

RESEARCH ON TECHNOLOGY-BASED LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN: PERSPECTIVES FOR STUDENT SKILLS' ENHANCEMENT - INTRODUCTION

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The technological boom has had a significant impact on education. The ever expanding pool of technological choices has shown the potential to create successful learning experiences for students. Language education has also benefited from this revolution. Having offered “the means to help reshape both the content and processes of language education” (Warschauer & Meskill, 2000), contemporary computer, internet and mobile technologies have provided language educators and foreign language learners with unprecedented opportunities for teaching and learning. This is particularly true in language education in the Sultanate of Oman that features computer laboratories, a wide range of software and programs for computer-assisted and mobile language learning, and high levels of teachers' and students' enthusiasm for technology-based language teaching and learning (Al-Busaidi & Tuzlukova, 2013; Beatty & Nunan, 2004; Emerson & Tuzlukova, 2012; Scully, 2008, etc.). In addition, there is evident teacher pursuit in helping students gain apprenticeship into new technology-mediated discourse communities, creating opportunities for authentic and meaningful interaction both within and outside the classroom, and providing “the tools for their own social, cultural, and linguistic exploration and for the kinds of international cross-cultural interactions which are increasingly required for success in academic, vocational, or personal life” (Warschauer & Meskill, 2000). However, according to Al-Issa (2011), computer-assisted language learning and the use of technology in language education in general are “among weaknesses and problems which ELT education systems in the GCC States have suffered from” (p.67).

To meet the existing local challenges (Al-Issa, 2011) and examine the technology-based language education in Oman “available for public scrutiny” (Nunan, 1999 cited in Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2010:59), this special issue of the Journal of Teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes is about searching for knowledge, putting isolated facts, practice and experience in perspective, helping make connections across academic and language teaching communities, and contributing to the scientific value and social significance of the local community of language educators and pedagogues in the Sultanate of Oman and around the world. Serving as a forum for language educators and researchers to reflect on, validate and evaluate the technological approaches and products for their impact on skills' enhancement, language learning and teaching, this special issue

includes research on integrating computer, internet and mobile technologies into the language classroom in the educational context of Oman and using them for communicative language teaching, engaging students in authentic, meaningful interactions and developing their critical thinking and problem solving skills. It also includes studies on tracking individual student learning processes, testing and assessment and language teacher professional development for effective use of technology in teaching.

In their paper entitled *Technology and English language education: A case study of Caledonian College of Engineering*, Kirankumar Ramachandran, Reeja Riyaz and Navaneeth Kolady Mootheri analyze the impact of technology on language education and report on their college students', teachers' and management' perceptions of technology. However, Kirankumar Ramachandran, Reeja Riyaz and Navaneeth Kolady Mootheri do not only trace individual perceptions of different aspects of technology and its integration; they also give a precise overview of how technology is currently used in the context of their college and give some recommendations on how the role of technology in language education can be further enhanced. As the authors indicate, Oman is one of the Gulf countries that has established a large and dynamic growth in the field of higher education which primarily focuses on instilling the young generation of Omanis with "capacities and skills that confirm with the technical and technological development and are characterized by high efficiency for management of changes" (Ministry of National Economy, 2002). According to Kirankumar, Reeja and Navaneeth, "such focus encourages universities and colleges in Oman to integrate technological skills into their curriculum".

The paper entitled the *Acquisition of language meanings via smart technologies* is contributed by Gayane R. Hovhannisyan. It reports on a pilot study of a repertoire of technology-based language learning activities/content with Omani college and high school students. The study's conceptual framework is driven by psycholinguistic theories of foreign language acquisition, practical and pedagogical implications of constructivism and pragmatics. In particular, the author looks at the features of smart technologies that can enhance meaningful language learning at both secondary and tertiary levels of education, and also explores some distinctive attributes and aspects of the social and cultural context, such as level of technology, level of skills, perceived needs, quality of smart applications, etc. The results of the study reveal the importance of the teacher's role in helping students follow their learning needs, navigate through the increasing number of devices, applications, sources and services. The author argues that it is also important to focus on students' experiences of processing and creating meanings before adapting materials to teaching tasks. This can be a positive step on the path towards stimulating students' autonomous learning and successful teaching that implements smart technologies.

