

PERCEPTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNET ASSISTED LANGUAGE TEACHING BY ENGLISH TEACHERS FROM RIO GRANDE DO SUL

PERCEPÇÕES E PERSPECTIVAS DE PROFESSORES DE INGLÊS DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL SOBRE O ENSINO DA LÍNGUA ATRAVÉS DA INTERNET

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Abstract: Internet availability started to increase in Brazil some years ago and has developed a lot in the teaching context as well. This article presents and reports the results of a survey that examined the contexts of twenty-four Primary, Secondary, University and Language Schools' EFL teachers from Rio Grande do Sul in relation to the use of internet in and out of classroom. This paper was based on a study written by Hee-Jae Shin and Jeong-Bae Son, available at CALL-EJ Online Vol.8. No.2, January 2007, who searched about the same topic in the Korean context. A total of twenty-four Brazilian teachers participated in a survey and responded to questions on (i) their perceptions on Internet Assisted Language Teaching (IALT); and (ii) the resources they used on Internet and the way they used them.

Key words: Language teaching. Internet. Teaching purposes.

Resumo: A disponibilização da Internet em maior escala começou a crescer no Brasil há alguns anos atrás e tem crescido muito no contexto de ensino também. Este artigo apresenta uma pesquisa e os resultados de um estudo que examinou o contexto de vinte e quatro professores de Inglês no Rio Grande do Sul, de Ensino Fundamental, Ensino Médio, Superior e Escolas de Idiomas em relação ao uso da Internet dentro e fora de sala de aula. Este trabalho foi baseado em um estudo escrito por Hee-Jae Shin e Jeong-Bae Son, disponível no CALL-EJ Online Vol.8. No.2, de Jan. de 2007, os quais pesquisaram sobre este mesmo tópico no contexto coreano. Um total de vinte e quatro professores participou da pesquisa e responderam a questões sobre (i) suas percepções sobre o ensino de línguas com o auxílio da Internet; e (ii) sobre os recursos que eles usam na Internet e a maneira como o fazem.

Palavras-chave: Ensino de línguas. Internet. Propósitos de ensino.

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1 Introduction

Information and communication technology have impacted societies everywhere in all sectors. Internet was launched in Brazil in 1988, and since its beginning it has always depended on efforts led by the Federal Government. It was introduced to the public in 1995 and currently Brazil has reached the status of the fifth-largest contingent of internet users. The Ministry of Education devised a plan to broadband connect 86% of all public schools by 2010. Internet access in Brazil has been growing and data from IBOPE/Net Ratings from December 2009 showed that the country had 67.5 million Internet users, with 1.2 million new users since September 2009. Accessing the internet from work, schools, and home are all on the rise. One complication in Brazil is that computers and information technology remain expensive for most public and private institutions to buy and maintain, including broadband internet access. So, some educational institutions justify the expense and narrow the use with their students to such aspects. Despite that fact, internet has become a useful tool for Brazilian teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) in schools, as they can find and use a variety of resources and materials online. For that reason, EFL teachers seem to have broad interests in using internet for their teaching purposes. This survey aims at presenting the experience of some EFL teachers in Rio Grande do Sul with internet for teaching purposes, as well as their expectations about bettering its use.

2 Internet and language teaching

Internet has been heralded as a great development in all areas of life, including education (Baber, 2001). Baber, questions whether the Internet would offer solutions for all our educational needs. Although we do not have the answer, it is clear that it may contribute and help a lot, once the Internet is an infrastructure which allows information to be shared, sent or received in various ways. Probably the most extensively used internet delivery method for language teaching is the World-Wide-Web. The www allows a teacher with website design skills to put up a website containing content of their choice. In its simplest form, a website can contain texts for language learners to read through, with tasks that they are encouraged to perform in order to "enhance their reading skills". If the teacher has somewhat more advanced website-design skills, he or she can add self-correcting tasks to the website such as multiple-choice exercises, gap fills and more. There are a number of advantages of web-based teaching. The main one is that it is available "24/7" - 24 hours a day, 7 days a

week. This means that if a student quickly needs help with a certain language area, he is quite likely to be able to find some sort of help or support quite quickly.

