create a non-traditional teaching atmosphere.*

Keywords— Technology, internet, syllabus, authenticity, e learning

1. INTRODUCTION

In the global era of the informational society, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) programmes and internet technology have become indispensable equipment and influential constituent in second/foreign language learning pedagogy. Various related studies pointed out the importance of computer and internet technology in creating collaborative and independent learning environments (e.g., Kung, 2002; Taylor& Gitsaki, 2003). Additionally, as an active stimulus for second/foreign language learning, Lee (2002) has argued that computer technology should be applied in language learning since it can offer students more learning motivation, enhance students' achievement, increase authentic material for study, foster teacher-student interaction, consider the individual needs and promote global understanding. The increasing use of technology, in addition to internet based learning and teaching have created a significant change in traditional language classrooms and inevitably in language syllabus. When making practical decisions about syllabus design, the possible factors that affect the teachability of a particular syllabus such as technologisation should be taken into consideration. Maley (1984) has pointed out that material, learner, and teacher are decisive factors in a language syllabus design and implementation. In this paper the role of internet technology in modifying and affecting EFL syllabus design in the light of these factors will be investigated. It is argued that internet technology can provide diversified authentic EFL material which in turn motivates learners and enables teachers to create a non-traditional teaching atmosphere.

2. TECHNOLOGY AND EFL CONTEXT

The computer is a powerful technological tool that has pervaded many sectors in our life. Education and second language learning have been largely influenced by the new information age. The role of technology in language syllabus and learning is not new. In previous decades, language laboratories with cassettes, microphones and headphones were used enormously in most educational and language settings. They acted as a major component of EFL syllabus grounded on drilling practice and stimulus –response patterns. Eventually, another medium for language learning and teaching has been provided by CALL. Language text books have utilized computer software as supplementary materials for teaching and learning vocabulary, grammar, spelling, listening, etc. Blake (1987) and Chun& Brandl (1992) have pointed out that CALL revolutionized teaching-learning process by increasing learner motivation, incorporating sound, graphic, video and presenting information in a non linear sequence which enables learners to access information they want at an individual pace. The invention of internet magnified the effect of CALL in EFL setting by providing communicative authentic task based activities which are in agreement with many recent pedagogical theories and approaches.

3. MATERIAL

In the last few years, curriculum designers and language teachers have benefitted from World Wide Web (WWW) as an abundant resource for language learning material. Integrating internet material into a language curriculum receives much support in the related literature (e.g., Singhal, 1997; Warschauer, 1995). Chun and Plass (2000:161), for example, explain that “WWW enhances language learning because of the universal availability of authentic material, multimedia capabilities, communication through network and non linear structure of the information.” To enhance and facilitate the

process of L2 learning, the syllabus material should be stimulating and authentic. Learners can be stimulated by exposing them to online collection of pictures, headlines, charts, cartoons, and short texts to find links between the elements and draw conclusions. Visual images are essential to building background knowledge about the target text, facilitating the contextualization of what is being read and promoting incidental vocabulary learning. Additionally, pictorial cues can be exploited by teachers to “catch learners’ attention, capitalize on natural curiosity and encourage prediction”(Barnett, 1986: 117).

Interestingly, WWW is a good source for providing authentic and up-to-date language resources and materials for EFL teachers and learners. Baird (2004) divides authentic materials into spoken and written. Spoken materials may include debates, airport announcements, weather forecast, news bulletin, and radio/TV commercials, but written forms include brochures, invitation cards, instructions for use of medicine, recipes and application forms.

The authentic material which suits students’ cultural background and meets their needs can fuel EFL classroom discussions if selected and presented carefully by teachers. Most internet authentic material is real life instances of language use rather than tailored exemplars utilized particularly for language teaching purposes. Authenticity is the core of communicative and functional syllabus since natural language behavior with content related to learners needs is the main requirement in such syllabuses and contexts. Authenticity is regarded an important factor in language syllabuses since it exposes learners to the characteristics of natural language which are similar to that enjoyed by native speakers and “there is motivational attraction for insisting on authentic texts, created as means of communicating content and not for some pedagogic purpose” (Johnson & Jonson, 1998:24). Furthermore, internet authentic material has been approved to stimulate higher order thinking skills (Mike,1996).For example, when an instructor asks students to search for specific information on WWW, then they are required to review, scan, evaluate and present the topic as a whole. Consequently, incidental learning will occur as a result of exploring current various online information and being exposed to additional practices in specific areas of language such as grammar exercises, vocabulary, cloze test, reading comprehension tests and so forth. Furthermore, the internet has become a prominent tool for presenting and experiencing creative works. Students can utilize internet as a platform for their works such as poetry, and stories. For example, many schools utilize WWW to publish their students’ work which can be accessed by other web users. In this way students not only use and consume online content but generate the content.

