

## eLearning in EFL: Problems and solutions

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper introduces certain problems encountered when technology-based instruction is employed in teaching English as a foreign language. Many academics feel ill-equipped to utilize these new technologies in teaching. Technology-based teaching is time consuming, leads to increasing workload, and demands high levels of technical support. Some academics are technophobes and many higher education institutions do not recognize the time effort spent in implementing web-based teaching and preparing computer-generated instructional materials. Three EFL specialists from Saudi Arabia are interviewed and their insights to solve those problems are presented.*

**Key words:** *EFL, technology, Higher Education*

### **1 Introduction:**

The needs to positively respond to changes in higher education, hold down costs, and provide high quality programs represent challenges to higher education worldwide. The implementation of technology in higher education has the potential to contribute to facing these challenges. Technology-based education has been implemented to extend teaching beyond the physical campus and to provide alternative delivery methods (Darby, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to review the perceptions of three college professors who have implemented various types of technology-based instruction in the field of teaching English as a foreign language at Umm Al-Qura University, Saudi Arabia.

Global and social changes are posing rapid and significant transformations on higher education institutions. Responding positively to such changes and continuing to provide a sufficient atmosphere for learning represent a challenge to those institutions. The occurrence of transformations within higher education shouldn't be a subject to questioning. How we can

participate in and benefit from such transformations should be our focus in the sense that, “Those institutions that are successful in establishing administrative and academic frameworks within which rapid technological change and adaptation can occur will survive and those who stubbornly adhere to archaic styles of management and decision-making will not” (Huff, 2000: 630)

The idea that there is a need to engage with new learning technologies in higher education has become clear in the views of many educators. Some educators think that embracing technology in teaching has become a must. Tearle et al., for example, state “it is no longer possible to opt out” (1999: 14). Furthermore, DiPiro (1999) contends that “With these [technological] developments it may no longer be reasonable that a professional school can expect to remain competitive even within a well defined, isolated geographic area by providing instruction traditional methods” (1999). More particularly, computers have been used as viable alternatives for delivery of instruction in different educational settings. Rapidly developing computer industry helped establish computers as an instructional medium. Increased computer speed and memory, the introduction of multimedia functions, and the development of graphical user interfaces helped teachers plan and achieve many educational goals (Milheim, 1993).

## 2 Benefits of tech in education:

Researchers in different fields related to educational technology reported many encouraging outcomes for the implementation of technology in learning and teaching. The following points are some of the positive points reported in the literature:

- Teaching with technology helped emphasizing the skills-based model of teaching and minimizing the lecture model of teaching. “By shifting faculty time and energy to technology and by reducing the labor-intensive nature of the traditional model of instruction, academic institutions can transfer the focus of learning to students who will be able to engage in a self-paced and self-directed learning activities” (Bartscherer, 1999: 6)

- Various types of technology made education more active and learner-centered which “enable the students to take greater responsibility for their own learning, and give them the power to fulfill that responsibility” (Sosabowski et al., 1998: 2).
- Computer-mediated discussions tend to be more diverse (multiple topics are discussed) and more inclusive (more students are involved) than face-to-face interactions (Harasim, et al., 1997).
- Computer-mediated discussions offered more opportunities for interactive and collaborative activities among members of the learning community (Poling, 1994).
- Students have constant access to course materials published on the World Wide Web (Kilian, C. 1996)
- Various technology-enhanced tools can motivate students and stimulate their interest in the learning process (Mereba, 2003).
- Technology-based instruction can change the type of relationship between students and professors in which students appreciate the role of their instructors as coaches not as gatekeepers (Sliwa, 1994).

### 3 Reasons for implementing elearning:

In response to the new educational milieu that technology created in the field of teaching

English as a foreign language, the three surveyed professors agreed that employing computers facilitated their teaching career. Dr. Ali Abu Reesh mentioned he decided to teach with computers because "successful instruction is based on communication and interaction. It is not lecture and note-taking any more. Computer-based instruction can effectively enhance learning." Dr. Sultan Alshareef stated that the advantage of using computers to help with 'delivery of instruction' is what encouraged him to embrace elearning. Dr. Sameer Aljabri believed that using computers in the two processes of teaching and learning "saves time and effort for both the teacher and the learner where things can be transferred, delivered, and done in a short time and with less effort."

The implementation of various types of technology as educational tools to facilitate teaching is a pedagogical practice that is based on theoretical grounds. The points that the three professors talked about (enhancing communication and interaction, smoothing the progress of delivery of instruction, and saving time and effort) are outcomes of the new educational setting that technology established. Many previous studies found that such implementation can create new horizons for students to learn and for teachers to deliver the subject matter. In

this sense, technology has been used to play a potentially rich role in teaching and learning that "defined variously by what the teacher has available, has had time to learn, or can find an appropriate use for, and by what students have access to, are familiar with, and are willing to use" (Stahlke & Nyce, 1996: 47).

