

The Role of Technology in Language Learning

LE RÔLE DE LA TECHNOLOGIE DANS L'APPRENTISSAGE DES LANGUES

Taher Bahrani¹

Abstract: The present study aims at investigating the role of different technologies which can provide authentic language input for language learning in EFL context. As the matter of fact, the study focuses on different technologies as sources of language input in EFL contexts which lack social interaction as an established source of language input in ESL context. In this regard, a study was conducted with the help of twenty language learners in Iran and twenty language learners in Malaysia. During the study, language learners in Iran used different technologies as authentic source of language input for language learning. On the contrary, the language learners were asked to use the social interaction as a source of language input. The results of the post-test indicated a significant improvement in language proficiency of those who used technology.

Key words: Technology; Language input; Social interaction; Language proficiency

Résumé La présente étude vise à étudier le rôle de différentes technologies qui peuvent apporter une entrée de langue authentique pour l'apprentissage des langues dans le contexte ALE (Anglais langue étrangère). En fait, l'étude se concentre sur de différentes technologies comme des sources d'entrée de langue dans des contextes ALE qui manquent de l'interaction sociale. A cet égard, l'étude a été menée avec l'aide de vingt apprenants en Iran et vingt apprenants en Malaisie. Au cours de l'étude, les apprenants en Iran ont utilisé de différentes technologies comme source authentique de l'entrée de langue pour l'apprentissage des langues. Au contraire, les apprenants en Malaisie ont été invités à utiliser l'interaction sociale comme source d'entrée de langue. Les résultats du post-test ont indiqué une amélioration significative de maîtrise de la langue de ceux qui ont utilisé la technologie.

Mots clés: Technologie; Langue d'entrée; Interaction sociale; Maîtrise de la langue

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INTRODUCTION

In my experience as a language learner in an EFL context, learning English was challenging issue. I also found many of my friends lacked motivation and they did not know how and where to advance their English skills except by waiting for teachers to feed them with an explicit instruction in the classroom. This was because students were not required to use English in meaningful ways outside the classroom. Later, when I was an English teacher and an English teacher trainer, I also found challenges with the English curriculum and teaching methodology. Although the curriculum encouraged multiple English language skills, many teachers still based their teaching on grammar rules, rote learning, and textbook based lectures. Many English textbooks introduced by the teachers were dry, with a lot of grammar exercises and reading passages which did not relate to learners' lives and interests. As a result, learners found English classrooms very unpractical and boring. Yet, they liked watching movies in English and using the Internet. However, these English activities were usually overlooked and received little support among teachers.

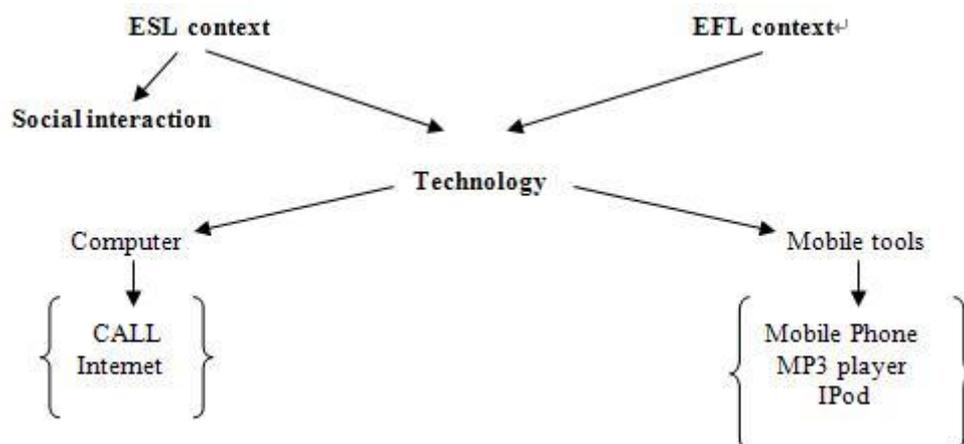
In this regard, the early use of different technologies such as computers in language learning constituted a natural extension and development of the work done in the audiovisual language labs. The pedagogical effectiveness of computer assisted language learning in formal and informal settings also began in direct proportion to the development of the capacities of computers. The following chart show the available sources of language input in ESL and EFL contexts.