Investigating teachers' actual levels of use of WhatsApp application with English foundation and credit program students at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman by Bati Al Shekaili draws on the results from a study that examines WhatsApp instant mobile messaging application in relation to the independent use of this educational innovation by language teachers. Basing his examination on Hall et al.'s (1973, as cited in Mustafa, 2008) adaptive Level of Use Self-Assessment questionnaire, the author brings to a discussion teachers' diverse competencies and experiences of using mobile phone applications. Bati's research reveals that a big number of teachers are at the 'low' levels and they should be encouraged to "easily move towards higher levels of use of educational innovations" in their classrooms.

In her paper *Twitter mobile application: A source of communicative and authentic learning*, Amal Albadi explores how mobile technology can be effectively used in language education through a combination of authentic and communicative methods and approaches. She also considers the unique learning environment that can be created by using mobile applications and explores it in relation to social acceptance and impact on students' motivation, digital literacy, collaboration encouragement and language skills' improvement.

A related paper by Muneer Nasser Alhadhrami *Using mobile phone apps inside and outside the English language classroom by undergraduate students at Sultan Qaboos University: Attitudes, practices and challenges* is aiming at exploring students' attitudes to mobile learning, in general, and in relation to individual experiences and challenges, provides a description and analysis of multidimensional practice that is currently in place at one of the leading universities in Oman. According to Muneer, Omani students try out a wide range of mobile applications that can help them in learning the English language outside the classroom. These include, but are not limited to WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc. Students also create groups in these apps and follow users from different countries to discuss issues in English. However, the in-class use of mobile applications is limited by 'rules and formality' as well as by teachers' lack of acceptance. Muneer concludes by contending that for the students "to take advantage of the available mobile phone applications, teachers should be more involved in guiding students to reliable applications and helping them in effective use of mobile phone applications in language learning".

The general purpose of the paper *The use of Edmodo, virtual learning management platform, in the context of promoting mobile learning* by Kristina Bayburtsyan is to discuss different approaches to mobile learning with a particular focus on Edmodo's characteristics, features and functions that can be effectively applied to promote language learners' independent studies and diversify their learning opportunities outside the classroom. The author also examines teacher and student roles and factors that influence the use of mobile phone applications in education, for example, users' expectations, pedagogical implications, etc. The discussion of Edmodo functions as a communication channel and as an organizer of a teaching process is supported by practical recommendations for language teachers. In the author's view, Edmodo can "facilitate an efficient course management and can positively affect interaction between teachers and students". She also believes that "in the hands of a creative teacher, Edmodo can become a great tool to instill independent learning skills in the 21st century learners".

In Katherine Usha Prabhukanth and Anne Gilhooly's paper entitled *An e-approach to report writing, the authors focus on how the concept of computer-assisted language learning can inject a new vigor into English learning methodologies and approaches to students' skill development and enhancement*. Addressing the contradictions which are present in the context of low performing language learners required to achieve relatively high order language and study skill learning outcomes, the authors discuss an e-approach to the written component of an academic research project carried out by students in the Foundation English Language Program at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. In their paper, the authors first familiarize the readers with the concept of the General Foundation Program, its English language courses, their objectives and framework; then they introduce the approach aimed at interfacing students with the course objectives through a virtual learning environment framework which is finally tested for pedagogical and instructional

value. The authors believe that the proposed framework can serve as “a resource to facilitate creative thinking and writing”. However, according to them, “like any resource, it is inert until there is the intervention of a catalytic mediation characterized by enthusiasm, imagination and creativity”.

The emphasis of the paper by Victoria Tuzlukova and Saleh Al Busaidi *Analyzing information, communicative and technological support in skills' development of language learners in Oman* is on multidimensional aspects that are skill development supportive in relation to the concepts of source of learning, support to learning and teaching, stimulation and motivation, and reference (Dudley-Evans, 1998). As the authors point out, “many language institutions and language programs worldwide have technology-based agendas aiming at offering educators high-impact, high-performance and high-engagement options for generating their students' interest, motivation and enhancing learning; growing communication and computer-based infrastructure; increasing the number of learners who utilize dynamic targeted websites and learning platforms; creating personal learning environments and shared information resources and enhancing research of the issues related to multidimensional perspectives of technology-based language teaching and learning”. They provide an examination and practical illustration of information, communicative and technological support currently existing in the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University in Oman and clearly demonstrate the pivotal role of such support for empowering teachers and students, and creating meaningful and dynamic perspectives (Nunan et al., 1987) in language education.