However, authentic materials should not be taken as granted since some of them may contain complex language structures, unneeded vocabulary items or culturally biased content which might demotivate low level students and place an extra burden on teachers’ work. Therefore, simplification of texts, selecting materials according to learners’ levels and needs, strengthening students’ motivation to integrate with L2 speakers, and gradual adoption of such updated materials instead of conventional textbooks might help teachers and syllabus designers overcome the possible difficulties we encounter when integrating authentic materials in FL classrooms.

4. FEATURES OF INTERNET AND EFL CONTEXT

Realizing the role of internet technology in enriching FL classrooms, teachers and curriculum developers need to continually look for better sources of authentic materials and provide supplementary tasks to enhance language learning and teaching. In addition to the original internet application, the related multimedia and features (sound, video, email, chatting, etc.) can be added as powerful additions to FL syllabus and teachers repertoire.

Electronic mail (email) based activities as the most commonly used internet application can be integrated into foreign language curricula by teachers and it has received great deal of attention from researchers and educators (Hartmann, 2000; Warschauer et al, 1996).Emails could be utilized to enrich FL syllabus and teaching materials by encouraging learners to access and engaged in authentic situations to develop thinking and communicative skills. Some up-to-date topics can be given to learners as debatable issues which in turn develop some skills such as persuading, arguing, defending opinions and evaluating. Moreover, emails can be used to supplement the language material culturally. For example, contacting L2 speakers and interacting with them through emails increase learner’s cultural awareness and promote global understanding which is not easy to be achieved through textbooks only. Byram (1997) argues that email exchanges bring learners to get involved in intercultural learning. This kind of learning helps learners to engage in effective cultural interaction which can occur outside of the classroom away from teacher control which in turn instil learner autonomy. Although such cultural email exchanges can take place on one-to-one basis, class-to-class basis is more beneficial and practical as explained by Avots (1991:135) “writing one class to another, or group to group within a class to another, allows students to interact with each other, to formulate ideas using the target language, and to practice peer editing skills.”Finally, e-mail exchanges can be exploited by teachers to encourage students to send questionnaires and survey to others from different cultures to recognize their cultural lifestyles.”Through this form of interaction authentic cultural materials can be integrated into classroom tasks and activities by teachers.

5. EFFECTS OF INTERNET TECHNOLOGY ON LANGUAGE SKILLS

With no doubt, any language syllabus should address the four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Integrating internet based materials particularly email exchanges in FL classrooms will inevitably impact the four language skills. In terms of reading, Stakhnevich (2002) demonstrates that reading web based texts improves L2 learners reading comprehension more than printed based texts. To explore the influence of internet based reading materials on students extensive reading skills, Pino(2006) conducted a study on college students and it was concluded that reading through internet helps students to learn more vocabulary and enhance their motivation to be on line readers and consequently inculcate the spirit of lifelong learning. As a silent process, reading can be done individually and learners can access reading texts and materials at their own pace. Therefore, on line reading enables the learners to take advantage from the huge amount of images and pictures in understanding the reading texts. Omaggio (1979) points out that visual aids build background knowledge about the target texts and simplify contextualization. Additionally, when learners approach the reading texts on their own instead of depending entirely on instructional help, they will become confident independent learners. To show the importance of reading independently in creating a problem solving reader, Pederson (1986) indicated that students who depend excessively on pre specified reading texts in traditional textbooks and teachers help learn less than those who try to solve problems by themselves and he added that “passage-unavailable treatment always resulted in comparatively higher comprehension rate than occurred in counterpart passage-available treatment regardless of the level of question or level of verbal ability.”(p. 39).

For the development of writing skills, utilizing email exchanges in writing classes as additional teaching tool is essential for many reasons. Firstly, making students familiar with writing emails prepares them to use a universal communication tool which is significant for their survival in the 21st century. Currently, it can be said that emails are taking the place of traditional communication tools such as faxes, papers, and letters in the world of business, technology, politics, and education. It is strange enough to find brilliant students who are good at writing academic essays and compositions, but as a result of less exposure to writing real life emails, they are not competent communicators in real life situations. Secondly, using email exchanges in writing classes enables teachers and students to interact with each other in easier and more convenient ways. Learners can get teacher's feedback over their writing tasks outside classrooms. Additionally, teachers can monitor and follow up their students' writings from the brainstorming phase to the final drafts which consequently, save much time and efforts in writing classes. Another advantage of emails in writing classes is making students concentrate more on the message itself and much less on spelling, mechanics and grammar. In this regard, Latif (2007) pointed out that much of students' writing apprehension and anxiety stem from their concerns about grammatical and spelling correctness. Compared to traditional writing classes which would be impersonal and voiceless, Lucas (1997) claims that communication through email between students and peers is of a great importance since it is less formal, more responsive and students can air their views and express opinions.