According to Shin and Son (2007), language teachers can make their classes individualized and personalized, resulting in self-empowerment and autonomy in learning. There are many different tools that a teacher can have available for personalizing his/her class. One of them is internet conferencing, a form of online teaching which has been around since at least 1997, and has been used largely for business communication (and as such it has been used extensively). For Baber, internet conferencing allows the teacher and the student(s) to connect with each other live at a pre-arranged time and then speak to each other, see each other, work on documents together on their respective screens and more. It is similar to videoconferencing but with the crucial difference of taking place entirely via internet from a desktop computer. It therefore does not incur any long-distance telephone costs or initial setup-costs beyond those of a regular computer, a headset and possibly a webcam, despite participants being able to speak to each other, just like in a telephone call.

Internet offers a wealth of information for students and teachers seeking foreign language resources. Dozens of Digests (short information syntheses) such as Eric Digests and so many others are available online on a wide range of topics related to foreign language education. Websites offer newsletters, bibliographies, FAQs (frequently asked questions), and resource guides on many topics of interest to teachers of foreign languages. Other organizations in the field such as important publishers like Cambridge University Press, Macmillan Education and Oxford University Press also maintain extensive, informative websites. Publications and curriculum materials abound, including a number of electronic journals and magazines. Numerous listservs (electronic discussion groups) are available to facilitate discussions among foreign language teachers and other foreign language professionals. Some of these lists have a specialized focus; others hold discussions of general interest to those working in the field. (KATHLEEN, 1994)

Through the Internet we can share all sorts of information with the world, get authentic materials from anywhere, and interact with people in distant locations as never before. In addition to the original internet applications, like File Transport Protocol for moving files between machines and Telnet for logging into distant computers, the wide range of features and media (text, image, sound, video, multimedia) supported by the current crop of internet programs makes them powerful additions to the foreign language teacher's repertoire (PONTERIO; LELOUP, 2000). There are a number of Internet applications that can be used to enrich the foreign language classroom. FL teachers can integrate email-based activities into

their curriculum and distance learning is another curricular area where email is being used (PONTERIO, 1996). A great number of lists of interest to language teachers are available on the internet (PONTERIO; LELOUP, 2000) in which they can find audio, video and lesson resources in general for teaching phonetics, structure, culture and intercultural aspects of the English language. There are also several electronic journals which target foreign language professionals such as the English Education Journal, the ELT Journal: Oxford Journals, the Internet TESL Journal for (ESL/EFL Teachers) and the Computer-Assisted Language Learning Electronic Journal (CALL-EJ), to cite some of good quality.

All these facilities can allow teachers and students to work in interesting ways with the authentic materials found on internet. The Web is so extensive that good tools are needed to help us find authentic materials that correspond to the topics of the foreign language curriculum (PONTERIO; LELOUP, 2000). Currently web course management software is designed for creating and managing online courses but can also be used to support and extend a traditional class by making materials with teacher annotation, glossaries, syllabus, and assignments available to students through the web.

According to Ponterio and LeLoup (2000) ultimately, it is incumbent upon the foreign language teacher to integrate these tools into the curriculum in a pedagogically sound and meaningful way. Clearly, target language communication and cultures are easily accessible through current and emerging technologies, and information about using these resources is readily available online. And at this point some questions may emerge: Are most of the EFL teachers aware of that? Have they ever tried these so many tools available on the web? Do they have interest in learning about, learning how to explore these sources and include them into their everyday practice? Do institutions invest on training/courses for the EFL teachers to learn how to ‘manipulate’ all these tools?

According to Schwertner (2014), president of APIRS (Associação de Professores de Inglês do Rio Grande do Sul) teachers’ development means teachers’ learning, which in turn, may happen in a variety of forms from reflections about classroom events to networking. And to Ponterio & Leloup (1997), the intrepid and creative teacher will venture into this virtual realm, find authentic resources, and use them to make the second language classroom a better place to learn. In this sense we may say that learning about teaching through technology tools depends much on teachers’ motivations, interests and initiatives.

3 The survey

The subjects in the survey were 24 Brazilian primary, secondary, university and language schools' EFL teachers. The age range of the respondents was from 21 to 52 years old. Their teaching experience ranged from two years to thirty years approximately. The survey used a questionnaire to document the participants' perceptions and perspectives on the use of internet for English language teaching purposes. The questionnaire consisted of a background section and two other sections: the first one, a multiple choice section to find out their perceptions and perspectives on the use of internet; and a multiple choice section to elicit their general opinions or comments on the use of the referred resource for teaching purposes. It was distributed on-line to approximately two hundred EFL teachers in Porto Alegre and other towns nearby. A total of twenty-four teachers completed the questionnaires and returned them within 21 days. The study was conducted in a period of approximately 40 days and was presented as a requirement for the conclusion of a specialization course in English language at PUCRS (Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul). The data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