The Source of Authentic Language Input for SLA in Informal Language Learning Setting in ESL and EFL Contexts

¹ Department of English, Mahshahr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Mahshahr, Iran.

Email: taherbahrani@yahoo.com

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Accordingly, the present study focuses on the effectiveness of different technologies on language proficiency in EFL context which lacks the social interaction.

1. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Most of the researches which are related to the present study consider the use of technology and social interaction to enhance language learning based on the behaviorist and interactionist view of language learning. The behaviorists consider learning the language through stimulus and response with the help of technology in informal setting and the interactionists consider the interaction with the native speakers in the target language country or ESL context to enhance language learning.

In the same line, the early use of computers in language learning both in informal and formal language environments constituted a natural extension and development of the work done in the audiovisual language labs. The pedagogical effectiveness of computer assisted language learning in formal and informal settings also began in direct proportion to the development of the capacities of computers.

In this regard, Adams, Morrison, and Reedy (1968) claim that CALL has the potential in not only to supervise language learners' performance in informal settings but also to monitor, record, analyze and summarize data about their learning. Considering the use of CALL in both formal and informal language settings, Keller (1987) also highlights the pedagogical values of the speed of electronic dictionaries because they are faster than paging manually through a conventional one. According to Keller, language learners can use computer dictionaries in their informal language learning based on the learner-centered approach. Decker (1976) also argues that most significantly, CALL provides instant feedback correcting drill exercises and tests. It seems that Decker has based his arguments regarding the use of CALL in informal settings based on the behaviorist approach that emphasizes stimulus and response for habit formation. In other words, language learners use the computer which is a kind of technology in both formal and informal learning settings to do some repetition and drills which are believed by the behaviorists to boost language learning.

However, in many other cases computers as a kind of technology can offer access to authentic language input resources that can be used to engage language learners in formal as well as informal language learning settings in listening, reading, repetitions, sending emails, participating in different chatrooms, communicating in the language via the web, and filling in blanks but not in producing oral language (Egan, 1999). In this regard, the use of computer-assisted language learning programs to improve speaking proficiency through developing a software which require language learners produce the language orally has been studied by Egan (1999).

Most commercial computer programs designed for language learning require language learners to do some exercises such as filling blanks, choosing the correct answers, practicing in reading and listening to authentic written and spoken language, producing language by repeating words or sentences, recording their responses and comparing them to native models (Egan, 1999). However, having language learners to produce spoken language is more than doing the above-mentioned activities or just recording one's voice and comparing it to native models by the means of computers. Accordingly, improving speaking proficiency and the acquisition of communicative language skills make it necessary to develop a software that is speech-enabled. Moreover, it should engage learners in interactive speaking activities both in formal and informal settings of language learning by computers.

Although Egan's software leads language learners to produce speech through interaction with computer, it mainly does so base on stimulus and response which reflect the behaviorist approach. Language learners seem to be in charge of their learning but the authentic language input and what the learners can gain is limited to what the software offers. This limitation may break the interaction when the software lacks the necessary stimulus or response. In other words, the critical point is that this interaction can be limited at times. Actually, if one stimulus is not recognized by the software, the interaction may fail or may be directed to something rather than what the language learner intends.

In recent years, the use of "non-desktop" technologies such as audio/visual mass media, for example, TV is also attracting increasing interest amongst researchers in informal, adult and lifelong learning and second language acquisition (Milton, 2002; Evans, 2006; Mackenzie, 1997; Fallahkhair & Masthoff, 2004). According to Milton (2002), mass media technologies can give the teachers as well as the learners a wide variety of activities and experiences that can support language learning in informal settings as well as the formal settings of the school.

Another study regarding the use of technology rather than computer in informal language learning was conducted by Fallahkhair and Mosthoff (2004) which focused on learning the language in informal setting through interactive television. The main purpose of the study is to focus on the learning potential of iTV in informal settings, currently available in the UK and some other countries via cable and satellite technologies. According to Fallahkhair and Mosthoff, unlike conventional television, iTV allows some level of user interactivity, providing new facilities for information retrieval and communication. In order to support the great potentiality of iTV for language learning in informal settings, they based their claim on a sound pedagogical framework that was derived from learners' interests, motivations and learning styles. Moreover, the study considered the possibility of using iTV in informal settings based on different language learning theories.

