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ICT4ELT: A study with reference to Kashmir

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Abstract

Benefits of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), especially the web 2.0 tools, like blogs and podcasts in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms have been confirmed by research conducted in the context of developed countries. Lack of infrastructure and a forward looking policy is hampering developing countries like India to reap the benefits of ICT. The present study reports the outcome of a survey conducted to find out the available ICT infrastructure and its use in colleges of one of Kashmir division of the northern state of Jammu and Kashmir of India. It further aims to highlight the benefits of using blogs and podcasts in ELT.

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1. Introduction

Uses of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in teaching and learning have been rapidly increasing in the last two decades. Challenges in, and barriers to their effective implementation apart, uses of ICT have a positive impact on situations of teaching and learning. Research conducted on the use of ICT have substantiated the claims of those who advocate what is known as e-teaching and e-learning, often considered a shift from the traditional mode of teaching and learning. The benefits range from enhancing the motivation of students and teachers, more collaboration and interaction between the participants in teaching-learning environments, learner-centric classroom activities and space for proactive role of learners, creation of self-assessment opportunities for learners etc. (Oliver, 2002), (Tinio, 2003, 7), (Sasseville, 2004), (Roschelle, Sharples, & Chan, 2005), (Ezziane, 2007), (Austin et al, 2010), (Anderson, 2010).

2. ICT in ELT

In the field of education known as English Language Teaching (ELT), use of computers as an aid in teaching and learning process started somewhere in 1960's (Warschauer, 2006). This approach known as Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) set forth the gradual process of technology inclusion in ELT classrooms. CALL programmers were designed to help students in learning and understanding different aspects of grammar, vocabulary

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and pronunciation. These programmers had the mechanism of providing feedback to the learners during practice sessions. Call programmers were designed as an aid to classroom teaching and were substantiated by other means like textbooks, oral drills etc. However, the scope of these programmers was constrained because of the limited language (Barr, 2004).

Scholars generally identify three phases in the use of computers as an aid to ELT. The three phases have been named as behavioristic CALL, Communicative CALL and Integrative CALL (Warschauer, 1996). These phases have also been referred to as Restricted CALL, Open CALL and Integrated CALL respectively (Bax, 2003).

The first phase of CALL influential in 1960's and 70's comprised of programmers with simple interactions between learners and limited feedback to the learner, "concentrating on decontextualized exercises" (Dudenay & Hocky 2012, 534). Furthermore learning exercises mainly involved language repetition (Schmid 2010, 159).

In the Communicative phase, the computer became more interactive in nature and the feedback process also improved substantially (Dudenay & Hocky 2012). The computer besides being a tutor attained the role of a stimulator "to stimulate students' discussion, writing or critical thinking" (Warschauer, 1996, 4).

Two major technological advancements led the beginning of Integrative CALL; the multimedia and Internet. The interaction between learners, through internet, became direct, inexpensive and convenient, that can take place 24 hours a day (ibid). Course books were supplemented by CDROMS, like Encarta (Dudeney & Hockey, 1912, 534). During this phase, a shift took place from computer-human interaction to human-human interaction through computer (Schmidt, 2010).

According to Bax (2003), CALL has to tread a long way to become fully integrated into the language teaching and learning process. He calls the stage, when technology becomes too commonplace like that of the technology associated with a pen or a book as 'Normalization'. "Normalization is therefore the stage when a technology is invisible, hardly even recognized as a technology, taken for granted in everyday life" (ibid, 23). At 'Normalization' CALL and learning process will be one and not as separate concepts. Drawing on the diffusion theory of Rogers (1995), and bringing it in tandem with the exigencies of language teaching, Bax (2003), has proposed seven stages for CALL integration to reach 'Normalization'. The proposed stages are:

- Early Adopters. A few teachers and schools adopt the technology out of curiosity.
- Ignorance/skepticism. However, most people are skeptical, or ignorant of its existence.
- Try once. People try it out but reject it because of early problems. They can't see its value—it doesn't appear to add anything of 'relative advantage'
- Try again. Someone tells them it really works. They try again. They see it does in fact have relative advantage.
- Fear/awe. More people start to use it, but still there is (a) fear, alternating with (b) exaggerated expectations.
- Normalizing. Gradually it is seen as something normal.
- Normalization. The technology is so integrated into our lives that it becomes invisible—'normalized'.

