

Original Paper

Saudi EFL Learners' Perceptions of the Benefits of ICT Integration into English Learning

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Abstract

This study focuses on exploring the benefits perceived by Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students of integrating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into English learning and teaching. It also aims to determine their use of ICT and their attitudes to its use in learning and teaching. Data were collected through a questionnaire survey from 120 female preparatory year students studying at an English Language Institute (ELI) at a University in Saudi Arabia. The quantitative data obtained were analysed through statistical descriptive analysis. The findings of the study reveal positive attitudes among students on the use of ICT in English learning and teaching. The majority of the students used ICT to access English learning resources to learn English. Students also perceived ICT as a useful tool that could be used to access authentic materials. In addition, students strongly agreed that ICT can improve their English learning and helps increase learning autonomy. The findings of the study were discussed and compared with the findings of related literature. This study provides valuable insights on how students perceive ICT as a tool of learning and teaching that can help provide a better English learning experience. Moreover, this study contributes to the research area of ICT use in EFL learning in the Arab higher education context.

Keywords

ICT, Technology, EFL, Learners' perceptions, Attitudes, Benefits, ELI, Higher education, Arab learners, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Nowadays, there is widespread use of technology in all life aspects, including education. The availability of technological gadgets has changed the shape of educational strategies and has motivated educators, teachers and curriculum designers to provide learners with appealing and effective learning opportunities. Information and communication technology (ICT) is widely used in EFL teaching and

learning to overcome the challenges faced by learners in the process of acquiring English language skills. Learners today are equipped with internet access and have access to a range of learning software, printers, projectors and white smart boards through smart phones, iPods, iPads and laptops designed to reach all types of learners. English language institutes housed within Saudi Arabian universities strive to provide quality classes to English learners by providing them with the latest and best teaching strategies that would motivate them to learn both in and out of class. Thus, when compared to the traditional style of instruction, the integration of ICT in EFL instruction can be seen as a motivating element (e.g., Zinan & Sai, 2017; Albugami & Ahmed, 2015; Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2011). As a result, understanding learners' perceptions of the use of ICT in teaching English and identifying the benefits can yield more information about the amount and nature of ICT that should be integrated into English instruction and activities in and out of the classroom. In addition, the ELI faculty's main target is to provide better learning opportunities for preparatory year students who, based on the researcher's long experience teaching in the ELI, seem to be struggling. Thus, the focus of this study is preparatory year students' perceptions of the use of ICT in learning and teaching English at an English Language Institute at a Saudi University. This study puts forward some practical recommendations for more developed teaching strategies that integrate ICT in a more fruitful and systematic manner. To the researcher's best knowledge there are very few studies that explore EFL learners' attitudes to the use of ICT in English language learning and teaching in the Saudi higher education context. This study addresses this gap in the literature.

This research questions set by this study are:

- What is EFL learners' reported use of ICT in English language learning and teaching?
- What are EFL learners' attitudes to the use of ICT in language learning and teaching?
- What do EFL learners perceive to be the benefits of using ICT in learning and teaching?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Benefits of ICT for EFL Teaching and Learning

The use of ICT can be considered to be crucial to effective EFL teaching and learning today. The benefits of ICT have been a popular topic of investigation in all education sectors including EFL teaching. One of the most reported benefits of ICT in EFL teaching that motivate teachers to use ICT is that it makes teaching and learning more enjoyable (Li & Walsh, 2011). Teachers can integrate different kinds of ICT applications including YouTube videos, digital dictionaries, blogs, emails, digital games and learning mobile applications. These applications were found to be effective in supporting English language teaching. For example, Kabooha and Elyas (2018) found that the majority of EFL students agree that YouTube has improved their English vocabulary knowledge which resulted in better performance in written comprehensions. There is a vast choice of ICT applications which can help improve learning skills. Gamlo (2019) found that the use of the *Learn English Grammar* application significantly improved students' grammar. The students who participated in Nalliveetil and Alenazi's

(2016) study stated that their use of mobile applications, including digital dictionaries, improved their pronunciation and spelling. Moreover, Chen (2013) found that college level EF learners who used technological applications believed that their English improved and were more confident in their use of English in different situations. ICT provides learners with access to English resources whenever and whenever they wish. Ezza and Bakry (2014) highlighted the fact that ICT offers English learners with a variety of learning materials outside class. This helps create independent learners who are able to find relevant course materials to match their learning needs and levels. In China, Zinan and Sai (2017) conducted a study to investigate English language college students' perceptions about the use of ICT. The students reported that ICT had created a meaningful and motivating learning environment for autonomous learning that was perceived to be far superior to the environment in traditional classes. ICT improved their learning outcomes and gave them the opportunity to communicate with others and learn using free technological English resources at any time. Çelik et al. (2012) found that students used ICT outside the class to access supplementary resources, thus increasing their engagement in the language learning process.