In terms of listening, many studies point out the importance of listening comprehension in foreign language learning (Brown,1986; Phillips,1997).Appropriate selection and organization of some educational websites can contribute to developing FL listening and proficiency. As a part of EFL syllabus, digital stories can offer students an opportunity for contextualization and introducing language features such as phrases, grammar and linguistic forms in an enjoyable way. Visual and auditory internet materials play a key role in listening comprehension since they provide a clear picture of the culture and language in the classroom including linguistic and paralinguistic features (prosody, gestures, vocabulary, sound patterns, etc. ,which convey meaning to the learners (Brett, 1995). The interactivity of internet based stories foster L2learning as learners are engaged in decoding and understanding the stories.

Students speaking skills can be also developed through internet based materials by interacting with native speakers and using real language in real communicative situations. Unfortunately, traditional EFL syllabus and the school context in most cases cannot offer a real interaction since contacting native speakers is very limited. However, Hanson (1997) claims that internet can easily offer opportunities for real interaction by allowing L2 learners to get involved not only in asking and making short questions and responses, but in participating in real speaking sessions which supposes agreement, disagreement, gestures, signs, etc. Importantly, speaking sessions through internet should be prepared carefully if we want to benefit from them educationally. For example, teachers can divide students into groups and establish turns to give everyone opportunity to participate. Then, an arrangement with other users should be done to specify the place, time, names, issues, etc. Moreover, before starting the chat session, the discussed topic should be prepared and the related questions have to be gathered in advance. The following activity is an example of how to conduct an online conversation to improve the learner's speaking skill. Let us imagine that we need to initiate a chat session about the subject “tourist attractions in my country.” First, the following points should be established and prepared: historical details, population, language, climate, etc. Second, once those points have been prepared by all learners, the chat session should be started and monitored by teachers to give feedback and turn students' attention to correct language errors and mistakes. Finally, each group can write a report about what they have done in the chat session and discuss that report orally.

The aforementioned role of internet-based material in developing the four language skills and the interaction in particular are in line with the five ideal hypotheses for learning a second/foreign language (Chapelle, 1998). The five hypotheses are:

- Learners should be engaged in L2 activities and the aim of these activities should be to foster good interaction.
- Learners have to be involved in interaction in the foreign language and this must be conducted through the negotiation of meaning.
- Learners need opportunities to produce in the second language.
- Learners must know what errors they have committed in their output or production.
- Learners must correct their production.

6. THE NEW ROLE OF EFL LEARNERS

The role of L2 learners has been enormously affected by the era of technology and internet based activities since the learner has become a creator of knowledge rather than just a receiver. The tremendous potential of internet as a tool for learning EFL has changed some of the learner aspects such as learner centeredness, motivation, individuality, social and cultural background.

Promoting learner centeredness is one merit of internet based syllabus and activities in EFL context in which learners are expected to be involved in the learning process by participating in selecting learning materials and taking partial responsibility for the learning process. Pinkman (2005:12) indicates that “once learners take responsibility for their learning, they will be more able to capitalize on learning environments both in and out of the classroom, hopefully making them life-long and efficient learners.” The following main characteristics of learner centeredness were pointed out by Hedge (2000). First, learners participate in the learning activities. Second, learners participate in designing the course content and learning procedures. Another characteristic is enhancing learner autonomy. Here, it is worth mentioning that in learner centeredness context, teacher’s role and expertise should remain vital and basic in the learning process but not the only dominating ones. In this respect Hammond (1990: 34) suggested “a teacher directed and learner centered approach to balance the dichotomy of teacher centeredness and learner centeredness.”

As instructors, we know that motivation is a key point in the learning process (e.g., Corria, 1999; Dornyei, 1994). Creating intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic one among our students is an utmost goal. Fortunately, the use of internet in FL classes seems to suit the needs of many students which in turn foster the intrinsic motivation. Engaging learners in what they like increases their motivation towards learning especially when different activities are offered through internet based materials which are usually associated with fun and attractive audio and visual items. Enabling students to exchange emails and conduct chat sessions at their convenience without being constantly monitored might reduce anxiety and enhance motivation. Muehleisen (1997) claims that a student joins the internet revolution for two reasons. Firstly, students look at internet as a trendy fashion and they want to be a part of it. Secondly, they feel the practical aspects of learning and job skills that will be beneficial in life.

On the other hand, using internet based materials and email exchanges could increase the learner cultural awareness and make him/her an open minded learner. The students’ intercultural awareness can be developed via internet based activities particularly email exchanges and chat sessions when they support their cultural text book information with real life examples they can receive from their partners in L2 culture. Additionally, the cultural awareness could be enhanced when students are asked by their online partners about their own cultures. This makes students know how others look at their culture and consequently they have to reflect on and criticize some aspects of their culture. Gervilliers et al (1977:31) refer to developing awareness about one’s own culture through questions from abroad as “distancing” and they clarify it in the following way: “The student, because she needs to describe them, develops an awareness of the conditions of her life, of the life of her town or her neighbourhood, even of her province...She had been living too close to these conditions and through inter-school exchanges she distanced herself from them in order to better comprehend the condition of her life.”