Among the two widely used tools of the web 2.0 era in ELT classrooms are Blogs and Podcasts. Research has indicated that these two have been successfully integrated into ELT classrooms in many parts of the world as an effective tool to substantiate teaching and learning process.

3. Blogs

A blog is a web application that provides a platform to people to write and share with others, anything they are interested in, with the provision for other people to respond likewise. "Blogs are online dairies. They are logs..... of thoughts, reflections, and events in the writers' life. A space for individuals to write whatever they choose, with an option for readers to comment on what they have read" (Eastment, 2005, 358).

Blogs can be effectively used in ELT for a wide variety of teaching and learning purposes. According to Hashmi & Najafi (2011), the use of blogs in ELT classrooms can be "refreshing, highly motivating and exciting" for the

learners. Blogs can serve as a “medium to reflect on material, inquire into issues, and interact with others”, besides providing a user-friendly and effective “environment for both learners and instructors” (603). In specific areas of ELT, blogs have been found to be quite useful in improving the skills of reading, writing and vocabulary development” (Guttler, 2011). These offer a space for real communication beyond classrooms (Noytim, 2010). User-friendly and interactive nature of Blogs has turned these into ‘sound instruments’ in teaching processes (Amir, Ismail & Hussin, 2011, 538).

Other studies like that of Godwin-Jones (2006), have concluded that blogs help learners in developing persuasive and argumentative skills, free expression of thoughts and ideas, besides helping students in writing and reading skills. Through blogs, learners can share their thoughts and experiences with their tutors and peers (Kim, 2008).

In an empirically grounded study, Deng & Yuen (2010) have summarized the following features of blogs that reflect their huge potential for teaching and learning processes.

“First, the blogs themselves were social-oriented. That is to say, blogging was not just about capturing experiences or releasing emotions, but also about reaching out to get in touch and initiate communications with other fellow students. Second, as a web-based broadcasting medium, blogs fostered a sense of connection within a community when community members read each other’s blogs. Third, the commenting function provided another channel for interaction and the exchange of social support. Likewise, the reflective learning process has been activated in three ways as well: Writing blogs enabled the student teachers to capture, externalize, and inspect their feelings and thoughts. Second, one’s experiences and thoughts captured in written form and stored in a public or semi-public space could trigger the reflection on the part of other classmates and amplify the practice of reflection within a community. Finally, a reflective dialogue between readers and bloggers could take place when readers post critical and constructive feedback online” (450).

Deng and Yuen (ibid) have proposed the following framework for what they refer to as “educational affordances of blogs”. The model is presented here (figure 1) to highlight the individual, social, interactive, expressive and reflective potential of blogs in teaching and learning process.

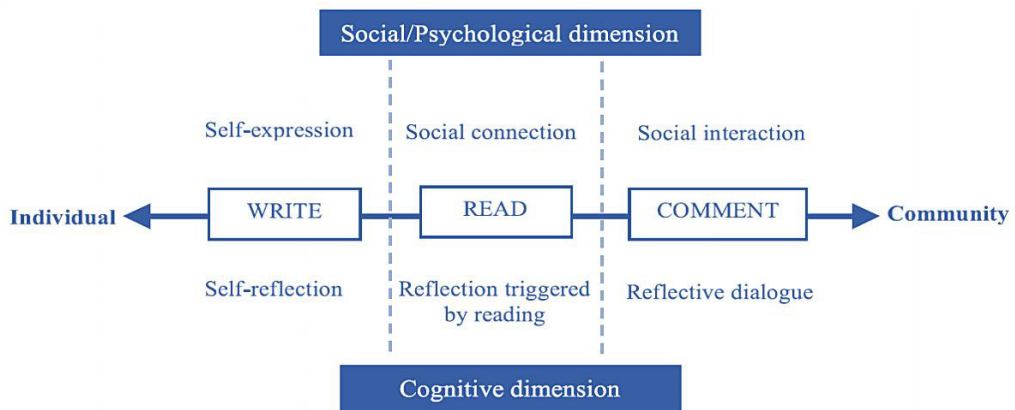


Fig. 1. The new framework for the educational affordances of blogs. (Reproduced from Deng & Yuen, 2011, 450)