ICT is a very attractive tool for EFL teachers and learners and provides an ideal learning platform to teach and learn English. The interactive white board (IWB) was found to have many positive impacts on language learning which were summarised by Orr (2008). The author found that the use of the IWB promotes interactivity in class by allowing students to manage the materials in the IWB and insert images and videos. The author added that IWB is appealing to all types of learners as it provides visual and audio input to meet all the students' preferences and needs. It also helps to improve information retention (Orr, 2008).

To make the most of ICT in language learning depends on certain factors, which have been identified in the literature, must be in place (e.g., Al-Mahrooqi & Troudi, 2014; Albugami & Ahmed, 2015; Gamlo, 2014; Li & Walsh, 2011; Liu, 2009). These factors include the availability of computers, a reliable internet connection, technical support, well equipped labs and classrooms, training in the use of ICT, and teachers and learners having a positive attitude to the integration of ICT in learning. The literature on EFL learners' attitudes is discussed in the next section.

2.2 EFL Learners Attitudes towards ICT Use for Language Learning and Teaching

A review of the literature on Saudi EFL learners' attitudes on ICT suggests that students have mainly a positive attitude to ICT. Alshammari et al. (2018), Ezza and Bakry (2014), Farooq and Javid (2012) and Liton (2015), among others, found that the majority of Saudi college students had positive attitudes to the use of new technology and were confident in the use of computers to find resources to help them learn English. Alshammari et al. (2018) found that only 29% of the students were not satisfied with the use of ICT and did not have the skills to use it. Similarly, Liton (2015) conducted a qualitative and quantitative study to examine university students' perceptions of the use of technology to teach English. 33 EFL students from universities in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Pakistan participated in the study. Liton (2015) found that 80% of the students believed that technology is an effective and motivating technique

in language learning that increases learning and helps develop more student-centered activities that can increase learners' autonomy. The students commented that universities should ensure that there is reliable equipment in classrooms. The students with negative attitudes to technology were those with low technical skills. This finding indicates that universities should provide technical training for students on how to integrate technology in their learning. In Indonesia, Sundiran (2014) carried out a mixed methods study to investigate university students' attitudes to the use of ICT as an English learning tool. The students reported positive attitudes to ICT but had some concerns about the barriers to the efficient use of ICT. Lack of internet and ICT knowledge were the main obstacles to ICT use identified. Caldwell (2018) found that Japanese university students were satisfied with the integration of ICT and mobile learning in EFL classrooms, but highlighted the need to increase awareness about the potential of ICT and mobile learning among university teachers and administrators to develop learning. The author recommended that university administrators be aware of students' learning preferences to help them achieve better results.

In Vietnam, Tri and Nguyen (2014) conducted a survey among 149 second year university students to explore their use and attitudes of ICT use to learn English. The authors found that students perceived ICT as being an effective tool to improve their learning skills including listening, reading, writing and grammar. However, the authors suggested that students should receive technical training that teaches them how to adequately use ICT to learn English. In China, Zinan and Sai (2017) and Liu (2009) found that college students had positive attitudes towards ICT. Accordingly, the authors recommended that teachers should use ICT more often in teaching to improve learning. It is also the teachers' role to encourage students to use ICT outside the classroom and guide them to find English teaching material online.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Setting and Participants

This study used a quantitative research approach to answer the research questions. The study was carried out at an English language institute (ELI) at a University in Saudi Arabia. The main purpose of the study was to explore the EFL learners' perceptions of the benefits of using ICT in the teaching and learning of English. It also aimed to explore learners' uses of ICT and their attitudes to it. The participants were EFL female students who are in their preparatory year. English is a compulsory subject in the first year and students must gain a pass in order to embark on their major programme. Female and male campuses are separately located. Therefore, the study employed a convenience sampling procedure to select the participants. 120 female intermediate EFL students from two classes who were taught by the researcher were selected for the study.

3.2 Procedure and Data Collection

A questionnaire was designed by the researcher based on questionnaires found in the literature. The main purpose of the questionnaire was to explore students' attitudes to the use of ICT and their

perception of the impact of ICT on the process of learning English. The questionnaire items were divided into two sections covering the students' use of ICT and their attitude to the use of ICT in the teaching and learning of English. The first section of the questionnaire consisted of ten Yes/No questions. The second section was designed using 18 Likert scale questions, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The questionnaire was translated into Arabic, the native language of the participants. The Arabic and English versions of the questionnaire were checked by three Arab colleagues who hold a Ph.D. and are fluent in the English language. Prior to the distribution of the questionnaire, it was piloted on 10 EFL students to identify and adjust any ambiguous items to ensure more accurate results. Piloting the research instrument is essential to increase its reliability and validity (Cohen et al., 2011).

