Improving Teaching and Learning English Through 'ICT'

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Abstract

The impact of information and communication technology (ICT) on language learning has been acknowledged globally because of the fundamental role they play in the advancement of the frontiers of knowledge in language learning. This is more so when the world is fast becoming a global village where the use of modern technological gadgets to improve language learning has become imperative. This paper is to investigate how to improve teaching and learning English through using ICT. The study found that if ICT is integrated into the teaching and learning of language, our renewed approach to the teaching and learning of English will go a long way in making ICT a more rewarding partner in the teaching-learning process. In the light of the findings, it is recommended that teachers should upgrade and familiarize themselves in the use and application of ICT facilities in the acquisition of language education.

Key word: ICT – Teaching and learning – English language
Introduction:

The English language is generally acknowledged as a global language, in view of its numerous functions and preference over several other languages around the globe. Going by the history of English Language, it is important to note that it started with the coming of the three Germanic tribes namely: the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes, who invaded Britain during the 5th century AD and crossed the North Sea from what is now modern day Denmark and northern Germany. Before the invasion of Britain by the three Germanic tribes, the language by the inhabitants of Britain was a Celtic language. Shortly after the invasion however, the language that was confined to Britain around the 5th century has gone beyond the boundaries of Britain and is still spreading like wild fire.

Apart from being a language of global unification, English is also seen as a veritable tool for learning, business and interactional purposes, among other functions. In view of its relevance, English is not only the mother tongue in Britain but also the mother tongue of several other countries like Canada, the United States of America, New Zealand, to mention just a few. It is also used as a second and a foreign language (EFL) in many countries like Nigeria, Ghana and many other developing countries. Based on the foregoing, it has become imperative for English Language teachers and learners to realize the fundamental role of information and communication technology as a catalyst in the advancement of the frontiers of knowledge in language acquisition which is a prerequisite to the viability of the global economic development.

Teaching and Learning English Language in the Traditional Classroom Setting

Gone were the days when teaching of English was restricted to all that the teacher had to say to the learners, a situation which made learners inactive in the teaching-learning situation. Be that as it may and without mincing words, the time has come for teachers and learners of English to realize the fundamental role of information and communication technology not only in the area of language teaching and learning but also in the global economy where the proficient use of English is fast assuming the indispensable engine of growth and development. It has therefore become expedient to note that the effective teaching and learning of English has gone beyond the stereotypical to regimented/tradition of mere classroom teaching because of the emergence of various gadgets in information and communication technology.

According to Brown (1980) second language education has changed considerably, pointing out the importance of the use of an “electric enlightened approach” to theory building but cautions that classroom contact is still very necessary for second language learners to give real-world validity to their theory building. Brown’s theoretical comments about the classroom vignettes contribute to the attainment of this goal as major methodological approaches and current issues in language teaching are depicted in these vignettes, first with the direct method, grammar translation and the Audio-Lingual method.

Similarly, Randall (2006) has admitted that technology has become a major component; a must-have in many homes around the world, with its concomitant influence permeating all facets of human lives, including education. This is a welcome development by many as it shows the direction in which language instruction will be driven by new advancements in technology.

ICT in Communicative/Learning modes

In any teaching-learning situation, learners can respond at ease for communicative mode of teaching. According to Madhavi (2010), communicative method for learning languages combines extensively, high-quality content with flexible and interactive multimedia technology. This comprehensive language learning method can act as a total solution for self-teaching, as well as teaching support to formal courses. Through a wide range of activities, a variety of skills could be developed in a learner. A learner needs to communicate in oral and written comprehension, as well as oral and written expression.

In order to achieve those stated objectives, Madhavi (2010) has identified three possible learning modes as:
The Guided Mode: this offers a step-by-step course. When organized into learning paths, this mode focuses on the acquisition of functional language patterns across a broad spectrum of themes. In this mode, a learner at the Junior Secondary School (JSS) level in Nigeria or lower intermediate level in some other countries can learn pronunciation, grammar, functions of words and vocabulary by applying the rules.

The Free-to-roam: this gives a learner the option of learning by topic or by linguistic skill. This mode is particularly useful for learners who are at the senior secondary school (SSS) in Nigeria or intermediate level of learning and also for teachers who want to familiarize themselves with the content available to them.

The dynamic mode: here, the advanced learners can immediately be immersed in an authentic learning context through the various dialogues and videos which illustrate every day and professional life and line with current pedagogical trends, familiarize learners with the voicing of the language using recordings made by native speakers.

Closely related to the communicative/learning modes is the use of language laboratory which can be used to enhance language teaching and learning processes through teacher’s console with language learning software.