In their paper *Adoption of information and communication technology in the Foundation Institute at the University of Nizwa – Attitudes, problems and solutions*, Béla Tóth and Khalfan Khalfan Hamed Al-Harrasi hold that Information and communication technology are considered to have an impact on educational transfer and reform, and, here, the role of the teacher as a motivator, facilitator, role model and information source, is crucial. Using a case study from the Foundation Institute at the University of Nizwa, they analyze language teachers' skills and attitudes, as well as the factors that either support or hinder the process of integration of information and communication technology. Praising teachers' positive attitude and exemplary commitment to using technology, the authors also highlight how their University deals with problems that hinder the application of information and communication technology, for example, lack of e-learning culture, lack of quality assurance and improper syllabus design resulting in a lack of connection between materials and information and communication technology (Diaz, 2010). This is essential for institutions that want to further integrate information and communication technology in language learning.

Khulud Said Rashid Al Bilushi in her paper *Effect of e-mail exchange on Omani students' writing skills* asserts the importance of integrating computer-mediated communication into second language (L2)/ foreign language (FL) instruction for creating “more communicative and student - centered classrooms”. She explores the effect of e-mail exchanges on the English language writing skills in the context of Oman's Basic Education and particularly focuses on language learning experiences that e-mail exchange experience can potentially provide. According to Al Bilushi, as writing and exchanging e-mails whether with real or imaginary e-pals, improves students' writing test scores, teachers should more actively employ this activity to support and develop writing, as well as motivate students toward the process of writing.

Blended learning: Language learner perspectives and experiences by Galina Bugon takes the attention of the readers to some issues that are central to the nature of blended learning, but are, however, relatively un-researched in the context of Oman. She focuses on learner experiences and perspectives with regard to blended learning. Using the example of Moodle activities offered to the language learners by the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University to create a virtual learning environment, supplementing face-to-face language instruction and encouraging their self-study, she provides a valuable description and analysis of the problems the language learners have and the strategies they use. The data Galina gathered reveal a number of recurrent challenges related to students' experiences of using Moodle activities assigned as a compulsory part of their self-study which include, for example, level of difficulty, time constraints, lack of support, lack of feedback, lack of motivation, the use of activities originally created following the principles of traditional language classrooms which, according to Bugon, tends to isolate the learner from all social interaction and views education as a one-on-one relationship between the learner and the objective material to be learned", etc. The study by Galina also indicates that students employ a wide range of strategies to cope with their challenges, such as getting help from outside, using networking among others. According to the author, one of the most important strategies Omani students use when working in virtual learning environments is interacting and working together to understand the task. However, such interactions are not encouraged by teachers, who, in the author's view, should be more involved in supporting students and giving them feedback to make blended learning meaningful and successful.

According to Hranush Ginosyan and Victoria Tuzlukova, the authors of the paper *Foundation Program student's profile: Writing, study and computer skills*, "the role of computer knowledge in student life is great since current trends in teaching and learning involve the use of computers to a large extent". In their paper, based in the context of the Foundation Program English Language exit courses at Sultan Qaboos University, the authors argue that in spite of considerable progress in applying technology in teaching and learning, students' computer literacy and skills should be more precisely considered when engaging them in online activities and tasks. The results of their study also reveal a complex picture of tasks and activities that involve researching, writing, asking, responding, sharing and reflecting, and necessitate action to be taken in order to give students reasonable opportunities and introduce them to the effective use of online language learning resources or applications.