During the data collection phase, questionnaires were distributed to teachers in their classrooms to be completed by their students and returned to the researcher. A total of 120 completed questionnaires were returned to be analysed.

The questionnaire was divided into three themes, each of which encompassed a group of items. The themes were: ICT use, attitudes towards ICT and perceptions of the benefits of ICT use. The software package IBM SPSS statistics ver. 20 for Windows was used to analyse the questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were used to obtain the means of each theme, the standard deviation and the reliability of the scale. Inferential statistics were also applied to run one sample t-test to test the significance of the mean for each theme.

The results were evaluated, presented and then discussed in relation to the relevant literature to answer the research questions.

4. Results

Inter-item Person Correlations are shown in Table 1 below. All the themes had a statistically significant correlation with the total sum of the scale $p\text{-value} < 0.005$, which means that the scale was valid and had internal consistency with its themes.

Table 1. Validity Test

Use of ICT	<i>r</i>	.504**
	<i>p-value</i>	.005
Attitude towards ICT	<i>r</i>	.917**
	<i>p-value</i>	.005
Perceptions of the impact of ICT	<i>r</i>	.768**
	<i>p-value</i>	.005

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was calculated for the scale. As seen in Table 2 below, the scale showed an acceptable consistency as a measuring tool.

Table 2. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.724	28

The summary of the statistics regarding the frequencies of items of the scale shows that the students have access to ICT such as computers, internet and smartphones. 97.5% of the students responded that they had access to internet at home and had smartphones. 85% of the students used their smartphones to learn English, whereas, only 56% used computers to learn English at home. 53% of the students responded that their instructors required them to submit writing tasks through email. 68.3% responded that they did not have internet access at the university.

Table 3 below shows the mean of the "Use of ICT" is 0.75, which is equal to yes.

Table 3. Use of ICT

N.	120
Mean	.75
Std. Deviation	.14

Table 4 shows that the mean of "Attitude to ICT" is 3.66 which is equal to Agree. 87 students (with a weighted mean of 4.59) strongly agreed that ICT is useful to learn English. 55 students (with a weighted mean of 4.11) agreed that, because they had access to internet and Wi-Fi, they could learn English whenever they wanted. 49 students (with a weighted mean of 3.95) agreed that they can use ICT appropriately in their English learning and they like using ICT to learn English. 57 students (with a weighted mean of 3.98) agreed that they can access the ICT resources they need to learn English, whereas a small percentage of students (25%) agreed that ICT takes up too much time and 21.7% agreed that when their instructor uses the traditional instruction method they learnt more than when they use ICT.

Table 4. Attitudes to ICT

N.	120
Mean	3.66
Std. Deviation	0.42

Table 5 below shows that the mean of perceptions of the benefits of ICT is 4.24, which equals Strongly Agree. 65 students (with a summated weighted mean score of 4.36) strongly agreed that when their instructor uses ICT they are engaged more in learning. 55 students (with a summated mean score of 4.32) strongly agreed with that using ICT helps them learn English through authentic EFL materials. 54 students (with a summated mean score of 4.28) strongly agreed that when their instructor uses ICT they understand better.

Table 5. Perceptions of the Benefits of ICT

N.	120
Mean	4.24
Std. Deviation	0.46

The one sample t- test revealed that the “Use of ICT” was significantly yes p -value < 0.005 (Table 6).

Table 6. Use of ICT t-test

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Use of ICT	15.113	119	.005	.19917	.1731	.2253

The one sample t-test revealed that “Attitude towards ICT” and “Perceptions of the benefits of ICT” were significantly not equal to “Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree”; that is, it was significantly equal to Agree to Strongly Agree p -values < 0.005 (Table 7).

