

Teaching EFL in Digital Age

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the 21st century, science and technology have been developing and innovating continuously, and people have entered the digital era. Digitalization is an important trend of global economic development. The popularization of digital technology makes it a trend that digital technology can assist EFL teaching. In the current EFL teaching, how to apply advanced digital technology to EFL classroom and how to carry out teaching activities better with digital equipment has become a hot issue for EFL teachers. This study introduces several main auxiliary teaching techniques in the digital age and puts forward some specific strategies for EFL teaching, in order to further improve the teaching level of EFL courses so as to meet students' personalized development needs.

Key words: EFL; Digital age; CALL; MALL; AR

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INTRODUCTION

21st century is a new era equipped with various high technologies that may influence every aspect of people's life. High technology has accelerated informationization and globalization and has penetrated into every part of life. The rapid development of information technology

has made it a reality to cover the whole world with digital information. Trends in technology utilization, economics and globalization show that complex Internet-based information communication technologies will continue to be available to everyone and will be used extensively in the world.

The application of technology has also been explored into the field of education through electronic tools like computers, mobile phones, augmented reality and virtual reality etc. In language classrooms, computer-assisted language learning has long been used to enhance language teaching and learning. English is the common language used by a large number of the people around the world. Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) among the learners has been increasing rapidly. New media represented by the Internet and mobile phones have developed vigorously all over the world. "Various methods and pedagogical approaches have been introduced in the field of English language teaching (ELT)" (Ramya, 2017). Innovative methods for teaching and learning have transformed the way English being taught today. One of the most important innovations brought into teaching is the technological interference in education. "The fast changing technology makes teaching media might be adopted immediately to change the students' views in preparing them to be compatible to other modern countries" (Yuliani, 2019). College students nowadays live in a digital age, and their cognition and learning style are impacted and changed consequently. "English as an international language is a compulsory major for college students" (Wan, 2019). How English teachers properly use digital technology to fulfill English language teaching so as to adapt to the time has become the focus of EFL in many colleges.

The goal of this literature review is to include extensive research into teaching English as foreign language in digital age to examine how various new high technology tools can help English language teaching, and

propose some points that new technology are not good enough and need to be improved so as to better serve language teaching.

PROBLEMS IN TRADITIONAL ENGLISH TEACHING

With the development of the times, traditional English teaching methods cannot meet the learning needs of modern students in many aspects, and need to be improved with new technologies. The following is a list of common problems with traditional English teaching methods.

LACK OF INTEREST AND ENTHUSIASM

As the saying goes, "Interest is the best teacher to learn". There are several difficulties in learning English for EFL students. "One of the most important reasons is the lack of positive interest in English learning and the lack of self-confidence in oral expression" (Wan, 2019). Wan's point is that traditional English teaching process is too monotonous, filled with boring content. It is impossible to stimulate students' interest in English learning. In traditional teaching mode, teachers still use blackboard, chalk, and textbook to teach students in classrooms. Students are from different regions, with quite different level of English language ability. If we spend too much time on those students with low-level English language ability, we will certainly not be able to meet the learning requirements of students with good foundation, which will also lead to the decline in teaching quality and students' interest in learning.

Traditional English teaching ignores the expressive function of language. As we know, language has two systems. One is expression form, the other is expression function. "Traditional teaching pays too much attention to the form of language expression but ignores the function of language expression" (Bu, 2011). In making this comment, Bu believes that traditional English teaching generally follows the classic language teaching procedure of "new words - text - grammar - exercise". This program is able to help students lay a solid foundation of English language. Many students can learn language rules, and memorize many words, but do not know how to use them. Many students even cannot make simple dialogue clearly after learning English for many years, hence lose interest in learning EFL.

