



ESL Teacher and ICT: Teachers' Perception

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Abstract

The rapid development of Information Communication and Technologies (ICTs) has made tremendous changes in the twenty-first century. ICT is said to bring a variety of benefits in facilitating the teaching and learning process. Therefore, ICT has been the emphasis in school and higher institutions of education nowadays. However, to integrate ICT in education is not problem free, problems are faced by the teachers. This paper aims to investigate the ESL teachers' perceptions towards the use of ICT in Kuala Terengganu. Data were collected via interviews with four Form 4 English teachers in a secondary school in Kuala Terengganu. Findings show teachers have a positive perception towards the use of ICT. However, teachers claimed they face challenges in using ICT especially due to insufficient facilities.

Introduction

The 21st century is an era characterized by many profound and rapid technological changes. Among these changes are many inventions and rapid development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), including ICT in education. The integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) can help revitalize teachers and students. It supports learning in a variety of ways, for instance, increases access to information, motivates students, develops problem solving capabilities and aids deeper understanding. Besides that, this can help to improve and develop the quality of education by providing curricular support in difficult subject areas such as in mathematical modelling or by helping visualization of complex processes in science. However, to achieve these objectives, teachers need to be involved in collaborative projects and development of intervention change strategies, which would include teaching partnerships with ICT as a tool.

Teachers' attitudes are major predictors of the use of new technologies in instructional settings. Teachers' attitudes toward ICT shape not only their own ICT experiences, but also

the experiences of the students they teach. According to Zhao and Cziko (2001) there are three conditions necessary for teachers to introduce ICT into their classroom, which are teachers belief in the effectiveness of technology, teachers belief on the use of technology will not cause any disturbances and teachers belief on their ability to control the technology. Demetriadis, Barbas, Molohides, Palaigeorgiou, Psillos, Vlahavas, et al. (2003) reached similar conclusions in their research study where they found the “Training efforts are generally welcomed by teachers but consistent support and extensive training is necessary in order for them to consider themselves able to integrate ICT in their teaching methodologies” (p. 35).

Therefore, in order to prepare students’ for real life in this technologically advanced and diverse world, the teachers need at first perceive positive attitudes with the technology. Various benefits of ICT are recognised, however, some studies show that most teachers do not make use of the potential of ICT to contribute to the quality of learning environments, although they value this potential quite significantly (Smeets, 2005). Harris (2002) conducted a case study in three primary and secondary schools, which focused on innovative pedagogical practices involving ICT. He concludes that the benefits of ICT will be gained “...when confident teachers are willing to explore new opportunities for changing their classroom practices by using ICT” (p. 458). As a consequence, the use of ICT will not only enhance learning environments but also prepare the next generation for the future and careers (Wheeler, 2001). In this paper, we would like to investigate ESL teachers’ perception towards the use of ICT.

Literature review

In this new era, the rapid development of ICT in education, has also changed the role of the teachers. Nowadays, teachers are urged to integrate the technology into their language teaching in schools. However, before ICT can be successfully integrated into the lesson, it is important for the teachers to have positive perceptions on ICT. This is because teachers’ belief is the most influential in the use of ICT. Dawes (2000) stated that teachers’ resistance of changes in their professional practices is merely a result of their personal beliefs. A teacher's broader perception of education is perhaps a more useful indication of his or her ability to integrate technology into the classroom. Besides that, the teacher’s input will also crucially affect the impact of ICT use on students’ learning (Cox & Marshall, 2007).

A number of studies have been conducted on teachers' perception on the use of ICT. For example, a study by Dexter, Anderson and Becker (1999) examined the teachers' computer use and their perceptions of the impact of computers on their classroom practice. Teachers made it clear that the computer did not automatically cause more progressive teaching practices. The teachers who had adopted more progressive teaching practices over time felt that computers helped them, but they did not think that the computers worked as a catalyst for change. Instead, they offered a variety of reasons for changing practices. They made it clear that their changes in instructional approach were the result of thoughtful reasoning. Their experiences in the classroom, reflection on those experiences, and the professional culture of a school influenced this knowledge construction process about what does and does not work in the classroom.

Afamasaga-Wright and Farita Tepora's (2008) study on Teachers' Perceptions of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in a Secondary School in Samoa. The findings found that teachers' perception of ICT were mostly positive noting that its use contributed to higher levels of student interest, engagement, independent learning and motivation. The study also revealed that ICTs were mainly used to support teacher-centred pedagogies and contributed to the efficiency of teacher preparation. While teachers were keen to use ICTs in their classes, they were hindered by lack of ICT skills and insufficient pedagogical knowledge. However, teachers perceived several obstacles to effective integration of ICTs in classrooms, which included insufficient student and teacher access to computers, timetabling restrictions, a user pays system, maintenance and running costs, student plagiarism from the web and access to inappropriate sites as well as inadequate teacher professional development for the use of ICTs.

