

Technology in Teacher Education: Developing Online Teacher Education Programs

Tecnología en formación de docentes: Desarrollo de programas en línea para la formación de docentes

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Many ESL/EFL teachers in the Middle East and Central Asia find themselves isolated not only geographically but also professionally from ESL colleagues. They often teach at rural schools where, in some cases, they are the only ESL teachers in the school or even district. These teachers, unlike their counterparts in large urban settings and developed countries, have fewer avenues for obtaining advice, sharing experiences, or finding collegial support. To help such teachers (as well as many novice teachers or even teacher trainees), the most inexpensive and easy-to-do method seems to be to develop a professional online ESL network. This paper, which is part of a study conducted in Iran in 2002, discusses the major considerations and problems one may find developing an online program.

Key words: Information technology (IT), information communications technology (ICT), teacher education, theory of change, website, language teaching

Muchos docentes de inglés como segunda lengua o como lengua extranjera en el Medio Oeste y Asia Central se hallan apartados, no sólo geográfica sino también profesionalmente de otros colegas. Usualmente enseñan en escuelas rurales donde, en algunos casos, son los únicos maestros de inglés de la escuela e incluso del distrito. Estos docentes, a diferencia de sus homólogos de grandes contextos urbanos y países desarrollados, tienen menos oportunidades de obtener consejo, compartir experiencias o encontrar apoyo. Para ayudar a esos docentes, principiantes e incluso educadores de maestros, la manera más económica y fácil es desarrollar una red profesional de enseñanza del inglés como segunda lengua. Este artículo hace parte de un estudio realizado en Irán en el año 2002 y discute las consideraciones y problemas más importantes que se pueden hallar al desarrollar un programa en línea.

Palabras claves: Tecnología de información, tecnología de información en comunicación, formación de docentes, teoría y cambio, sitios Web, enseñanza de lenguas

INTRODUCTION

The world is witnessing great changes in many areas in the new millennium. One area is the use of technology which is so evasive and influential that it has affected the whole world. In the last century, everybody talked about industry and the economy had an eye on new industrial advancements to invest money and to earn interest. Today, however, the world is looking at Information Technology (IT) or Information Communications Technology (ICT) and waits for the changes it can bring about. New terminologies have also been coined such as Internet, world wide web, website, and so on.

Thanks to IT we have a new form of literacy: electronic literacy. As Warschauer (2000) maintains, there are several kinds of literacy that make up electronic literacies. There is information literacy. We are able to navigate the Internet and find, critically analyze, and then make use of information found there. There is what might be called computer-mediated communication literacy. It means being able to use the Internet as an information tool to send an email message that has an impact and is appropriate for the circumstances. Also, there is multimedia literacy, which is the knowledge of how to create texts on the Internet by combining different multimedia and also being able to read and interpret media to create a message.

One area, for example, is the scholarly production of knowledge. It used to be, only 20 or 30 years ago, that if a scientist came up with a new discovery, most people would not hear about it until it was published in a journal and that process might take a year or two. Now, a scientist is communicating with other scientists around the world immediately on the Internet. Just think about how much faster the production of knowledge can take place. So, it seems we are going through a revolutionary period in communication that matches the development of the printing press. We are going much faster, however, because the printing press took hundreds of years to spread and have an impact. It is claimed that over 10

percent of the people in the world are using the Internet right now and in another 20 years, it could be 30, 40, or 50 percent!

ICT and Future Shock

Using ICT in educational settings requires change. It requires change in the way teachers think about teaching and their teaching practices. Van de Ven and Poole (1995) say: "The task of making the transition from traditional teaching to teaching with technology is much tougher than it seems. This is because the transition is as much a cultural one as one of mere methodologies. It involves a shift in teaching paradigms, a shift in the way of thinking about teaching (p. 198)".

Truly, different teachers will handle this change differently and attitudes will play a major role in this difference.

Toffler (1970) noted that human beings have shown themselves to be very adaptable creatures, but he warned that their ability to absorb change is not infinite. He suggested that we were, in 1970, approaching something he called 'future shock', which he defined as 'the human response to overstimulation' (p. 290). In Toffler's view, the symptoms of this future shock include anxiety, hostility, senseless violence, physical illness, depression and apathy. It has been 30 years since Toffler wrote this and many of us probably feel that we, and perhaps most of the world, are in terminal future shock.

Widdowson (1990) made a distinction between teacher training (regarding teachers as technicians who seek standard operating procedures and manuals) and teacher education (considering teachers as interpreters of contextual factors and decision-makers in the English classroom). Thus, teachers play the most important role in the TEFL field and we need explicit teacher education discussion forums (as opposed to participating in conferences/teaching demonstrations or workshops, seminars, assuming that teachers develop professionally and automatically via those activities) and research (investigating what teachers know,

believe, value, and do). There should be a harmonious relationship between teachers and researchers: teachers inform researchers of provisional specifications and researchers provide feedback regarding what teachers are concerned about in their teaching practice (Ellis, 1997).