Traditional English teaching ignores the center role of students in classrooms. As Bu puts it, "For a long time, English teaching has followed the principle of 'teacher-oriented' and neglected the main role of students" (2011). The essence of Bu's argument is that the teacher's explanation takes up most of the class time; hence students have little practice because the teaching quality

criteria measures teachers' preparation for lesson and lecture organization. In that case, students become passive recipients of language knowledge and lack of initiative in EFL learning. However, the focus of English language learning is to learn rather than to teach.

Unlike other applied fundamental subjects, English language learning is a kind of practical course. "English language teaching effect should be based on students' learning effect, which depends on students' subjective initiative and participation to a large extent" (Bu, 2011). In making this comment, Bu urges us to make EFL teaching student-centered, bring vitality and enthusiasm to the classroom, timely find students' difficulties and solve their problems, and become their learning guide. In this way, we can overcome the disadvantages of the traditional teacher-centered teaching model, such as passivity, dependence, and blindness, and make students real masters of learning.

LIMIT IN SPACE, TIME, AND PRACTICE

Space is the first limit bringing obstacles to English language teaching in traditional EFL class. According to Wan, "In the traditional teaching mode, the communication opportunities between the teacher and the students are only limited to the communication in the classroom" (2019). Wan's point is that once the class time is over, it will be inconvenient for the students to communicate with their teachers. This will cause the lack of communication between teachers and their students. While communication between teachers and students is not only an important means to promote the efficiency of education, but also an education itself. The whole meaning of education is contained in the teacher-student relationship. The educational process can even be regarded as a dynamic process of the formation and establishment of teacher-student relationship. Therefore, lack of after class communication is an obstacle to EFL learning.

Another limitation is time. This time limitation refers to the students' learning time limitation in the class periods. "In schools, all knowledge is taught equally at the same time ..." (Murugan, 2017). The essence of Murugan's argument is that class time will limit customized teaching to students. After all, students have individual interests and difficulty levels in EFL learning. During the traditional class time, teachers teach all students at the same time and cannot teach them according to their personal features, leading to low teaching efficiency.

The third limit lies in the practice. For EFL students, there is a lack of formal language environment for English language learning. "[Traditional classroom] makes the knowledge too theoretical and is not conducive for students to apply the knowledge they have learned to the real life" (Li, 2019). The essence of Li's argument is that

traditional classroom has limit in the site and discipline, therefore students cannot carry out field learning. Li also states, "Some experts have pointed out that the higher the consistency between the situation created in foreign language learning and the real situation in practice, the better the learning effect will be". But in the traditional foreign language teaching practice, there are no conditions for EFL students to learn in real social situations.

SOLUTIONS: COMPUTER ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING

Since the computer came out in 1960, it has been changing our life greatly. Hence it has become a powerful tool and has been used for foreign language training. It is called computer assisted language learning (CALL), which has promoted the study of English in several ways.

First CALL can increase students' interest in studying English. "In the digital age, the application of information technology in teaching can add interesting teaching video and audio to stimulate students' enthusiasm for English exploration" (Zhang 2019). In other words, Zhang believes with the help of CALL, teachers can make use of massive digital resources to expand students' knowledge, enhance their understanding and perception of English, and stimulate students' interest in EFL learning. CALL can create good and rich teaching resources to make students learn actively. Students can explore their favorite things which can make EFL learning closely related to their own life, hence improve the overall efficiency of EFL learning. A current tendency in education which is applicable to EFL teaching is gamification of learning. It can deliver teaching resource and stimulates students' experience. According to Ogurtsova, "Applied to Business English teaching to future economists we can suggest that computer game-based learning systems (computer simulations) have to be created for attaining desired cognitive, attitudinal/ or behavioral outcomes" (2015). In making this comment, Ogurtsova believes that gamification of learning can be useful to teach students to use English language as a tool to choose the right communicative strategies in typical sociocultural situations. It is even possible to construct the EFL course as a computer game where students can learn vocabulary, grammar and develop listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in a fun way.