The paper by Umamaheswara Rao Bontha *Student reflections on computer-assisted learning with special reference to their course books* explores in detail the educational context of the Foundation Program at Dhofar University in relation to the use of technology and computer-assisted English language learning. As Umamaheswara indicates, computers and the internet can be effectively used in the English language classrooms as they offer opportunities to fulfill students' personal needs and expectations and individualize language learning. According to the author, both teachers' and students' perceptions of computer-assisted language learning are important for the successful integration of technology, reaching the intended learning outcomes of the English language courses and allowing richer forms of 'language exploration' (Higgins, 1995). Umamaheswara Rao also reports positive aspects of using books/materials that support computer-assisted language learning. Here, he shares the view of some researchers that teachers should perceive computer-assisted language learning only as a tool to make language teaching interesting and productive but not as a programmed-learning machine (Jones & Fortescue, 1987), and act accordingly.

In his paper entitled *Integrating multimedia in teaching English to Oman learners*, Joseph Decena Dayag investigates the extent of multimedia integration in teaching English as a Foreign Language at Shinas College of Technology in the Sultanate of Oman. The study elicits data on such aspects of integrating multimedia in teaching English as frequency, reasons, factors and encountered challenges. The results reveal that the majority of the English language teachers frequently integrate multimedia in teaching, specifically, when they introduce a topic, provide enhancement and listening activities, and unlock technical vocabulary. It is evident from the results of the study that multimedia is primarily integrated to motivate the learners, ensure variety in classroom activities and facilitate the learning of the language. In describing factors that facilitate multimedia integration, Joseph Decena Dayag provides a valuable list that includes access to equipment, availability of technical support, and educational technology training. According to him, lack of time and unavailability of multimedia equipment in the classroom are among the challenges that teachers encounter when they want to integrate multimedia in the English language classroom.

In his paper *How can a class website be used to supplement teaching? A case study of advanced level technical college learners in Oman*, Edward Stallard discusses ways for better augmentation of the syllabus by specific use of computer-assisted language learning and, as a consequence, for increasing learner motivation and creating means through which the learners can interact with the target language outside the classroom. The study by Edward reflects on the benefits of using a class website which, according to the author, include, for example, making up for some of the failings of the syllabus, motivating students, etc. The author contends that “in taking the time to create a website for students, the teacher provides a safe vessel upon which the class can explore the vastness of the internet”. However, according to Stallard, the quality of students’ experience with the class website is higher, when the teacher is involved and guides them.

The paper by Gennady Medvedev is entitled *Google Translate in teaching English*. Aimed at exploring instant translation tools currently used in the English Foundation Program at the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, it also addresses the issue of educational implications of translation as a meaningful language learning activity. In addition, the author looks at how Google Translate can be effectively used to introduce and practice vocabulary items with Arab learners of English. The broad subject of this paper is the translation method. However, the author presents the reader with a discussion of a wide range of issues related to the place of translation in the current teaching paradigm in relation to, for example, vocabulary input in the classroom, etc. He also gives some practical ideas that can be effectively used to introduce and practice vocabulary items for Arab learners of English.

The title of the paper by Farah Bahrouni is *Using Multi-Facet Rasch Model (MFRM) in rater-mediated assessment*. It examines the Multi-Facet Rasch Model (MFRM) approach (Linacre, 1989) that has proved to be a valuable tool to investigate the effects of various facets on test outcomes in rater-mediated assessment contexts. The author addresses the conceptual foundations of the approach and its development. He also focuses on its powerful features and implementation in rater-mediated assessment contexts, as well as on the interpretation of the main statistical indices of the approach. The analysis is illustrated with the data from a study conducted at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University.

Jokha Al Hosni’ s paper *The power of image in English language teaching* reflects on the effectiveness of using infographics as a learning tool in enhancing learners’ comprehension and memory retention. Acknowledging the fact that the use of visuals in

media and the online world has intensified, the author also considers the increasing need for making the new generation visually literate. The results of the study conducted by Al Hosni reveals that the use of infographics in the English language classroom enhances students' comprehension and boosts their ability to recall.

All the papers in this special issue of the Journal of Teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes focus on a multidimensional approach to technology-based language education in the Sultanate of Oman. However, they share a common understanding of the significance of technology for the continued development and enhancement of our students' competencies and skills.

It is the hope of the editors and contributors that this issue will serve as a valuable resource and reference guide for the comprehensive presentation and coverage of research on technology based education in the Sultanate of Oman. It is also our wish that this collection of papers will become a source of inspiration and ideas for language educators and students, and help them discover new perspectives and opportunities to build upon.

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