Short Paper

Rethinking the Use of Technology in ESL Classrooms

Over the past two decades, our educational system has changed a lot because of the fast digital revolution around the world. The Internet and the revolution in technology has become a powerful tool for education, language pedagogy, and language use. Therefore, it has become essential to use technology in fields such as education in ways that facilitate language learning and keep up with the fast pace of development around the globe. Moreover, the digital revolution nowadays has made it more imperative for teachers and students to use technology and integrate it in the classrooms. Using technology in English as a second language (ESL) classes has recently started to raise an important question. Is using technology in a language class really effective and helpful to students to improve their learning experiences?

A great deal of research examines the advantages and disadvantages of integrating technology in ESL classrooms, comparing the traditional class environment and teaching through technology. It also investigates the effectiveness of technology on student’s attitudes towards learning, motivation, and acquiring new literacies. Research on using technology in ESL instruction leads to two multiple perspectives. The first perspective considers technology to be a must-use in the classroom and praises its merits. (Stites, 2004); Li (2005); and Cetto (2010), for example, argue that technology can be a great asset in ESL classrooms, offering authentic writing activities and endless resources on grammar instruction, lesson plans and other central
topics. It signals a shift from using the teacher-centered approach to a student-centered approach which influences greatly the students’ attitudes towards other cultures and increases students’ motivation towards language acquisition and culture studies. Others like Cooper (2001); Hertel (2003); and Warschauer & Liaw (2010) indicate that emerging technologies such as blogs, wikis, and Moodle can help to develop language skills through authentic communication, collaboration, networking, and scaffolding. These tools provide ESL students with vast opportunities to practice and improve their English not only inside class but also out of school; at home, or any place they get access to the Internet. Indeed, technology has become very influential not only in language learning but in education in general whether in K12 or higher education. If we look at the schools and college around the country today we notice that at the core of the 21st skills in education now is the use of technology in the classroom. Thus, for teachers to be equipped with the knowledge and tools to facilitate the learning process through technology has become of great importance nowadays.

Another perspective on technology also recognizes the positive effect of technology on ESL learning but at the same time highlights its misuses and the possible challenges that teachers and administrators may face. Lai and Gips, DiMattia (2004) and Gips (2004); and Kritsonis (2006) emphasize the idea of taking into consideration both maximizing the benefit and also preventing the misuse of technology in the language classroom. They argue that, for example, computers can provide students with a less stressful environment away from the class and the authority of the teacher; however, a challenge may arise especially when ESL students use technology without supervision and training. One problem that the research reports regarding language learners’ use of the Internet is the confusion between standard and informal language and not being able to tell the difference between formal or scholarly writing and everyday
writing. Another ethical problem is plagiarism. According to Wendy Sutherland –Smith (2005), many “ESL students consider[ed] the Internet a ‘free zone’ not governed by legal proprietary rights”(15) which makes using the Internet without proper training and supervision by teachers an important problem. Issues like plagiarism and the copy-paste routine that many ESL students might be used to present a great challenge to many ESL teachers aiming for a full integration of technology in their teaching.

However, regardless of these concerns, technology integration in the classroom nowadays seems like a no-brainer. Most schools now are equipped with advanced technologies that teachers can implement in the classroom. Teachers are aware of how important technology has become in everyday life and waste no time in putting it to use in the classroom. As we have seen in the research around instructional technology, you could rarely find someone who argues against the use of technology without at least praising its merits. Among the many advocates for the use of technology in education, you find some who mention disadvantages for the use of technology and constructively criticizes certain types of usage or practices that could be detrimental to teaching, but all in all the tone in general praises the use of technology and aims to prevent whatever might make that use less fruitful.

I personally think that using technology in the classroom is such a great idea. However, I have noticed, in college-level ESL classrooms at least, a major shortcoming. The missing link in the integration of technology in the language learning classroom, in my opinion, is the student. Focusing on improving the role of the teacher in classroom technology integration, Koehler and Mishra (2008) presented a new idea in instructional technology they called technology pedagogy and content knowledge, or TPACK, which is an approach that helps to make teachers’ use of technology in the classroom more organized and more fruitful. It is a type of teacher planning
and training in which the teacher’s knowledge of the topic, her pedagogical training and technological understanding are all put together in order to reach the best learning experience for the student. The idea has indeed revolutionized how teachers and schools think of technology in the classroom. While TPACK focuses on the teacher and the administration that provides the technology, my approach aims to make the student part of the process of choosing the best digital tools that would ensure a better learning experience. The way technology integration works in ESL centers at US colleges and universities is that teachers, or in some cases the administrators, choose the digital tools and have students use them in and outside the classroom. The teacher is the sole decision maker in this process; she is the one who decides what should or should not be used. While teachers obviously have better knowledge of the content and the pedagogy, the technology knowledge of many students today may surpass that of teachers’. Most of our ESL students now are digital natives, meaning that they grew up with technology and took using it in their everyday lives for granted. Their response to technologies in the classroom can be much different from that of teachers whose technological awareness could be much less comprehensive than that of students. ESL students nowadays can easily sense which technology could work for them and help them learn English faster, and I believe making them part of the decision could benefit their motivation and learning outcomes.

ESL centers and institutes need to listen more to the students through, for example, teacher-student technology workshops or student evaluations of the technologies used in the classroom and their recommendations for future classes. Teachers could also allow students to choose the educational digital tools and perhaps present it to other students in class.

A key factor to using technology in the classroom is engagement. Using the computer in the classroom as a teaching tool is greatly different from using a board and a piece of chalk. The
board was a mere medium and the message written on it was much more important. However, with technology, the medium and the message become indivisible. Students, or users in general, do not only care about the outcome of using a certain computer program they also care about the program itself and the experience of using it. Take videogames as an example. Video games are in most cases educational tools; they teach users to think better and make progress. They rely so much on addictiveness which comes from engagement. The number one measure of success for any game is its ability to engage the user.

There is a new trend in language learning now called “the gamification of language learning” (Kapp, 2012). Applications like “Duolingo” have attracted millions of users who learn foreign languages on their own. The way the program works is that the user takes quizzes in the foreign language they’re learning to level up, interact and compete with other users. A study done on the effectiveness of Duolingo by the City University of New York and the University of South Carolina shows that an average of 34 hours of playing this game equals one semester of foreign language learning at the university level (Grego & Vesselinov, 2012). The key to this astonishing finding is user choice and engagement. Understanding this aspect of instructional technology will be of great importance to both teachers and administrations. Therefore, I believe that given the chance to students to express their opinions on the technology used in the classroom and to voice their recommendations can greatly benefit the learning process by increasing students’ engagement and improving their performance.
References