Second CALL is an ideal tool to provide teaching material. "Digital tools can take us into virtual worlds of all kinds, provide us with data for conclusions that would have been unthinkable a generation ago, make space for new collaborations ..." (Botshon, 2014). In making this comment, Botshon believes that CALL should be able to provide students with digital tools that allow them to perform in the most efficient way. Students should be able to guide themselves toward their learning goals

with digital tools and resources. CALL can also provide teachers with digital tools to organize and monitor students' work efficiently. As Zhang states, "In digital age, teachers can effectively apply information technology to assist English teaching. It can save classroom teaching time, allowing teachers to spend more time and energy on thinking about teaching plans" (2019). Zhang's point is that teachers can apply information technology to enrich the course content, such as applying multimedia to make the teaching richer and more intuitive, so that students can have a more profound impression and understanding on what they learn. Teachers can further expand classroom knowledge, so that students can have a broader understanding of what they have learned, which is conducive to expanding students' learning horizon and improving their English learning efficiency.

Third CALL may improve communication between teachers and students. A computer is not just a device for storage of data, furthermore it can be used as a powerful tool to deliver information and be used for communication. "Computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the internet connectivity have redesigned the usage of computers in English language learning" (Ramya, 2017). In making this comment, Ramya means that new computer technologies allow teachers to make conversations with students in different ways, adopt rich sources into the classroom and assignments, and use many kinds of teaching styles and paces. The introduction of Language laboratories has extended the scope of CALL. Nowadays, wireless network has been widely applied in the campus. The combination of wireless and computer technology may enhance the learning and communication of EFL learners on campus.

MOBILE ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING

With the technological innovations, modern society becomes a mobile society. Mobile phones become so popular that people cannot live a day without them. In some countries like China, mobile phone can almost do all kinds of payment with various types of APP. CALL has also developed into mobile area and introduced a new branch, which is commonly called mobile assisted language learning (MALL).

Using mobile phones in EFL learning is beneficial because mobile phones can efficiently present learning content and create variation in English teaching and learning process. In Murugan's view, "... Mobile phones enable the learners to strengthen their language skills as it promotes an environment that motivates the learners to be explorative" (2017). Murugan's point is that mobile phones can enhance EFL learner's skills in areas such as language, communication, motivation, collaboration, creativity and thinking skills. Mobile phone applications

can promote independent learning, realistic language practice, interactive learning, and fun in learning as students are familiar to those applications. Mobile phone technology can enrich students' learning process because it is versatile and enhance students' high motivation and encourage them to participate in the classroom actively. The use of mobile phone in EFL learning may bring students to higher thinking order skills so that they can understand, develop, and treat MALL as not something they have to do but a tool that they can apply and learn from.

MALL provides two-ways communication between teachers and students wirelessly. "In principle, m-Learning offers students the chance of learning whenever and all over the place" (Yuliani, 2019). The essence of Yuliani's argument is that mobile phone applications are mainly composed of large amount of English learning materials, and app English learning is not limited by time and place, which allows EFL students to learn more knowledge points and learn at any time. To meet the students' needs, many sorts of mobile phone apps have been produced to assist learning like discussion forum, text-based activities, audio-based learning, even interactive game-based language learning. In Yuliani's research, "Students showed their positive attitude toward the possibility of practicing language activities such as listening, speaking, reading and vocabulary by using mobile phone" (2019). The results of his research also indicted the students' willingness to adapt new framework of language learning by using mobile phone.

AR ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING

Augmented Reality, sounds new to us, started as early as in 1960. Though it had started very early, it is difficult to be implemented due to the limited computer technology then. But as technology has been improved a lot in this era, most people have access to computers that leave room for implementation of AR into language learning. There are many advantages of AR integration in EFL learning, such as referring to multiple intelligences; learning English by observing and exploring; enhancing language performance; interacting with language, teachers and peers; self-learning and motivation etc.