4. Podcasts

Podcasts are web based downloadable digital audio or video files. According to Meng (2005, 1) podcasting is “the process of capturing an audio event, song, speech, or mix of sounds and then posting that digital sound object to a web site or blog in a data structure called an RSS 2.0 envelope (or feed). Using specialized news readers, users can subscribe to a web page containing RSS 2.0 tagged audio files on designated web pages and automatically download these files directly into an audio management program on their personal computer. When a user synchronizes their

portable audio device with their personal computer, the podcasts are automatically transferred to that device to be listened to at the time and location most convenient for the user". (Quoted in Fernandez, Simo, & Sallan, 2009)

Among the advantages of podcasts is the freedom of anytime and anywhere use on the part of the learners and the fact that these are automatically delivered to the learners' device from the source location on web without the need to search for it (Man-Man, 2006), (Evans, 2008). Podcasts can be effectively used to develop a link between students and teachers as well among students themselves (Hismanoglu, 2011). Research has also indicated that these could prove to be good sources of extra-listening exercises by exposing learners to real life communication beyond the confines of classroom (Stanley, 2006). The three identified uses of podcasts according to Fernandez, Simo, & Sallan (2009) are dissemination of course content, capturing live class material and enhancing studying.

Given the immense potential of podcasts for teaching and learning processes, especially ELT, a huge number of websites have appeared offering podcasts for all levels of learners as well for learning different skills like pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary etc. Based on their content, Man-Man (2006), have identified following types of ELT podcasts:

- Comprehensive: covering a wide range of topics like listening comprehension activities, interviews, vocabulary etc.
- Whole lesson: covering a single lesson like a news story in each episode, corroborated by a text file and a lesson plan for worksheet materials
- Vocabulary, Idioms etc.: Usage of words and idioms is provided
- Conversations: these contain conversations between native speakers along with the text
- Jokes
- Songs
- Pronunciation: These focus on the pronunciation of different phonemes
- Stories
- Listening comprehension: These help learners with listening comprehension

Teachers can convert their lectures into podcasts which gives learners a chance to listen to these repeatedly and beyond the confines of classrooms. Podcasts have also been reported to increase motivation, attain perfection through practice and rehearsal, enhance collaboration through group podcasts, provides ample chance for slow learners and less confident students etc (ibid).

5. The present study

The present study is based on two parts; the first concerning the available ICT infrastructure and the extent to which these are being employed in the ELT classrooms of various undergraduate colleges of Kashmir valley of the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) of India. The second part is based on the outcome of a 30 day ELT course involving web 2.0 technologies of Blogging and Podcasting, designed for 25 potential computer application instructors.

5.1. Study I - ICT infrastructure and its use

Jammu and Kashmir is the northern most state of India. The official language of the state is Urdu and the native language of the people is Kashmiri in Kashmir division, Dogri and Kashmiri in Jammu division and Ladakhi and Bropka in Ladakh division. Urdu serves as a lingua franca for the people of the state. However English, like other states of India is an "associate official language" (Bhaskararoa, 2002) and for all practical purposes is the language of governance, and education.

Most of the undergraduate colleges in the state are government owned. The valley has 46 state owned colleges, affiliated with University of Kashmir, which offer undergraduate courses in sciences, Social sciences and arts and humanities. The three year degree courses offered have a compulsory English paper, under the title of General English, in all the streams, besides three other optional papers, that a student chooses for once for three years of the

degree. Lately, in four of the colleges, another English paper with the name of functional English was started, with a complete focus on spoken English language.