This serves as a platform for learning, practising and producing language of teaching. The functional use of language laboratory according to Schrum (2000) is attributed to the following objectives:
- To maintain good linguistic competence through accuracy in grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary.
- To develop pragmatic competence, to understand the grammar form, function and state of normality.
- To enrich the discourse competence, to prepare the learner to be able to produce contextualize written text and speech.
- To acquire strategic competence to use both spoken and written language to use in a wide range of communicating strategies.

In teaching phonetics for example, the sound of English language can be written down using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) for adequate exercises. The use of minimal pair perception exercises (sheep – ship, zeal – seal, ten – then, bird – board, shout – tout, port – pot) helps learners learn the sound of English. This can also be well practised on pronunciation exercises with the help of software or by using CDs in language laboratory.

ICT in Teaching
Teachers are faced with the challenge of education through technology. Keefe (2007) states that schools must produce “adaptable individuals” who will keep up with the rapidly moving development of society. Furthermore, he argues that one of the most basic challenges of teaching is now to create, maintain and improve conditions for learning (2007). Garrett (2009) states, that when using technologies teachers can approach language teaching more holistically. Furthermore, she mentions that before technology was integrated into teaching, the four language skills required four different lesson plans. Some teachers now can over take by integrating textual, aural, and visual input” (Garrett, 2009). Moreover, Yunus and Suliman (2014) present a study conducted in Asia, which showed that 89.6% of the 58 students involved in the study agreed that using ICT had improved their overall language skills.

Teaching through ICT has its advantages. However, psychological factors, such as motivation and learner engagement has a role in learners’ language acquisition (Young, 2003) and to be able to effectively use technologies in education a level of motivation and autonomy among EFL learners is required. Autonomy is further brought up by Jacobs and Farrell (2003) who state that education and teaching have gone through a paradigm shift, related to language teaching, where one of the primary changes has been the focus on learner autonomy.
Furthermore, they claim that learners need to be able to influence what is in their curriculum. The different ways of presenting subject matter, which the learners can choose from, are also related to the idea of learner autonomy (Jacob & Farrell, 2003) and correct use of ICT could provide options for personalized instruction. A study conducted by Yunus et al. (2013) was aimed to find the advantages and disadvantages of using ICT in ESL teaching, specifically reading and writing skills. One of the secondary school teachers involved in the study explicitly points out the strengths of ICT when it comes to attracting attention and customizing tasks. However, mentioned in another study by Yunus et al. (2013), a teacher who was in the study commented that the use of ICT in teaching could be a distraction which causes the teachers to lose control of the classroom.

The classroom is complex and instruction given by teachers is not always good for all learners. However, ICT, mainly through Internet, provides the opportunity for learners to access various types of instruction at any time customized for their particular needs (Davies et al. 2013). This is further supported by several researchers such as Yunus et al. (2013) who states that it is a great possibility for teachers to be able to present subject matter in different ways depending on the individual student’s learning style. The idea of customizing instruction is further supported by Davies et al. (2010), Mullamaa (2010) and Garrett (2009) in relation to his research on CALL (see section 3).

ICT in teaching affects both students and teachers. It offers great opportunities for communicative language learning using computers and online software. In addition to the teachers’ classroom practice, it also has an effect on students’ attitude towards language learning and motivation.

**Impact of ICT on Language Teaching and Learning**

Many arguments have been advanced on the impact of information and communication technology (ICT) on the teaching and learning of language. While some are of the opinion that it would make students smarter and enhance the teaching and learning of language, others posited that there is no certainty about its possibilities because many educators are not yet familiar with the technology to use and how to apply it in the teaching – learning process (Morse, 1972). For instance, there has been a great deal of debates in the past few decades on the pedagogical worth of computers in the classroom. While some researchers have suggested that technology often remains antiquated, limited to the simple writing assignments and browsing the internet (Cuban, 2001), others have suggested that this has been due in part, to educators’ limited knowledge of the role played by communication technology in language instruction, a situation which shows that the use of computer is only a medium in which a variety of methods, approaches and pedagogical philosophies are implemented (Garrett, 1991). This implies that the use of ICT in language education has its merits and challenges.

**Prospects of the use of ICT in Language Education**

Information and communication technology (ICT) is of immense help in virtually all areas of teaching and learning. In the field of language education, there is now so much emphasis on on-line learning, which has been seen as the great liberator by freeing both teachers and students to accomplish learning in new and exciting by sourcing information from the Internet (Schrum, 2000). Other prospects of ICT in language can be summarized as expanding access to language programs, improving the quality of teaching and learning, providing access to current up-to-date materials and offering teachers and learners an avalanche of materials in different modes.