Among those benefits, the major function of AR in EFL learning is experiencing. Virtual content can be seamlessly integrated into the display of real scenes. Students can learn English language better through real experiences situated in the learning environment. AR technology makes this process possible. As Li states, "Virtual elements co-exist with the completely real elements, allowing users to interact with virtual elements in a real environment and making learners fully immerse themselves in the context created by the current AR technology" (2019). In Li's view, augmented reality can

introduce dimensionality into EFL learning. Students may have a real sense of experiencing the language. AR can add sounds, graphics, and even touch feedback to the natural world so as to enhance EFL learner's experience. Due to the continuous improvement of intelligent terminal performance, classrooms are equipped with computers, projectors, network, video cameras, and electronic white board. Therefore augmented reality system can be applied to teaching so that students can use more senses to learn English easier in the simulative scenes.

In EFL classes, it is important to keep learners' interest and attention. While AR designs can be an effective tool to maintain students' attention and interest. As Tulgar puts it, "Since language is for communication, enabling young learners to establish and maintain interactions with other people through the target language should be among the main concerns" (2019). The essence of Tulgar's argument is that AR has been shown as an effective and helpful tool to support effective EFL teaching and learning as it enables timely interaction between the learners and their surroundings hence increase learners' motivation, attention, concentration and satisfaction. Through presenting a combination of rich real and virtual language content, AR technology provides learners an opportunity to broaden their horizons with the virtual content and still keeping in the reality. On the whole, EFL learning becomes faster and easier for students who are involved in the process of AR.

CONCLUSION

Ever since computer technology has been actively involved in EFL teaching, its role has been shaped by technological development as well as changing the pedagogical approach to language teaching. "To date, technology is a must in teaching; ... Dissociating technology from education appears like dissociating a soul from a body. It is incrementally becoming the air we breathe" (Atamena, 2016). The various digital technologies mentioned in this article are only some of the major digital tools that EFL teachers often use in their teaching. As digital technology can bring an English language environment to the classroom and offer additional possibilities for teachers to present teaching materials in most attractive ways, EFL teachers have paramount need to intensify their efforts to explore the most advanced technologies and apply newest teaching instruments in their teaching in order to assure an efficiently EFL teaching in this digital generation.

However, computer assisted English teaching cannot completely replace traditional classroom teaching, but complement each other. In fact, traditional teaching tools are still useful and can promote learning. Botshon states, "Even digital junkies will admit that the traditional form of the university, including its reliance on the same set of structures for centuries, has been tremendously

successful, not only in replicating itself, but in helping students become more fully realized citizens” (2014). In making this comment, Botshon believes that there are thoughtful and provocative content in traditional form of teaching, with lively discussions between students and lectures given by teachers. A variety of methods can be combined and manipulated to provide colorful and vivid learning environment for English language learners. Traditional language teaching focuses on imparting systematic language points, which is helpful for students to form knowledge structure in a short time. Teachers can fully control the classroom and help students focus their thinking. Class teaching system can facilitate teachers to organize and monitor the whole process of teaching activities. It can not only promote the emotional communication between teachers and students, but also be beneficial to the cultivation of language learner’s thinking ability. In the modern classroom in the digital age, a teacher should be involved in teaching activities that digital technology cannot deal with.

To better support EFL teaching, there are still many problems about digital technology that need to be solved, such as its usability and practicality; technical problems; lack of training and the risk of isolation, among which isolation is one major point that EFL teachers need to be aware of. As Tulgar states, “However, it is also reported that [digital technology] may result in isolation in some cases” (2019). Tulgar’s point is that digital technology assisted language learning may direct students for too much self-learning, resulting in limited interaction with others. It is difficult for EFL teachers to gauge and monitor students’ digital technology assisted learning. Therefore, while integrating digital technology into language education, EFL teachers should be careful and conscious about the engagement levels of their students with the design, and monitor the interactional patterns of their students and encourage interactions between student and student and between student and teacher in order to prevent isolation.

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