Article

Computer-assisted Cooperative Learning in EFL in Saudi Arabia

Abstract

The Saudi education system is facing a climate of change characterized by an interest in integrating new technology and educational approaches to improve teaching and learning. In this climate, the present article explores the feasibility of introducing computer-assisted co-operative learning in government secondary schools in Unaizah, Saudi Arabia. In particular, it considers teacher experience with/attitudes towards such learning in teaching English as a foreign language; administrative support for such innovation and students' responses to a co-operative learning environment, based on interviews and observations.

The author concludes that the introduction of computer-assisted co-operative learning in English, supported by appropriate training, could benefit both students and teachers and offers recommendations for its implementation.

Keywords: EFL, computer-assisted co-operative learning, secondary education, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Computers can be very powerful tools in learning and teaching English as a foreign language (Mambretti, 1999; Al-Harbi, 2000). They can provide opportunities for students to learn cooperatively and use the language creatively for communicative purposes. This, in turn, will enhance their ability to construct learning and develop confidence and fluency in language use.

Saudi Arabia has in the last two decades sought to implement technology in education, as part of the country's overall development and human resources strategy. Such efforts began with the introduction of computer studies as a trail subject in secondary schools in 1986.

More recently, efforts and concerns have centred on developing teaching methodologies and on how computers may effectively assist in supporting and achieving educational goals (Sabbak, 1996). In early 2000 Crown Prince Abdullah announced the 'Watani' project, an ambitious national project to incorporate computers and the Internet into school classrooms and lessons (Saudi Press Agency, 2000). These initiatives, however, are still in the early stages.

This article considers the potential of computers for assisting teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in state-run boys' secondary schools in Saudi Arabia. It concludes with the view that computer technology can no longer be ignored. Saudi educators, in seizing the initiative to use computers in teaching English, have made an important step forward towards improving the educational process.
2. Using computers in EFL

The communicative approach to teaching claims that if second language acquisition replicates first language acquisition, or does so for the most part, then the teaching of second language should benefit from the same procedures and strategies exhibited by both L1 acquirers and natural L2 acquirers. The cornerstone of the communicative theory is that the learner has to use the target language as a medium of interaction. "[The] notion of direct rather than delayed practice of communicative acts is central to most CLT interpretations" (Richards and Rodgers, 1986:68). The learning or acquisition of rules "arises from constant practice on the communicative" (Little et al., 1994:460), activities involving both listening and speaking at the same time.

Within such an approach, computer technology potentially has immense value, both as a source of "comprehensible input" (Krashen and Terrell, 1983) and as a medium for shaping and disseminating output which promotes fluency, encourages syntactic language processing and affords students opportunities to receive feedback from others (Swain, 1985).

Moreover, the computer with its multimedia technology offers opportunities for successful collaborative learning and teamwork in small groups (SIIA report 2000), promoting interactive language teaching at the highest level (Felix, 1998).

This potential, however, has yet to be realised in Saudi Arabia, for a variety of reasons: a rigid, overcrowded curriculum, lack of resources, and inadequate teacher preparation—particularly as in Saudi a graduate in any subject is considered automatically qualified to teach, without any specific training in pedagogy.

Theoretically, the EFL textbooks prepared and supplied by the government espouse the communicative approach. However, few teachers seem able to cope with the 'challenging' directions given to them in the Teacher's Book (1994).

In most schools, the textbook is the sole reference for the teacher and students (Al-Maini, 2006). Lessons are teacher-centred and the students are largely passive, with little chance to generate their own oral or written output to develop their linguistic and communicative skills. Activities and tasks are very limited, driven by an assessment system which relies heavily on memorization of grammar rules and formulaic sentence structures. Nevertheless, there are signs of change, as the following experiences demonstrate.