4 Results

There follow some tables about the teachers' responses to the survey:

Check the Types of Internet Activities that You Use in the Classroom

Voice chatting	3 13%	People may select more than one checkbox, so percentages may add up to more than 100%.
Text chatting	5 21%	
Encyclopedias	5 21%	
On-line dictionaries	13 54%	
Video Conferencing	3 13%	
Quizzes	13 54%	
Games	18 75%	
Puzzles	12 50%	
E-mail	15 63%	
Crosswords	11 46%	
Web surfing	15 63%	
Other	10 42%	

Reasons for Preventing Internet Use in the Classroom

Students' limited computer skills	1 5%
Your limited English ability	0 0%
Students' limited interest	2 9%
Students' limited English ability	3 14%
Your limited interest	0 0%
Your limited computer skills	4 18%
Limited time	14 64%
Limited computer facilities	9 41%
Other	5 23%

People may select more than one checkbox, so percentages may add up to more than 100%.

Questionnaire - 1. Internet provides non-native speakers of English with a rich learning environment.

agree	24	100%
disagree	0	0%

Questionnaire - 2. Internet tools can be used for teaching purposes.

agree	24	100%
disagree	0	0%

Questionnaire - 3. It is easy to find ESL/EFL materials on the web.

agree	23	96%
disagree	1	4%

Questionnaire - 4. Students can be motivated by the use of Internet in the classroom.

agree	24	100%
disagree	0	0%

Questionnaire - 5. Students can improve their English skills through the use of internet.

agree	24	100%
disagree	0	0%

Questionnaire - 6. Students will be more attentive in Internet-assisted English language teaching.

agree	19	79%
disagree	5	21%

Questionnaire - 7. I am competent to use internet-based materials in the classroom.

agree	24	100%
disagree	0	0%

Questionnaire - 8. I know how to integrate Internet resources into existing classroom curricula.

agree	20	83%
disagree	4	17%

Questionnaire - 9. I need training to improve my Internet literacy skills.

agree	9	38%
disagree	15	63%

Questionnaire - 10. I would like to use internet-based materials and activities in my classroom as much as possible.

agree	20	83%
disagree	4	17%

The answers indicate that the majority of the EFL teachers use on-line games with their students in classroom. It is the most adopted tool, validated by 75% of the teachers and seconded by web-surfing and emailing with 63%. Following 54% of the teachers make use of on-line dictionaries and quizzes. The next activity most exploited in classroom is puzzles, with 50% of the responses. Crosswords in the internet are used by 46% of the teachers and other activities (not specified) are utilized by 42% of the teachers. Text chatting and encyclopedias had 21% of the responses and the least used tools are voice chatting and video conferencing, with only 13% of the responses. There weren't any tools which are not accessed at all by the teachers. Other online activities were not cited by the respondents. Reasons for preventing the use of internet in classroom in these teachers' contexts are: limited time with 64%, limited computer facilities with 41%, other reasons (not specified in the responses) with 23%, teacher's limited computer skills with 18%, student's limited English ability with 14%, student's limited interest with 9%, student's limited computer skills

with 5%. The two options which had no answers are “your limited English abilities”, and “your limited interest”, with 0% of the responses. The results for the questionnaire are mentioned here: 100% of the teachers agree that internet provides non-native speakers of English with a rich learning environment. 96% of the teachers agree that Internet tools can be used for teaching purposes and 4% disagree about that. 100% of the teachers agree that it is easy to find ESL/EFL materials on the web. 96% of the teachers agreed that students can be motivated by the use of Internet in classroom and 4% disagreed about that. 100% of the teachers agree that students can improve their English skills through the use of internet. 79% of the teachers agree that students will be more attentive in internet-assisted English language teaching. 4% disagree about that. 83% of the teachers agree that they know how to integrate Internet resources into existing classroom curricula and 17% disagree about that. 38% of the teachers agree that they need training to improve their internet literacy skills and 63% disagree. 83% of the teachers agree that they would like to use internet-based materials and activities in their classrooms as much as possible and 17% disagree.

5 Discussion

The results show that the twenty-four teachers have very distinct backgrounds which vary from kindergarten to university levels. Their ages, experiences and contexts of teaching are very different as well. However, from the youngest to the oldest, all of them use internet in their EFL classroom and they seem to be motivated to keep on doing that.