In addition, the three professors believe that elearning is similarly beneficial for students at different perspectives. Dr. Ali Abu Reesh mentioned that the benefits which students get from studying with elearning "are unlimited, but the most important one is interactivity." Likewise, Dr. Sameer Aljabri observed that students who study English as a foreign language where elearning is incorporated became "more interested and active in learning. They show readiness to learn more, do more exercises, engage in extra work, and as a result, be better learners." Dr. Sultan Alshareef stated that "elearning can lead to many more benefits [such as] to help students access learning materials whenever they like, to have access to electronic materials used in class (e.g. PowerPoint presentations), and to discuss issues related to their course online."

These benefits reported by the three elearning practitioners in the department of English at Umm Al-Qura University have been emphasized by other elearning practitioners as well as learning theorists. A prominent trend in learning theory that has gained increasing significance recently contends that the use of a variety of pedagogical strategies encourages reflective practice which means more interaction between students and their teachers and students themselves (Newby et al., 2000). Elearning has been found a good tool for engaging students in different activities and making them interested in receiving the information.

Interactive learning is effective because it involves the learner in constructing ideas as a result of experiences (Von Glaserfeld 1990). Teaching students with technology facilitated their

interaction with the course subject matter and helped them to develop process skills and attitudes alongside knowledge and understanding. (Coyle, 2004).

### ξ **Difficulties in employing technology:**

Along with the enthusiasm of implementing new learning technologies, higher education institutions, faculty, and students faced multiple technology-related difficulties. Educators who first used technology-based instruction faced obstacles because the whole educational setting was subject to change. For example, Dr. Sultan Alshareef found multiple problems when employing elearning to teach English to Saudi students. He stated,

Some students don not have access to the Internet. Some other students do not know how to use computers. I always ask them at the beginning of the semester if using online materials would be a problem to them. The answer is always 'NO.' However, towards the end of the semester, they start complaining. Some of them just ask their colleagues to printout materials for them. This is why I tend to use elearning to the minimum (i.e. crucial resources for the course can be obtained by other conventional means).

Dr. Ali Abu Reesh attributed most of technology-related difficulties to technophobia where both teachers and students react passively to the newly-presented educational setting. Previous studies indicated that introducing technology in education even in developed countries encountered many problems because “many academics have had no training and little experience in the use of communications and information technology as an educational tool” (Dearing, 1997: 36). Furthermore, Dr. Sameer Aljabri pointed to several administrative factors that could contribute to minimize the benefit from implementing elearning. In particular, he referred to obstacles related to "using up-to-date technology, maintenance problems, budget problems, and little space assigned for extra labs."

Faculty members engaged in web-based instruction have complained that the process of developing web-based course materials is time consuming and demanding of high levels of technical support and in most of the cases lead to the increasing of their workload (Cravener,

1999). Different work obligations may force faculty, in many cases, to stick to traditional methods of teaching. "For academics already struggling to keep up with increased administrative demands, teaching loads and research pressures, learning technology can be a formidable, time-consuming area to further sap their limited energies" (Littlejohn, & Sclater, 1998: 1).

The three surveyed professors expressed similar views about their elearning practice with respect to the need for prolonged time to developing course materials. Dr. Ali Abu Reesh mentioned that "we [elearning practitioners] spend a lot of time to collect materials and put them in the appropriate design, but this is only in the initial stages. In other words, it gets much easier as the faculty members get used to it." Moreover, the extensive time associated with developing materials for courses taught online forced some elearning practitioners to reuse the same course materials. Dr Sultan Alshareef stated that "It's true that I can re-use the same materials, but I still feel that web-based instruction requires more time/effort where technical knowledge/support is always necessary." Dr. Sameer Aljabri takes a step further and suggested that professors who teach similar courses should work together in developing the course materials. He stated, "This process [developing course materials] needs time and effort. A teacher might need weeks to develop one course online. I believe this problem can be overcome if two or three teachers work together and each one develops part of the course."

### o **Causes of hesitation:**

Many researchers in the field observed that in spite of the widespread implementation of technology-based education, there are many faculty members avoid participating in any form of electronic teaching (Olcott & Wright, 1990). The three professors whose views are analyzed here confirmed the presence of this problem. They think there are three main reasons behind this reluctance to engage in electronic forms of teaching: change resistance,

technophobia and insufficient computer skills. Dr Sultan Alshareef stated that "Resistance to change is, in my view, the main reason [for avoiding elearning as an instructional method]. Some professors are not very computer literate, and some others underestimate the effort/time needed to implement elearning & prefer to stick to what they are used to do. To convince them to embrace teaching with technology, I think, they need to (a) see how effective elearning is employed and (b) have very good support in at least their early attempts to implement elearning."

Dr. Ali Abu Reesh emphasized the point of technophobia as an influential factor that can hinder a wide range of professors from teaching with technology. Technophobia is defined, according to Miriam Webster dictionary, as "fear or dislike of advanced technology or complex devices and especially computers." Technophobes fear or dislike technology because technology changes the environment they live in and may cause them to feel insecurity and anxiety. Academics become technophobic when they resist technology-based changes that might undermine their professional status because they do not trust unproven technological innovations (Spratt et al, 2000).