Wilson (2004) pointed out the extended benefits of internet based syllabus which are beyond learning of specific skills. He claims that non traditional syllabus material encourages shy, marginalized and peripheral students to participate in communication confidently since internet interactions conceal some social features such as disability, race, or other paralinguistic traits such as hesitation, frowning, etc.

Generally, the role of the internet based syllabus in creating effective learning experiences depends on how effectively the learner employs such syllabus and technologies. In the educational domain in general, and in L2 in particular, the internet can be used as a useful tool for inquiry, communication and construction (Bruce & Levin, 1997).

As a tool for inquiry, learners can access sources of information that help them understand a certain task or topic. Student knowledge can be enhanced through accessing experts in a certain field or by interacting with them directly. So, the constant exposure to real life and updated contexts prepares students to face the ever changing world. In terms of communication, internet is a remarkable tool for instant communication that learners can communicate with their teachers and peers through emails, newsgroups or videoconferencing. Concerning construction, learners can develop their thinking skills and construct knowledge by scaffolding the varied learning activities. So, learners can regulate their learning progress at their own pace, convenience and experience.

7. THE ROLE OF EFL TEACHERS

The pedagogical effectiveness of using any technological instrument in EFL classes depends largely on the methodological approach that controls its application. Salaberry (1996) mentions that technology or internet based syllabus themselves are not marvellous. Their value lies in the methodology followed by the teacher in the application stage. However, internet technology is a powerful tool in activating EFL syllabus since it enables teachers to help students interact, collaborate and participate in the learning process. In internet based activities, teacher is not the only source of knowledge, instead his/her role should include planning, organizing and coordinating in a learner centred environment.

As planners, teachers have to plan the tasks and activities which students are engaged in. For example, in email exchanges teachers have to establish learning goals and make contacts with possible partner classes through on line networks. If, for example one of the teacher's goals is to teach writing, internet activities should be structured accordingly to develop students' writing skills. Moreover, some questions should be addressed and clarified before learners start exchanging educational emails. For instance, which topics should students write about? Should they use L1 in their emails? Are they expected to correct their partners' mistakes?

In the next stage, teachers should make the internet based activities an integral part of their classes and a serious part of the learning process. Rather than a facilitator, Fischer (1998) suggests that the teacher needs to take on the role of expert to enable learners benefit from the big amounts of linguistic and cultural information in developing their communicative skills. Therefore, integrating email exchanges or chat sessions in EFL classes as additional teaching materials will lead to academic results, interest and educational transforming results (Warschauer, 1999).

It is worth mentioning that introducing internet based activities in EFL classrooms is not an effortless process. Teachers should not underestimate the potential complexities and expected obstacles. For example, some activities in a certain class may be dependent on computer lab schedules. Also, teachers should be ready for hardware and software malfunctioning. Another complexity might stem from the partner classes which might have absent students or some delays. But if the teachers start small and create activities that are directly integrated into classroom goals, the process will be easier and teachers will try more ambitious future steps.

When working in learner centred environment, teachers are required to recognize students' opinions in integrating technologies into classroom activities through surveys, or classroom discussions. Working in learner centred environment and involving students in classroom decisions do not indicate passive roles for teachers. On the contrary, Warschauer et al (1996) mentioned that teacher's role in internet enhanced classrooms includes many things such as improving learning strategies, planning, coordinating, and increasing students' meta-linguistic awareness of computer mediated genres.

8. CONCLUSION

This article pinpoints the potential role of internet technology in reshaping the EFL material, learner and teacher. The online syllabus material stimulates learners as it exposes them to update authentic spoken and written activities. To fully benefit from the internet material, students' cultural diversity and proficiency levels should be taken in the stakeholders' considerations. Concerning learners, the internet based materials could create more active EFL learners as they enhance motivation and reduce anxiety. Grey (1999) states that internet based activities can keep learners interest and energize EFL classrooms through the following four basic functions: search for and receive-talk to and reply-publish and provide-collaborate and learn. The activities in the four categories are fundamental in establishing a motivating EFL classrooms and creating situations for students to acquire and sharpen their English skills. Pedagogically, teachers in the era of technology have not become the only source of information. To cope with a learner centred environment, which has been developed by internet based materials, teachers should play additional roles such as planning, coordinating, organizing and choosing the materials that suit the learners' needs. In general, teachers' roles are surely needed when integrating CALL into curriculum as technology is powerless without imaginative and thoughtful application.

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