Specifically, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2006) stated amongst others that:

- English lessons that incorporate multimedia applications can exert powerful motivation and provide bored students with exciting new ways to learn.
- The use of ICTs enhances English Language competence as well as the quality of learners’ experience.
- The effective use of ICTs removes the time and space limitations found in traditional teaching, as classroom dialogue can now extend beyond the time and space constraints.
It allows students to learn more autonomously and thereby raises self-esteem and confidence.
- In enhances learners’ interaction, verbalization and involvement in group collaborative learning.

It is pertinent to note that television with its array of foreign channels, as provided by DSTV and other cable channels can be of tremendous help in language acquisition. Information and communication technology helps the students to perform better in language learning than with regimented traditional classroom teaching. Online learning has the potentials to offer anyone with an internet connection access to a wide expanse but inexpensive education just as e-learning and computer allow schools to deliver classes to students anywhere in the world (Educause, 2010).

Problems/Constraints of the use of ICT in Language Education
The view that the internet and other forms of information and communication technology are of immense benefit to the education system is incontrovertible. The internet is repository of enormous content but it also contains an equal amount of junk and obscene sites which, if not regulated and censored before students are allowed to work on it, can lead to all forms of moral decadence, especially among teenagers and youths. The teachers are not totally immune from the obscene sites.

The success or failure of a teaching – learning situation in language acquisition rests to a large extent on the teacher. However, it has been discovered that many teachers are yet to upgrade or familiarize themselves with ICT and its application in the classroom setting (Morse, 1972).

Considering the above notion, it can be inferred that the integration of ICTs in language education is still being faced by the general apathy on the part of both the learners and the teachers. In addition, poverty and perhaps economic mismanagement can be seen as great impediments to the viability and sustainability of the use of ICTs in English Language teaching and learning process not only in Nigeria but also in some other developing countries.

Furthermore, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA 2000) has identified the following as major constraints to the use of ICTs in language education:
- Electricity, phone lines, internet facilities etc. are either unreliable or expensive.
- Video recorders and other ICTs are locked in storage closets because only few teachers know how to operate and incorporate them into their instructional programs.
- ICT trained teachers often quit teaching for more lucrative jobs because teaching is not attractive especially in Sudan.
- Poor maintenance of the existing ICT gadgets (where provided) is a debilitating factor against the use of ICT in language education.
- There are no language and computer laboratories in virtually all schools in Sudan.

Large or overcrowded classes may interfere with the objectives of the use of ICTs

Computers, Internet and EFL Reading
Integrating computers or/and the internet technology in the Foreign language classroom is a subject of great debate. Most research findings in the field of ICT reveal promising results about the use of computers and internet in EFL reading. Kim (2008) assumes that these technologies can provide “both ESL/EFL teachers and students with virtually boundless uses” (Kim, 2008:242). CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) has nowadays become a common feature of most EFL classrooms. A wealth of research (e.g. Jonassen et al, 1999) stress the great benefits CALL has in increasing students’ interaction (in the target language) in the form of exchanging, discussing and negotiating utterances and information to construct students to engage with materials in authentic environments and to integrate various language skills and usage (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). With particular emphasis on the reading classroom, Case and Truscott (1999) stress the importance of computers and the internet as good sources in developing reading skills. They argued that computer-based reading helps increase
students’ interaction with texts, attention to individual needs, and increases independence through an ability to read texts they would not otherwise be able to read. It also helps them improve their sight word vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension which are crucial for improvement in reading. Similarly, AlKahtani (1999) comments that previous research about the use of computers for reading instruction clearly supported the idea that computer-based instruction facilitates students’ reading comprehension and increases their reading speed such as studies conducted by (Kulik et al, 1983).

Moreover, Pérez Correa et al (2004) provide guidelines for successful computer-reading instruction in the classroom:

- Computer instruction in reading should focus on meaning and stress reading comprehension.
- Computer instruction in reading should foster active involvement and stimulate thinking.
- Computer instruction in reading should support and extend students’ knowledge of text structure.
- Computer instruction in reading should make use of content from a wide range of subject areas.
- Computer instruction in reading should link reading and writing. Taking into account all that has already been mentioned about the important role of computers in the reading classroom, one can assert that successful instruction could be more efficient if students are actively engaged in their learning and made more responsible for their reading, because computer-based instruction is student-centered instruction (Pedersen & Liu, 2003; Sandholtz et al, 1997). Moreover and compared to direct models or teacher-centered teaching, “the use of computers in a student-centered approach involves active participation of students in their learning process” Kyeung Kim, 2008: 243). In this respect, studies of some researchers (e.g. Miller and Olson 1994 and Cuban 2001) further state that the use of computers can sometimes transform teachers’ pedagogical practices from teacher-centered to student-centered ones. Due to the invaluable role of the internet technology in the classroom it has become as put by chen (2008) “possible and feasible for language teachers to make effective use of instructional materials, especially in teaching language and culture” (Chen, 2008:1016). During the last 10 years, more and more language teachers have integrated the internet into the classroom (Fischer, 1999) for the simple reasons that:
  
