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The advantages and disadvantages of Internet-based language learning in Iran

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of Internet-based language learning. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from Islamic Azad University of Tabriz through a questionnaire in which 120 EFL teachers were participated. The main purpose of this study is to make some suggestions to deal with existing disadvantages and therefore to facilitate language learning. It is hoped that the result of this paper will help learners and improve language learning and finally it will guide Iranian educational system.

Key words: language learning; e-learning; internet-based learning; network-based learning

1. Introduction

In Jarvia, Holfors and Griffin's study (as cited in James, 2002) over the past two decades there appear to be a paradigmatic shift away from education and training to learning, from teacher-centred education and from face-to-face to e-learning. One important feature of this shift is the application of technology to enhance the delivery of education. Nowadays, most of the universities and schools in Iran try to build the Internet-based language laboratory to use this new method, which gradually changes the traditional method and provides a fresh environment for the language learners.

Also in Gaoda He's study (as cited in Luo, & Yangling, 2008) network-based learning means a teaching mode on the basis of computer hardware techniques and internet communication techniques, which has been proved to be applicable in improving the skills of learners. Along with discussions on the potential role of the Web in the learning and teaching of English (Knobel & Lankshear, 1997; Liou, 1999; Son, 1998), a number of researchers (Felix, 1999; Murry & McPherson, 2004) argue that the Web offers a global database of authentic materials that can enhance language learning and teaching.

Nunan (1988,p.177) maintains that “no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centred unless the learner's subjective needs relating to the process of learning are taken into account”. In line with this need for more studies on

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IBLL, several researchers have conducted studies on students' perceptions on Internet-based activities to find ways of using Internet resources to facilitate language learning. For example, Osuna and Meskill (1998) looked at the role of Internet resources, particularly in connecting learners with authentic culture. Also Kung and Chuo (2002) reported that their 49 college students showed positive attitudes toward using five teacher-selected ESL/EFL websites for homework assignments and self-study.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Because the main subject in this paper is to find out the advantages and disadvantages of Internet-based language learning, then the researchers needed to have access to EFL teachers, fortunately it was available. A total of 120 EFL teachers participated in this study. All participants were from Tabriz Azad University.

2.2. Instrument

In this study, a questionnaire was applied. This questionnaire consisted of two sections, (Qualitative and Quantitative parts). Section 1 contained 11 statements to which the teachers responded with Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD). Section 2 consisted of 3 open-ended questions. The purpose of these questions was to ask the teachers for information and suggestions about the strengths and weaknesses of IBLL. (see Appendix I.)

3. Results

Table 1 shows the results of the teachers' responses to section 1 of the questionnaire. In response to Question One, 110 teachers indicate their agreement, but 10 teachers indicate that students do not enjoy the pre-created Internet-based activities. Also, a total of 80 teachers (66%) indicated enjoyment of students by the task-based Internet activities. Questions Three and Four are related to student learning as a result of Internet activities. The results indicate that 83% of teachers agree with Question Three and 66% agree with Question Four. Responses to Question Five indicate that 20 teachers (16%) are in disagreement and strong disagreement while 100 teachers (83%) are in agreement. In terms of the Internet activities being valuable to learning as investigated by Question Six, 68 teachers (56%) indicate either strong agreement or agreement. Question Seven examines student confidence in using the Internet-based activities for learning, a total of 110 teachers (91%) indicate their strong agreement or agreement. In response to Questions Eight and Nine, 60 teachers (50%) are strongly agreed, 110 teachers (91%) are agreed, 39 teachers (32.5%) are disagreed and 31 teachers (25%) are strongly disagreed.

In relation to the Internet being a useful tool for learning (Question Ten), 120 teachers (100%) are either strongly agreed or agreed. And finally in response to Question Eleven, 110 teachers (91%) are either strongly agreed or agreed and 10 teachers (8%) are disagreed.

Table 1. Number of teacher responses and average ratings on the questionnaire

	SA	A	D	SD	Average rating(SA=4-SD=1)
1	60	50	10	0	3.41
2	10	70	40	0	2.75
3	60	40	20	0	3.33
4	20	60	40	0	2.83

5	90	10	10	10	3.5
6	48	20	50	2	2.95
7	70	40	10	0	3.5
8	10	60	30	20	2.5
9	50	50	9	11	3.15
10	100	20	0	0	3.83
11	40	70	10	0	3.25

Note. N= 120; 4 SA, 3 A, 2 D, 1 SD.