Considering the above-mentioned researches, the existing gap related to the literature review which the present research tries to fill is that none of the reviewed researches considered EFL context which has no social context similar to that of the ESL context. However, the question to be answered by the present research is that in EFL context in which no social interaction with the native speakers exist in informal setting and language learners can access and exposure to authentic language input through different technologies help to improve EFL learner's language proficiency.

2. AN EXPERIMENT ON THE USE OF DIFFERENT TECHNOLOGIES IN EFL CONTEXT AND SOCIAL INTERACTION IN ESL CONTEXT ON LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Participants

The participants of this study were initially one hundred language learners including both males and females from Iran as an EFL context and one hundred language learners including both males and females from Malaysia as an ESL context. Out of the initial participant from each context, 20 participants were selected based on language proficiency pre-test.

Instruments and materials

The first instrument was a set of sample IELTS language proficiency test which was used as a pre-test and post-test. This study will have parallel rather than the same pre-post tests to ensure the internal validity.

Procedure

This research was conducted based on pre-test and post-test design. The first step to take, before the participants were selected, was to verify the reliability of the sample language proficiency pre-post tests. To do so, the tests were given to a trial group of language learners in both contexts separately. Then, the reliabilities of both tests were calculated separately by means of KR-21 formula. Once the reliabilities of the above-mentioned tests were verified, the tests were given to one hundred EFL students including both males and females in Iran and one hundred ESL learners in Malaysia. When the scores of the tests were obtained, 20 participants who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected separately as homogeneous language learners from each context.

Throughout the experiment which lasted for 3 months, the participants in the EFL contexts were asked to use different technologies to have access to authentic language input and the participants in the ESL context had exposure to the social interaction.

At the end of the experiment, all the participants took the second parallel language proficiency test from IELTS as a post-test to check if there was any significant improvement regarding their general language proficiency.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the post-test were indicative of the fact that technology had more effect improving language proficiency of the language learners than social interaction in this case study.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics Related to EFL Participants' IELTS Pre-Post Tests Results

EFL	N	MEAN	SD	t-test
Pretest	20	5.5	.52	_4.003
Posttest	20	6.5	.48	

T-observed=-4.003, T-critical=1.671, T-observed bigger than t-critical

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics Related to ESL Participant's IELTS Pre-Post Tests Results

ESL	N	MEAN	SD	t-test
Pretest	20	5.5	.59	_0.135
Posttest	20	6	.47	

T-observed=-0.135, T-critical=1.671, T-observed smaller than t-critical

The results are in line with the studies conducted by Brinton and Gaskill (1978), Cauldwell (1996), and Mackenzie (1997) regarding the effect of exposure to mass media on improving different language skills. It also sheds more light on what Krashen (1981) claims regarding exposure to language through social interaction in informal language learning setting in ESL context. Accordingly, more exposure does not necessarily mean more language proficiency in ESL context.

The reason that ESL participants improved their language proficiency less than the participants in EFL context who had no access to social interaction may be supported by the notion of scaffolding.

The scaffolding outside classroom setting is given by ordinary people or the peers, not from the language teachers. However, this support from peers in social interaction aims at making the language easier which may not contribute to language development in general.

On the contrary, in EFL context, language learners should use different techniques in order to understand the necessary input from exposure to different technologies. The techniques such as the use of dictionary or subtitle which are used initially not for language learning in informal setting can lead to the improvement of language proficiency.

CONCLUSION

The present study tried to provide empirical evidence of the effectiveness of authentic sources of language input provided by different technologies on language learning in EFL context. Actually, the study examined a broad concept that whether technology could be an alternative source of language input rather than social interaction which does not exist in EFL context or not. According to an experiment conducted with the help of twenty language learners from an EFL context and twenty language learners from an ESL context, the results proved that exposure to different types of technologies in EFL context can improve language proficiency more than social interaction which does not exist in EFL context.

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