To find out the state of ICT infrastructure and its use in ELT classrooms, a survey questionnaire, standardized over a series of three trials, was distributed among the functional heads of English departments. Only thirty nine of the questionnaires were filled-in and returned. The questions included ranged from the use of ICT for personal use, the ICT infrastructure available in the colleges, to the use of these technologies in ELT classrooms.

5.2. Results

All the 39 informants have a working knowledge of computers and use internet for their personal purposes. All have knowledge of emails, search engines, social networking websites. Except for 3, all informants are aware of ELT resources available on web and 16 actually use these in an offline mode in their classrooms. Only in 5 cases have the institutions provided a computer to the teacher for his/her use at the workplace. Only three colleges, have managed to get interactive boards, however at all the three places, these have not so far been utilized for teaching purposes. 22 of the colleges own an OHP, but at each place, it was meant for use of whole college and not exclusively for ELT classrooms. Only 2 colleges have a lab equipped with ample number of computers for use of students including ELT purposes. At 4 colleges, ELT classrooms/labs have an Internet connection, however only offline resources are employed. In 4 of the colleges, regular classroom teaching is being substantiated by CALL based teaching and CALL software is being actively used. 34 of the participants acknowledge the potential of ELT resources available on internet for teaching and learning purposes and believe that these could be effectively employed in ELT classrooms. None of the participants have received any administrative directive for the use of ICT in classrooms and all believe that there is no government policy on the use of ICT in the colleges of the state. Whatever knowledge the teachers have acquired related to ICT is self-learned and none has received any formal training in this regard. No training program has been organized by any of the concerned departments to acquaint the teachers with the use of ICT. In only one of the cases, it was found that the teacher interacts with some of the students through a micro-blogging website, beyond the confines of classroom. Among the reasons that serve as barriers to the adoption of ICT in ELT classrooms, poor infrastructure featured most prominent, followed by lack of an ICT policy for the state and large size of the classrooms.

5.3. Study II - Usage of Blogs and Podcasts in ELT

This part of the study is related to the outcome of a 30 day ELT program designed for 25 girl candidates who were selected to serve as computer instructors in colleges associated with one of the universities in an Arab country. All the girls had Post-graduate degree in computer science and were native Kashmiri speakers. At their places of appointment, the classroom language was to be English and given their competence in spoken English at the time of interview, it was decided to design a special ELT program for them to improve their English language skills. Given the time constraints, it was decided to avoid traditional classroom and instead a computer lab was used. The lab was equipped with computers having latest configuration with high speed Wi-Fi internet connectivity and a head phone attached to each machine.

The program was designed primarily around two ICT tools of web 2.0 technology namely blogs and podcasts. Blogging was aimed at helping the learners in improving two language skills, namely 'use of vocabulary' and 'tenses' and podcasts were directed at improving 'pronunciation'.

5.4. Results

Maximum improvement, both in terms of level as well as the number of learners, was found in pronunciation followed by use of vocabulary. In pronunciation component, 48% girls showed substantial improvement, 24% showed fair improvement, 20% of them had moderately improved their pronunciation and 4% showed marginal improvement and 4% showed no improvement. With regard to use of vocabulary, 36% showed substantial improvement, 32% fair, 16% moderate and 8% marginal improvement. No improvement was shown by 8% of the girls in their use of vocabulary skill. As regards improvement in use of grammar (tenses), 40% girls demonstrated

substantial improvement, 20% demonstrated fair improvement, 16% moderate, 16% marginal and 8% of them showed no improvement at all.

Table 1: Comparative Improvement in English Language Skills of Two Groups of Learners

Language Skills	Teaching Method	Improvement					Chi Square	p Value
		Substantial	Fair	Moderate	Marginal	No Improvement		
Pronunciation	Podcasts	48%	24%	20%	4%	4%	14.12	0.007
	Conventional Methods	16%	12%	16%	32%	24%		
Vocabulary	Blogs	36%	32%	16%	8%	8%	10.46	0.031
	Conventional Methods	20%	12%	8%	28%	32%		
Grammar (Tenses)	Blogs	40%	20%	16%	16%	8%	7.07	0.137
	Conventional Methods	16%	12%	24%	16%	32%		

The outcome of the program is in contrast with the experience of authors with several previous short-term ELT courses designed around traditional ELT techniques. Many of these past courses were designed for native Kashmiri learners of comparable background. In a previous program designed around traditional techniques, 25 learners with post-graduation in computer science selected for a similar job abroad were given a 30 day ELT course to improve their language skills. The comparative results of the above program, designed around blogs and podcasts with those of the previous program designed around traditional ELT techniques are shown in table 1.