  - It offers “a new learning environment and a wealth of pedagogic possibilities” (Yang, 2001: 156).
  - It could serve as technological scaffolding, which complements teacher scaffolding inside and outside the classrooms (Ibid).
  - It encourages students, increases autonomous learning potential and brings enthusiasm into the classroom (Ellinger et al, 2001).
  - It serves as a mediating tool for technology enhanced and student-centered instructional environments (Watson, 2006).
  - It helps motivate students (Warschauer, 1999 and Yang, 2001).
  - It contributes to teacher professional development (Al-Mekhlafi, 2004).

In reading particularly, Leu and Leu (1997), for example, point out that electronic books and stories in EFL classrooms enrich students’ interest and lead them to be a good readers. Furthermore, the internet technology can be used to stimulate different tasks in the EFL reading classroom, for example online-reading materials such as reading online news “prepare students to become life-long users of the language” (LeLoup and Ponterio, 2004: 06). For better understanding of the various possibilities of implementing any technological device in the EFL classroom and to ignite teachers’ curiosity to use ICT in teaching EFL reading, we deem it necessary to make a comparison between the traditional and the technology-enhanced reading/extensive reading classroom. their knowledge about the target language. For Harmer (2007) computer-based instruction can also provide students with unreachable and fascinating activities which motivate them. Ybarra and Green (2003) state that computers can provide added practice when necessary.
5.2 EFL Teacher Training
Teaching using ICT puts demands on teachers as well as students. To effectively implement information and communication technologies (ICT) into the classroom it means that not only students need to be proficient in the various programs and software but also teachers. Yunus et al. (2010) discuss, with regards to the demands of teachers nowadays, that the use of simple classroom pedagogy cannot be used in the same way when ICT is integrated. Post-graduate education, university education of new teachers, is equally important as the education of the young students of today’s upper secondary schools. Teacher education is facing immense tension at the moment with focus on teacher quality. Furthermore, if ICT and computer assisted language learning is to be a tool for teachers, the education of new teachers is a major factor (Garrett, 2009). State that teachers need to synchronize themselves with technology and take advantage of the possibilities provided as our world progresses. This aspect is further noted by Stockwell (2009) when stating that “keeping up with technological developments”, and finding out the different areas of functionality of the technology available, are strategies teachers can use to successfully use technology in language teaching.

Application of technology in instruction, mentioned earlier by Maryam et al. (2013), is further discussed by Hismanoglu (2012) as a point of investigation of how future generations of EFL teachers will integrate ICT into their teaching. Furthermore, he states that pre-service teachers with a negative perception towards ICT cannot stimulate and transfer their ICT teaching experience to students (Hismanoglu, 2012).

Another concern is that the teachers at universities are not proficient enough in using ICT, more specifically computer assisted language learning, to transfer skills to undergraduate teachers. Although, she states that ICT probably is integrated in most teacher training programmes to some extent (Garrett, 2009).

Conclusion
The use of information and communication technology (ICT) cannot be underestimated in language teaching and learning process because emerging technologies make it pertinent and practical to approach learning in ways that have been advocated by scientists, theorists and educational psychologists. It is imperative for modern day teachers and learners to keep abreast of the modern trend at improving teaching and learning of English language through the use of Information and Communication Technology. Suffice it to say that information and communication technology has revolutionized society globally, including how language instruction is taught and delivered.

The internet in particular has become a conduit where people can learn, share and collaborate in ways not possible many years before now. A great deal of success however comes from preparing students to interact and learn in this internet age. Therefore, if ICT is integrated into the teaching and learning of language, our renewed approach to the teaching and learning of English will go a long way in making ICT a more rewarding partner in the teaching-learning process.

In the light of the findings, it is recommended that teachers should upgrade and familiarize themselves in the use and application of ICT facilities in the acquisition of language education. The commitment and enthusiasm to the teaching and learning of English through the effective use of ICT should be of utmost importance not only to the curriculum planners and education policy makers but also the teachers and the learners of English. In order to facilitate the integration of ICT into language learning, the following should be put in place:
- Constant/regular supply of electricity
- Provision of computers in schools for learners and laptops for teachers of English language.
- Recruitment of and adequate remuneration of competent instructors.
- Regular computer training and re-training for English language teachers.
- Provision of internet facilities in schools.
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