On the other hand, Abdulkafi Albirini (2006) studied the cultural perceptions of high school English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Syria toward ICT. The findings found a notable conservatism in participants' perception of ICT in education and society at large. Teachers were mainly concerned about the morally damaging effect of ICT (particularly the Internet), its inattentiveness to their cultural and language needs, and its growing primacy at the expense of other societal needs. Hence, participants urged for the creation of local computers and software that would better serve Syrian identity and culture.

Allan Yuen, Lee Man Wai, Nancy Law & Albert Chan (2008) explored the factors associated with the impact of ICT use on students and teachers' perception on the use of ICT. The results showed there are three direct effects on students' impact, namely teachers practice orientation, students-practice orientation, and pedagogical ICT competence. The findings also revealed that teachers' perception on students-practice orientation was the strongest predictor of students' impact than other factors. The direct effects of teachers-practice orientation, students practice orientation, and pedagogical ICT competence on students' impact were positive. The pedagogical ICT competence had direct as well as indirect effects on students' impact. However, the effects of pedagogical ICT competence on the mediated factors teachers-practice orientation and students-practice orientation were negative. The indirect effects of community of practice on professional collaboration and teachers-related obstacles in using ICT on students-impact were mediated through teachers-practice orientation, students-practice orientation, or pedagogical ICT competence. The effects of community of practice on professional collaboration on all mediated factors were positive whereas the effects of teachers-related obstacles in using ICT on all mediated factors were negative.

Chai Sing Ching, Hong Huang Yao and Timothy Teo (2008) did a comparative study between Singapore and Taiwanese pre-service teachers' beliefs and their attitudes towards ICT. The results indicate that the teachers' epistemological beliefs were generally relativistic. They were also inclined to believe rather strongly the constructivist notion of teaching. This study suggested that pre-service teachers from Singapore and Taiwan are holding beliefs that are congruent to the education reform efforts. However, the teachers' attitude about ICT use does not seem to relate to their epistemological and pedagogical beliefs. The findings also suggest that further effort needs to be taken in order to foster more productive use of ICT to support constructivism-oriented teaching.

It is clearly shown that teachers' perceptions are crucial to determine the successful integration of ICT in their lessons. In this paper, the researchers aim to investigate Kuala Terengganu ESL teachers' perception towards the use of ICT.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative design using a face-to-face semi-structured interview in order to probe detail information on teachers' perception towards the use of ICT. For the

purpose of this study, four Form 4 ESL teachers from different English classes participated in the interviews. They were three Malay and one Chinese English teachers.

Findings

The semi-structured interview allowed the researchers to have an authentic understanding of the teachers' perception towards the use of ICT. Several themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews. These themes were categorized and discussed in the following sub-headings.

ICT in teaching and Learning Language

All interviewed teachers showed that they were aware that ICT is a good tool in helping them to conduct their lessons. Teachers agreed that by using ICT, it helps them in teaching as well as grabbing students' attention. One teacher, Roza, stated, "...It helps a lot, where it will tackle the students' interest in learning English in various ways. It is more interesting and students won't feel bored as ICT will be more refreshing for them to learn in a way." Another, teacher, called Ana, added to this point by saying, "It (the lesson) is more interesting and effective."

On the other hand, Bib also revealed that if students really use the ICT in the lesson, it can help the students in their language learning. She said,

Yes, as long as the students really do their work, but sometimes they do something else. You see when we bring them to the computer room, use internet to search for the information, but sometime they do some other things. But if they really get into the lesson, I think they can get a lot.

Teachers' were asked on the use of ICT. Responses indicated that all teachers have positive views towards the use of ICT as they revealed that using ICT is interesting and effective. However, surprisingly most of them still held to the old traditional method, which is chalk and talk. They sometimes used PowerPoint. The following are some of the responses recorded from the teachers' words:

I can say sometimes I use chalk and talk while you know that is an old method, and sometimes I use PowerPoint. And I think I use text book most of the time. (Roza)
I use chalk and talk and papers most of the time. (Nancy)

There was one teacher who used other authentic materials as teaching aids and movies from YouTube in her lessons. She said, "... use conventional method to explain and get students

into the activities. Sometimes I used teaching aids, like papers, handouts and I also show students some movies” (Bib).

Enhancing students’ language learning

Teachers were also asked whether they encouraged their students to use ICT in learning English. Teachers’ feedback was encouraging where they knew students could get more information from the internet. Here is a teacher’s opinion, “Of course especially when I taught EST last time, English for Science and Technology. They can get a lot from there—the Internet” (Bib).

From the response, we can say that the teacher encouraged her students to use ICT to learn English. Besides, teachers were asked whether they provided students with some websites for them to access. Most of them said they did. Roza, one of the teachers stated, “Yes, I asked the students to surf the Internet. I gave them the websites that they can surf. Last year, I did on environment, and they found it very interesting.” Another teacher added that she also provided the information to the students. She said, “Ya, sometimes I do, but actually there are a lot of websites that we can find from the books. Some reference books give you websites, the address so that you can go find info there” (Bib). In general, the data indicated that ESL teachers perceive that ICT can enhance students’ language learning.