During my fieldwork, I observed two examples of cooperative learning with ICT, in different schools. In one school, I observed a lesson taught by Maher, in the school's Learning Centre. The lesson was based on a reading passage in the textbook. However, Maher used the data projector to display the text. After the reading, he displayed comprehension questions and multiple choice answers using the projector. Students were divided into groups of about five, and given time to discuss and decide on their answers, Maher then played a CD, supplied by himself, to enable them to hear the correct answers with native (American) pronunciation. Although this lesson was based on the standard curriculum materials and followed the usual pattern of reading, explication and question–answer, the students appeared to be highly motivated by the provision of variety through this mode of delivery. They were all attentive and participated actively.

In another school, an English teacher, Bander, had initiated an 'English Room' containing a computer and data projector. Observing an English lesson in that room was an enjoyable experience, with all students fully engaged and participating actively. Aware that students were bored with the traditional way of teaching, Bander had obtained permission from the headteacher to install the equipment in a spare room, at his own expense.
Many Saudi teachers, however, are resisting technology implementation. Another English teacher, Yousef, was disinclined to use the school's computer centre, and benefit from it. He argued that with 20 classes to teach each week, he had no time to use the Centre; he seemed to view use of the learning centre as an extra chore that would have to be fitted in, in addition to his normal classroom teaching, rather than facilitating or even replacing some of his classroom activity. There are also teacher training issues, since he did not know what modern technology could offer and how its use might affect teaching and learning.

Another view frequently expressed by teachers was that it is “forbidden” for teachers to introduce additional resources. One explanation may lie in concerns that the use of computers and access to the web can bring instant exposure to Western values. However, in the examples cited here, the content delivered was still that provided by the Ministry, i.e. the textbook and therefore ideologically acceptable. Institutional differences in the schools, such as the support of the headteacher, the availability of a room not timetabled for other purposes, or the general professional culture among the English teachers, also contributed to the different practices of teachers. However, at least some Saudi teachers are keen to move towards a more constructivist approach to teaching and learning. Although Maher and Bander did not depart from the approved curriculum content or radically change the lesson structure, their willingness to encourage more interaction among the students appeared to enhance both motivation and performance.

It is notable, however, that both Maher and Bander had supplied their own resources; in Bandar’s case, at considerable expense. The problem is that despite recent initiatives, funding is not available to equip every school. One headteacher, in a school which had no modern technological aids, so that English teachers depended completely on traditional teaching methods, was trying to enlist financial contributions from local businessmen to buy equipment and made it clear that he expected no help or support from the Ministry of Education.

ICT is potentially valuable for learning, but particularly for listening skills, and through this, for pronunciation skills. It provides for accurate listening and controlled pronunciation with model voices, as well as helping students to overcome their shyness and giving them confidence to experiment with the language. In many Saudi schools, however, ICT is still infrequently used or even unavailable. In Unaizah, there are teachers who are willing and able to use it, and their EFL teaching is enriched as a result, but as yet these are mainly the privately funded efforts of a few pioneering individuals.

3. Conclusion

Without a doubt we are in the centre of a “monumental technological paradigm shift, one which will eventually change the way that all instructors teach and the way students learn” (Jensen, 1993). While technology should not take over the language classroom, it must be embraced in order to allow educators to do those things which they are unable to do themselves, or those which will improve what is currently being done in the classroom. The cases cited here show that there is no ideological objection or obstacle in Saudi Arabia to the provision of additional, up-to-date resources, if funding can be found. Schools could solicit assistance from local businessmen in financing such modernization initiatives, step-by-step, beginning with smaller purchases and building up the resources of the school gradually.

I also suggest that cooperation should be encouraged, within and between schools, to share and exchange resources. This would not only benefit the students, but might help to foster collegial relations and contribute in the development of a professional culture.
Both these suggestions, admittedly, involve practices that, although not unknown, are rare in Saudi Arabia at present. In this respect, educational supervisors have a potentially important role to play, in their visits to schools, in encouraging such arrangements, both by explaining the benefits of such initiatives, and by making clear that there is no ideological objection to them. This is important in a culture where teachers are unaccustomed to taking initiatives and reluctant to act without permission. In this way it is to be hoped that gradually the values of creativity, initiative and cooperation would be promoted and embedded in the school culture.

References


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