Table 7. Attitudes to ICT and Perceptions of the Benefits of ICT t-test

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Attitude towards ICT	16.990	119	.005	.65833	.5816	.7351
Perceptions of the benefits of ICT	29.500	119	.005	1.2416	1.1586	1.3247

5. Discussion

The findings of the study show that the majority of EFL students use ICT. They have smartphones and have access to internet and they use their phones to learn English. This is similar to Hossain’s (2018) findings with regard to university EFL students in Bangladesh. The author found that 90% of the students owned smartphones and that about 83% of them used smartphone applications to learning English. In this study, about half of the students reported that their teachers require them to submit their writing tasks through email. This leads to the discussion that teachers should be aware of the impact of using technology to teach English and that they should pay close attention to students’ learning preferences. It is recognised that students are familiar with technology and that increasing the use of technology in the learning and teaching process can create a favourable learning experience. This has been supported by several studies including Liu (2009) who found that the reason why students reported less positive attitudes to the use of ICT related to the use of teaching techniques that were more traditional. Liu (2009) found that students were not encouraged to use technology outside the

classroom which led to more negative attitudes towards the use of ICT. The author suggested that teachers should receive training on how to use ICT in their teaching. Teacher training on the use of technology has been discussed in several studies. Ageel (2011) conducted a study on university teachers in Saudi Arabia to investigate the factors that hinder teachers from using ICT in teaching. He found that one reason was lack of technology skills and reported that the teachers themselves suggested that their universities should provide training programs that educated them on applying ICT in teaching. One of the negative points reported by more than half of the students was the lack of access to internet at the university. This indicates that university leaders should ensure that learners and teachers have access to all the resources needed to reach the learning outcomes. This would motivate them to integrate ICT in their instruction. This supports the findings of Li and Walsh (2011) who investigated the factors influencing the uptake of ICT among Chinese secondary school teachers. The authors found that one of the factors encouraging teachers to use ICT in their teaching is the fact that their school was equipped with multimedia apparatus and software.

Findings from the data analysis suggest that most of the students have a positive attitude to the use of ICT in English teaching. 87 students out 120 strongly agreed that ICT is useful in learning English. As most own technological gadgets they can access ICT resources to learn English at any time they need and are familiar with the advantages of having these tools handy at any time and place. This result is in line with Ezza and Bakry's (2014) findings. The researchers studied college students' attitudes to the uptake of ICT to learn English. They found that the majority of students had a positive attitude to the integration of ICT in the teaching and learning of English. In this study, a small number of students (between 26-30 students) believed that ICT consumes a lot of time and stated that they preferred traditional techniques over ICT use in the teaching of English. There could be two reasons behind this negative attitude: the students have a low proficiency level in English and are more comfortable with face to face traditional instruction; or, the students are not familiar with new technology. Tri and Nguyen (2014) suggest that, as students could be ICT illiterate they should be educated on how to use ICT to learn. Liton (2015) also recommended that students' digital skills be developed through training on the use of technology applications for learning and teaching (p. 17).

The statistical analysis of the data showed that students significantly perceived ICT as beneficial for language learning. The students showed awareness of the benefits of ICT on their leaning English development and on their engagement to learn. In addition, they also believed that their teachers' use of ICT increased their comprehension and made them more independent learners. They also believed that ICT provides them with authentic materials that help them learn English by listening to native speakers. These advantages of ICT are discussed in several research studies that conclude that creating a promising learning environment leads to successful learning outcomes. This is consistent with Zinan and Sai's (2017) findings during a study they carried out in China to investigate college EFL students' perceptions about their ICT based English course. The authors found that students enjoyed the course and perceived that the use of ICT as a course tool had a great impact on their learning in several ways.

The authors concluded that the students agreed that ICT provided them with a more pleasant teaching environment than that created in traditional teaching classes. In addition, they valued the fact that ICT increased communication in English language between learners and teachers and allowed plenty of time for learning outside the class at any time for any period of time through authentic resources that made learning more fun and motivating.

This study had some limitations, one of which was that it was limited to EFL female students. Exploring male perceptions and use of ICT would have provided a gender basis of comparison with regard to attitude to ICT use to learn English. Also, the data collection approach was limited to the quantitative approach. Collecting qualitative data (e.g., through observation) would have allowed for a more vivid and insightful understanding of the nature of ICT use in the classroom.

6. Conclusion

This study concluded that EFL students attending a Saudi university perceive ICT to be a useful tool to learning English. Students were positive that ICT can help engage them in learning through a variety of authentic resources and allow them to learn English independently. There were a few students who did not value the use of ICT and preferred traditional teaching strategies.

In light of these findings the study can make some recommendations. To ensure that ICT use in teaching English is successful, it is recommended that institutes provide training programmes for students in the use of ICT in learning. For students to benefit from the advantages of using ICT, teachers should encourage students to use ICT at home by, for instance, submitting tasks through email, contacting teachers and peers through instant mobile messages or other social networks, creating online group discussions and uploading learning English apps. It is recommended that teachers and students share any innovative and digital learning resources regularly to make the best use of ICT to learn English.

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