Challenges

Most of the teachers interviewed highlight that they faced certain challenges in using ICT for teaching English especially due to the lack of facilities in the school such as limitation of software, computers not well maintained and many others. One teacher claimed that,

...facilities, software and limitation of software. In the classroom, the screen is there but we do not have the access to the LCD. Most of the time, it (the computer room) is full and there is also a limitation of software, there are no software that we can use. (Roza)

Another teacher revealed her challenge which is due to the inconveniences. In her words,

We have to bring all the things like the laptop, LCD and the projector. And we have to carry here and there... quite tiring, not so convenience. So, I think it is better, may be if they can supply the projector for each class. (Bib)

There was one teacher who pointed out that ICT is a good tool for teaching but due to the school's limited facilities, it is difficult to use ICT in her teaching. In her words, "At time especially in school, you know, most of the ICT are not well maintained. So at times, I find that carry out the class using ICT is quite troublesome" (Nancy). Surprisingly, there was one teacher, Ana, who said that she did not face any challenges in using ICT. This showed that she is very motivated and interested in using ICT.

Overall, teachers' ICT competency is moderate; however, there are still teachers who are not very competent in using ICT. It was found that, most of the teachers were only given a short computer course such as a day or two only. Among the 4 teachers interviewed, there was only one who did not attend any computer course. She claimed that the school did not send her to any course and she learned ICT by herself. She commented, "Erm...no, I learn on my own. I haven't gone to any computer courses so far. No, the school has never sent me for any computer courses" (Bib).

However, this does not seem to be a problem to most of the teachers. All four teachers have positive perceptions towards the use of ICT. There was one teacher who did attend a two-day computer course but she claimed that she is still not well-verse with ICT even though she had about 32 years of experience in teaching. This revealed that younger teachers have better computer competency and adapt well to technology literacy compared to older teachers.

Advantages and disadvantages of using ICT

Teachers were asked on the advantages and disadvantages of using ICT in teaching English. The responses from the interviews endorsed that all teachers feel that ICT has many advantages which can facilitate students in their language learning especially grabbing students' attention and making the lessons more interesting. These are evidenced in the responses as follows:

ICT can help students to understand what the teachers teach and this can improve their English. (Nancy)

It can avoid boredom learning the language. Teachers can use song and PowerPoint slides where students can see interactive pictures. (Roza)

There are many advantages, because students are very fond of computer. So it catches the students' attention and interest. (Bib)

Despite the advantages, there are some disadvantages of ICT as well, where some teachers said to use ICT one needs to have proper equipment. ICT can be a waste of time in certain

circumstances if some students are not serious in using it. Below are some teachers' comments,

At time I feel that some students are not that serious, sometimes it is a waste of time. (Nancy)
Because of the limited facilities and software in the school, I cannot use ICT very often.
(Roza)

Surprisingly, one teacher pointed out that students might feel bored if she always uses ICT. Her reason was, "Sometimes students might feel that this is boring, every time you come you just on your lab top then you show us pictures. Some might say, where is your own idea?" (Bib).

Discussions

From the interviews with teachers, it was found that teachers have a positive view towards the use of ICT. Teachers responded that there are many advantages in using ICT for language learning. Teachers reported that ICT could grab students' attention and interest, as well as to avoid boredom of learning the language. This reflects the benefits of ICT, where ICT is a flexible tool to be used and can remove the barriers of time and location in the provision of learning opportunities.

Surprisingly, some teachers were found to be not competent in using ICT because they did not attend any ICT or computer training course previously. However, this does not hinder the teachers as they have positive perception towards ICT and they are very supportive of their students using ICT in learning. According to Timothy Evans (1997), effective encouragement of low-achieving or discouraged students is of utmost importance. He describes that when the students are given encouragement they will do better. This is supported by a study conducted by the National Central Regional Educational Laboratory (2002). The findings show that teachers' encouragement is essential to raise the performance levels of their students.

Teachers also show high regard of ICT where they stated that the ICT tool is effective and interesting. However, not all teachers supported the use of ICT all the time. Most of them think they should use both ICT and also the conventional method in class. According to the teachers, it depends on the topic which they are teaching. If they plan to teach grammar, the conventional method will be better because they can use drilling. On the other hand, if extra

information is needed ICT will be used. In other words, both technique need to be integrated in the classroom, where it depends on the circumstances and objective of the lesson.

In summary, ICT has many benefits in language teaching as well as learning, as it provides lots of activities for the students and materials for the teachers. Teachers' attitudes and perceptions are a great influence on the students. Teachers need to have positive attitudes towards the use of ICT before they are able to encourage students in using the ICT tools.

Conclusions

The semi-structured interviews with the four Form 4 English teachers have helped the researchers to visualize the circumstances faced by the teachers in the use of ICT. The findings show teachers have a positive perception towards the use of ICT. However, most teachers do not use ICT in school due to the inadequate access, computer lab, resources, and teachers' ICT skills. Hence, proactive measures need to be taken by the Ministry of Education, and headmaster to promote effective implementation of ICT in teaching ESL. They can send more teachers for training on ICT courses, so teachers are equipped with the skill. Regarding the lack of resources, perhaps the school administrators need to be creative to solve the problems.

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