Insufficient technology-related skills is a key factor why many academics hesitate to use electronic forms of teaching that normally require a wide range of abilities. Some researchers in the field observed that "The academic staff often lack even basic IT skills and as a consequence feel ill-equipped to utilize these new technologies in their teaching and in the provision of learning support material" (Sosabowski et al., 1998: 4). Dr. Sameer Aljabri emphasized this point as a discouraging factor against implementing elearning. He stated, "Well, I think some professors are not familiar with the advantages of this technology in the field of teaching. They do not want to learn new things and believe this technology is for the new generation." To acquire the necessary skills to build a web-based instructional project,

faculty members need to learn the basics of web publishing, graphics design, audio and video file management, and other related skills. If they do not have such skills, which is often the case, they have to make efforts to attend training sessions that can swallow up their time that the faculty can use to engage in other university-requested activities like publishing and committee meeting (Williams & Peters, 1997).

Such suggestions have been introduced in several previous studies. The problem of insufficient technical skills in building and maintaining web-based teaching materials, for example, can be eased through the provision of instructional support that has been considered a key factor to enhance the level of technology-based education (Olcott & Wright, 1990).

Instructional support “refers to the kind of support the institution provides for faculty members to develop and improve their instruction. It usually comes from people who have specialties in certain areas in which faculty members need training and assistance to conduct their teaching effectively” (Lee, 2001: 103). Instructional support is a basic part of a more comprehensive organizational support that higher education institutions offer. Previous research emphasized the relationship between how faculty members perceive the culture and climate of the organizational support and their attitude toward their job. It has been observed that that individuals’ perception of organizational support is directly related to the level of their work motivation and commitment, which in turn can lead to improve job performance. Organizational support in the form of incentives was found crucial to motivate faculty members to engage in distance education (Jackson, 1994).

However, Umm Al-Qura University does not provide quality instructional support for elearning practitioners which is a prominent discouraging factor. One of the suggested solutions for insufficient instructional support is that faculty members who have the necessary technical background help their colleagues and pool their expertise and resources .Dr. Sameer

Aljabri stated "They [professors who avoid employing elearning as an instructional method] need to get involved in this field gradually. First, they have to teach a course which have been developed already by other colleagues for two or three semesters. Once they find it easy, they should get involved in the process of developing the course online." However, this can create a problem for faculty members who prefer to work alone. Besides, some academics think with the student mentality of 'just tell me what to do.' Well, there are no magic solutions to technology-related problems. The lack of interest and enthusiasm to develop the necessary skills make some faculty so dependent on others and accustomed to be spoon fed and told what to do (Williams & Peters, 1997).

A significant way to enhance the adoption and development of learning technologies is to address critical work-related issues, such as faculty motivation and IT skills and resources training, to overcome faculty reluctance to embrace learning technologies. Sosabowski et al. (1998) observed that faculty members who are not good at using tech in teaching tend to make some effort to develop some technology-related skills to meet some administrative needs. More particularly, one of the critically encouraging or discouraging factors in the implementation of technology in teaching college students is whether or not the college policy considers teaching with technology an activity for which faculty should receive credit. Professors who work with technology have the problem of obtaining institutional recognition for their work.

The three surveyed professors have similar feelings that their employer, Umm Al-Qura University, did not succeeded in recognizing and supporting their efforts with elearning. Dr. Ali Abu Reesh attributed the problem to the lack of understanding of the benefits of elearning. He stated, "almost all academic institutions in Saudi Arabia do not have the basic understanding of effective E-Learning. Hence, they do not provide the basics tools to support

elearning." Dr. Sultan Alshareef complained that UQU has not made enough efforts to support or even recognize his endeavor in implementing elearning. He stated, "I think my employer has not noticed what I'm doing because elearning is not currently seriously on the agenda."

Higher education institutions have used rewards to motivate faculty for better productivity and higher performance. Reward systems include salary increases, fringe benefits, promotion, and recognition. The incentives that higher education institutions offer and the activities they reward convey the organizational values of those institutions. Reluctance of faculty members in designing and developing web-based instructional materials can be greatly reduced by offering appropriate incentives for such activities.

Accordingly, academics who are involved with web-based learning need their work to be recognized and supported. When higher education institutions fail to accommodate academics undertaking technology-based projects, those academics are discouraged and face a high degree of 'career risk' because "their innovative educational work caused them to turn aside from more conventionally recognized work tasks" and because the institutional rewards system in many colleges "are not in sync with alternative forms of delivery" (Wolcott, 1997: 17).

## ٦ Conclusion:

The implementation of elearning in teaching English as a foreign language at Umm Al-Qura University, Saudi Arabia encountered several problems. This paper introduced some of those problems along with certain solutions suggested by three professors from the department of English. The problems reported include the difficulty that some college professors face because they do not have enough skills to use technology while other professors are not motivated to engage in technology-based instruction, the long time consumed when

developing web-based materials, the reward systems that don't give significant incentives for using technology in instruction. Suggested solutions to these problems recommend providing academics with considerable instructional support, giving them encouraging incentives to as a way to value their work, decreasing their workload, and taking their innovative work into account for promotion and tenure. All the suggested solutions to problems encountered when employing technology-based instruction aim at enhancing teaching and facilitating the role of teachers so they are more capable of helping students to learn.

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