Since the data utilized were of nominal nature, Chi Square test was employed to ascertain whether the improvement was with the mode of teaching. The Chi Square analysis of the data presented in Table 1 shows that there is a significant association between the improvement in pronunciation (Chi Square= 14.12, p= 0.007) and use of vocabulary (Chi Square= 10.46, p= 0.031) with that of mode of teaching, but the association was not found significant in learning of grammar (tenses).

As regards the improvement in pronunciation it may be said that listening exposure to native English language through podcasts was quite effective and such podcasts could be used for the same purpose at least in the context in which the program was designed. This is in tune with the findings of Stanelly (2006), Ducate and Lomicka (2009) and Knight (2010) that podcasts proved to be good source of extra listening, by exposing learners to real communication of native speakers. The exercise could be more effective if the learners are asked to repeat the language many times after listening to the same through podcasts, what actually was done by the learners during the program. Improvement in use of vocabulary substantiates the research findings of Kim (2008) and Guttler (2011). As regards the use of vocabulary, besides blogging, other ICT tools of web 2.0 technologies may be explored for the purpose. On the use of blogs and podcasts for teaching Grammar (tenses), it may be concluded that grammar lessons may also be taught through the traditional classroom techniques besides the above to derive desired results. CALL program can be utilized for the purpose and some other ICT tool may also be explored.

6. Discussions

While it is clear that most of the ELT teachers are quite aware of the benefits of the use of ICT in ELT, what clearly serves as an impediment is the lack of infrastructure in the colleges of the state. Leaving aside the availability of high-speed internet facilities, the colleges lack ample number of computers as basic infrastructure. Lack of a sound policy on ICT in the state is another major hurdle. Given the two constraints, a lack of motivation seems to have overtaken the ELT teachers in the use of ICT in their classrooms.

Use of ICT in ELT can bring substantial improvement in the English language skills of learners as shown by the study. The study further adds to the significance of the growing body of knowledge suggesting the use of ICT in ELT, especially in the context of developing nations. Teaching and student community if provided the necessary ICT infrastructure and administrative support can improve their teaching and learning respectively. This may be true

of all teaching subjects. The huge resources available on web could be made useful to the students of the state, by adapting it keep in view the local cultural obligations.

While no such previous attempts to know the state of ICT infrastructure and its benefits has been made in the state, the present study calls for a comprehensive survey of the ICT demands of the colleges of the state. Furthermore the present study should instigate the government and administrators to devise a policy to tap the benefits of the use of ICT, especially in ELT. Further research to know the benefits of various ICT tools in other domains like teaching of science and social sciences should also be explored.

However, given the state of current infrastructure in colleges of the state, and the slow pace of development of educational sector, it may be not naïve to say that the state may take another decade to develop the basic infrastructure required for the implementation of ICT. In the absence of a forward looking policy for the implementation of ICT in the educational sector in general and colleges in particular, the student and teaching community of the state is surely going to lag behind the international standards. There seems to be a lack of will on the part of the governing authorities to implement the use of ICT in the educational sector.

In the wake of growing unemployment in the state, coupled with the problems created by prolonged political conflict successful implementation of ICT at college level especially with regard to teaching of English has the potential of creating jobs, especially in the BPO industry that India has been managing successfully over the past many years. Fluent speakers of English as well as those of other major languages like French, Chinese, German, Arabic etc., can contribute to the development of tourism sector, a sector with tremendous potential in the economy of the state.

However, the fact remains that the phase where ICT are fully integrated with learning and teaching process and what Bax (2003) calls the phase of ‘Normalization’ is a distant dream for the teaching and student community of the state and in fact, a genuine beginning has not been made as yet.

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