Most of the teachers believe that using internet to research and learn can be rather motivating, and also agreed that they would like to use e-learning materials as much as possible. On the other hand, 38% of the teachers responded that they needed to improve their internet literacy skills and some of them informed that they need more training to learn how to integrate these resources into classroom curricula. These facts show that this group of teachers would be interested in going further regarding exploiting internet resources in class but somehow, sometimes they face limitations. It may be hard for teachers to balance and choose when and how to use internet tools adequately once they are so many and so vast. It demonstrates the necessity of teachers to be offered training on internet skills, so that they will be able to choose from a wider variety of tools, for the most efficient ones, the ones which would best fit into their context. Although it is important, again it does not exclude teachers' reflections upon their own learners' community needs once they are directly involved with the apprentices, being able to recognize which type of tool would best respond

to their necessities and enhance their potential. This reflection may be very demanding and long but worth it for sure. It may lead teachers to select not all tools, but probably the most effective ones, at least for their context.

At this point we may refer to Mark Warschauer (2002), who disagrees about “overly simplistic notions” about digital topics and their impact on education and development. According to him, there are many types of literacy, whose value “varies in particular social contexts”. In this sense, first of all, teachers should understand why to choose specific action plans referring to the usage of online resources in their EFL lessons and whether they would really be relevant and meaningful for that group of students. According to Warschauer (2002), “Literacy is social practice, involving access to physical artifacts, content, skills, and social support; and, acquisition of literacy is a matter not only of education, but also of power.”, therefore, as a social practice, it means the ability and effort of the teacher to recognize weakest and strongest features of that language community and what source of web resources would in fact make the difference in terms of development of that group of learners and of himself.

Teachers’ responses also showed that tools like voice chatting and video conferencing are the least used. Interestingly, encyclopedias are not frequently used too. Taking different education contexts and interests into account we could inquire whether it is a premade choice based on specific language development objectives for a certain group of learners, or a matter of limited resources. Back to the results, 41% of this group of teachers reported about limited computer facilities, which means that public policies and schools in general should invest more to have adequate rooms and equipment in order to offer more opportunities and stimulate the use of internet in classroom. Limited time is also a reason which prevents teachers from using more internet tools for teaching purposes. It suggests that there should be some more reflection upon the quality of language teaching and language studies at schools and this, by offering more language learning hours a week for example, once the more exposure to the target language, the fastest the learning process can be.

As already mentioned, as important as the availability of devices, or the amount of time regarded, enabling human development would help enhance and improve the quality of EFL learning in any contexts. Consequently, although many of the teachers may be misled by the notion that equipment and training on web resources are enough to integrate new and relevant skills to their students’ efforts, they are certainly not. Warschauer (2002), for example, has done ethnographic studies and case study researches on access to ICT and social inclusion in a variety of communities in India, Brazil and California, through which he

reached to the conclusion that even when poor communities are provided with software and equipment, sometimes they are not able to cope with social or policies' local problems resulting in failing projects.

6 Conclusion

This survey has demonstrated that this group of EFL teachers from Rio Grande do Sul is an example of how these professionals are open and concerned about how much they and their students can benefit from internet resources while studying English. However, a relevant aspect of this survey's results was the fact that although teachers have a positive attitude to the use of internet for teaching purposes when all of them claim to be competent to use internet-based materials, numbers decrease when it regards to knowing how to integrate these resources to the curricula and increases once again to express some needs on training to improve literacy skills.

These teachers' main difficulties are not exactly about equipment or facilities, but about guiding and advising along the teaching process. For the ones which do not have this support, today there is an "infinite" number of possibilities and internet itself has become gradually more user-friendly. For teachers of English as a foreign language who think their literacy skills are not enough, they may even find many tools to learn from free instructional technology resources, where they can find helping online resources for EFL teaching, for example, at *Emerging Et Tech*, in which it is possible to have videos with tech tutorial, just to mention one. Besides that, googling for support in EFL teaching would by itself offer a great variety of chances, examples of projects, forums and teachers exchanging programs. Anyway, the highest point of this proposal has to do with the important role of a teacher as the conductor, the tutor of the EFL learner, the one who is to choose among so many possibilities and decide what resources would be the ones which will increase his groups' advantages and learning opportunities. The EFL teacher needs pedagogical support in order to perform his role properly and also a great amount of reflection and research on the best use of internet-assisted language teaching according to his students' reality. In other words, teachers need to respond to the challenge of engaging in computer- assisted language teaching, which according to LEE (2000) requires a lot of time and commitment.

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