The teachers also provided one or more answers to the three open-ended questions in section 2 of the questionnaire. In response to Question 1 about their enjoyment in using the Internet for teaching English, all teachers answered positively. They enjoyed finding out about websites for teaching English. In relation to the use of IBLL (Question 2), 50 teachers (42%) said that IBLL was good for improving language skills such as listening, reading, grammar or vocabulary and 38 teachers (31%) pointed out its flexibility and unfortunately 32 teachers (26%) did not answer to this question.

.....students can practice every skill. They can practice at home not only in the class.

.....the Website is very flexible so student goes home and anytime he/she wants, he/she can access the Internet and do homework.

And finally through Question 3, 40 teachers (33%) talked about the advantages of Internet-based language learning (Table 2), 40 teachers (33%) mentioned some disadvantages (Table 3), and 40 teachers commented about some solutions (Table 4).

Table 2. The advantages of IBLL

Advantages

1. **Openness:** Internet-based learning can overcome the traditional education in terms of time and space barriers, so anyone can at any time, any place choose any of the teaching content to their own learning style.

2. **Learning autonomy:** Internet-based language learning is carried out by individual learner-centered learning. This kind of learning is an active learning and learners' reason to learn is to meet their own needs and this need is the source of independent learning.

3. **Stimulating interests of learners in language learning:** Interest is very important to learners, without interest nothing can be achieved. In the traditional way of learning, the biggest problem is that how to arouse learners' interest. But the Internet-based language learning can help learners to display their individuality fully.

4. **Strengthening learners' learning autonomy:** Learning autonomy means the ability to take changes of one's own learning. This concept is popular in Iran. Through Internet-based language learning learners can manage their learning process independently. They can choose learning materials according to their needs.

Table 3. The disadvantages of IBLL

Disadvantages

1. **Negative effect of network resources on learners' interest:** Too much information on internet confuses learners, therefore they give up searching. Spending too much time searching frustrates

learners' motivation.

2. Internet-based learning is inferior to traditional ways of learning: During natural communication, learners can see each other, they can use many ways to communicate such as facial expressions. During natural communication listener knows the meaning of speaker and if he cannot understand, he can judge by means of different ways, but Internet-based learning is powerless and it cannot give detailed account of the learners' recognition ability.

3. Learning process has chaos: During the process of Internet-based learning, teachers cannot control learners completely. They may chat online, watch movies or do whatever they like. Learners cannot get feedback from teachers.

4. Abilities of teachers cannot meet the needs of learners: Although teachers in Internet-based learning have an important role, as director, but in the educational system of Iran it is weak. Teachers do not have enough information and knowledge about Internet-based learning and therefore they cannot help learners.

5. Learners do not have enough self-control: Internet-based learners are from different cultures, learning motivation, therefore these differences result in different learning objectives which in traditional method are considered carefully but because these differences are not clearly defined in Internet-based learning some of the learners are bored and become away from learning.

Table 4. The suggestions and solutions

Suggestions

1. Strengthening the functions of Internet-based learning: The content and form of Internet-based learning should be enriched. The functions of Internet-based learning should be fully developed according to the needs of learners so they can learn efficiently.

2. Increasing teachers' information in Internet-based learning: Teachers should take good advantages of different computer techniques and avoid using the dull words resources. They should try to get familiar with the modern teaching.

4. Conclusion

This paper analyzed the advantages and disadvantages which exist in the Internet-based language learning in Iran. It also put forward the suggestions to solve the disadvantages. Only by designing suitable hardware and software we can create a better environment for Internet-based language learning. Because we are in an information age, Internet-based language learning will have a bright future surely.

Appendix I.

University:

Age:

Date:

Express your opinion about these questions

Quantitative part

Strongly Agree=4 Agree=3 Disagree=2 Strongly Disagree=1

1. Students enjoy the pre-created Internet-based activities.

2. Students enjoy the task-based Internet activities.
3. Students learn a lot from the pre-created Internet activities.
4. Students learn a lot from the task-based Internet activities.
5. The experiences in Internet-based language learning made this course more interesting.
6. The Internet-based activities are valuable for learning English.
7. The students gain confidence in their ability to use the Internet for learning purposes.
8. The students are comfortable using the Internet during the Internet activities.
9. Teachers are now comfortable using the Internet for language teaching.
10. Teachers feel that the Internet is a useful teaching tool.
11. The students like to access Internet-based activities outside class time.

Qualitative part

1. Do you enjoy using the Internet for teaching English? If yes, what do you enjoy about it? If no, why do not enjoy it?
2. In what ways do you think Internet-based language learning is good or bad?
3. Do you have any comments about advantages or disadvantages about IBL? If there is any disadvantage, what are the solutions?

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