The Need for a Nationwide Project

To bring harmony and to accelerate the change, the officials and language designers should arrive at the heart of the project. It should be considered a national project, since it deals with a fundamental subject: English as a second or foreign language, the language of international relations and communication. When the time comes for policy making, officials are usually concerned about three significant and determining factors: budget, work force, and culture.

Money, the major concern, is essential to be invested in the project. At the beginning, it may seem to be wasting money, but when one expands the scope, it is nothing compared to the benefits gained. Work force includes both language designers and IT professionals. An ideal project requires cooperation of the two sides. Culture, as a determining factor, is highly dependent on how much the traditional teachers are willing to change their classical approaches (from chalkboards to websites). This needs more reflection.

In the newly independent regions such as Central Asia, in which the desire and courage for development are at their highest level, developing an online program would not be impossible. It is true that the increased pace of technological development in the region requires more investment, but one thing is crystal clear: the authorities have recognized the importance of the issue and are providing the necessary help.

Features of an Online Program

To enhance teachers' knowledge and skills in an authentic way, a developed and well-organized web site seems inevitable. Through such sites teachers can address their own particular issues

and use the available resources. These teachers or teacher trainees can also attend virtual training classes focusing on new ESL approaches, classroom management, language assessment, prop application, and/or material preparation. Also, they can take advantage of entering a chatroom and discuss a topic of current interest, or leave questions on a message board to be answered by others. How to make an e-portfolio, for example, can be discussed with professionals in one room.

The Online plan should focus on both theoretical and practical aspects of language teaching. That is, the program should foster a survey to find out the most frequent problems teachers are faced with. Hence, needs analysis would have a focal role in such development.

Meanwhile, websites with good-quality materials which are designed for teacher education and teacher training are very rare nowadays. Or at least the existing sites do not settle the major local problems of the teachers over here. Therefore, a well-organized and qualified website is the one which, apart from any commercial interest, tries to develop teachers' awareness, cooperation, and interaction more than does the printed element.

To design an interactive website, Yeh et al. (2000) argue that a qualified one should include the following features:

- Accommodating a variety of learning styles (text, graphics, high quality audio and video media)
- Designing meaningful and real world tasks (the communicative and authentic activities)
- Encouraging exploratory learning (interactive tasks)
- Providing sequence instruction (in the web pages)
- Providing feedback (in the web pages)
- Encouraging metacognition (design of learning strategies in the web pages)
- Using graphics to show relationships
- Providing useful academic and scholarly links (teachers' resources)
- Designing places for sending and receiving messages (chatroom, mail board)

- Providing downloadable educational software (games and songs)
- Providing links to digital journals and newsletters (online forum)

Also, as a survey done among Iranian English teachers (Motallebzadeh, 2002) shows, most teachers believe that a quality website is one which can satisfy their needs, among which the following were identified as the immediate ones:

- Providing links to other educational sites to develop teachers' pedagogical knowledge
- Helping them share their knowledge with other colleagues and scholars in other regions for developing more interactive and practical tasks
- Getting access to authentic materials required for a language class
- Providing downloadable games, worksheets, and formative tests

When an online program is called for, we expect an up-to-date and modern team of experts who are always busy constructing, developing, and reconstructing the components of the plan. Therefore, selecting such a team requires great care. As mentioned earlier, the team should include a group of language designers and IT professionals. This team needs to work with teachers in an action plan to analyze the teachers' immediate needs and to get feedback regarding what they have already designed. The program should be multifunctional and have more interactive potential to prepare the groundwork for enhanced electronic literacy, e-learning, virtual education, and e-book fashion.

Providing the teachers and teacher trainees with enough and effective instruction is another important dimension which needs consideration. To start a nationwide program, we need to prepare users to get the most out of the new technology. As shown in a survey by Yeh (2002), many teachers complain about their practical knowledge on how to use the Internet. They also stated that they didn't receive sufficient instruction on how to surf and browse the web pages, how to locate the required information through the search engines, and how to download the things they wanted. Hence, it is

recommended that the program establishes several workshops for training and educating teachers and teacher trainees to maximize the effective use of the Internet.

CONCLUSION

In a changing world in which the people live with up-to-date information and in an age where the new technology has changed the world into a global village, everyone has the right to have an opportunity to be more and more dynamic. The language teachers are no exception. Teachers need to access information that will enable them to carry out their responsibilities more successfully. To help such energetic and enthusiastic teachers, developing an online website seems inevitable. Such innovation, when supported and financed by the government, would enable language teachers to share their experiences with colleagues in other parts of the country or world. This in turn improves the general level of English proficiency in the region.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Khalil Motallebzadeh is assistant professor at Islamic Azad University, Iran. He has a Ph.D. in TEFL and is especially interested in language testing, language teaching and CALL. He has been a committee member of Asia CALL since 2004. He has published articles in national journals such as *Roshd* (Iran's journal of the Ministry of Education) and the *Journal of Medical Sciences*. He has also participated in national and international conferences on EFL, translation, and applied linguistics as a presenter and attendee.

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