Reflections on Web-based language teaching

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Abstract: Web-based education has been enjoying greater popularity because of its undeniable advantages. It has been seen as a panacea by more and more people in educational field, including language teaching. Based on the realization of the great potential brought by the development of technology, some viewpoints about the relationship among technology, teaching and pedagogy are put forward: firstly, technology is a tool, not a strategy; secondly, pedagogical concerns and theory should drive the way technology is used in education, not the other way around; thirdly, what matters more than technology is how the technology is used for learning, and how it is integrated into the daily classroom scheme so that active engagement in acquisition-oriented work take place; and finally, the change of learning environment inevitably calls for parallel changes in teaching and learning procedures. Available technologies can greatly enhance both student-teacher and student-student interaction and can afford students increased opportunities for self directed learning. To be most effective, technology must be used to support well-planned curricular goals and should involve carefully designed activities providing students with meaningful educational experiences.

Keywords: Web-based teaching; educational technology; pedagogy; teaching

1. Introduction

Recent information technological developments, especially the World Wide Web, have provided a powerful stimulus for the production of a range of electronic materials for education and therefore changed the way of education quite dramatically. The major contribution of the Web is the way in which information can be assessed and reviewed. The use of a graphical, coherent interface, and the use of hyperlinks that enable one to associatively browse through series of documents provide a user-friendly front end to the Internet. The Web enables any user that is connected, to exploit the available resources on virtually any site within relatively short time. The traditional bounds of the classroom and the class group are broken. Therefore, the “same time, same place, only some people” traditional educational environment is giving way to “any time, any place and anybody” Web-based instructional models [1]. This development significantly increases the potential scope of language learning.

Now a lot of language courses can be found on the Web. An Internet connection in the classroom provides access to authentic audiences around the world and allows learners to work with a rich variety of sources: two-way communication between learners and other resource people would otherwise be unavailable or impractical. Teachers and their students are now able to reach beyond the learning environment as it is defined locally and thereby native speakers of the target language are able to become active participants in the learning process [2,3]. By using online resources, students have complete control over their learning in a way never before possible [4].

For teachers, the huge databases of organized materials available to students in computer software packages and on the Internet save them from struggling with limited resources in educational institutions [4]. With so many advantages in education, ‘technology is likely to dominate and define language learning very soon’ [5]. However, many Web-based learning materials seem to be “driven primarily by considerations of technique rather than any coherent methodology”. People are trying hard to make full use of the new technology without having a serious consideration of methodology, the most essential aspect in the teaching process and also the way to achieve best teaching outcome. The intention of writing this article is from the author’s long time observation to such phenomenon and careful reflection.

As is warned by Garrett [5], without the research that only language teachers can take, the effect of technology on language teaching and learning is all too likely to be disastrous. The potential disasters are of several kinds: using technology as a convenient excuse for cutting back on staff; using online resources without
giving serious thoughts to how to integrate them into learning; developing web teaching with pedagogically unsound materials; neglecting to provide adequate training and support for teachers. Therefore, adequate attention should be paid to the following aspects in order to get the most from this media.

2. Some necessary reflections on web-based language teaching

Firstly, technology is a tool, not a strategy. Being proficient in the use of a word processor does not guarantee that you will be able to write the next best seller. Likewise, the Internet cannot, in and of itself, improve the quality of the learning one puts on it. It is a medium in which a variety of methods, approach, and pedagogical philosophies maybe implemented [6]. It is worth mentioning that having the right technology and delivering good learning program using that technology is essential but insufficient. An effective web-based learning strategy must be more than the technology itself or the content it carries. However, many online learning are offered without the strategic thread holding all the materials together, thus most programs have minimal impact or just be short-lived. This problem is worth adequate attention.

In web-based teaching, the first thing we need to be aware of is that by adopting web-based learning, we are not just introducing new technology for learning, we are introducing new ways to think about learning. It would be irresponsible to be led purely by the latest technological breakthrough.

Secondly, pedagogical concerns and theory should drive the way technology is used in education, not the other way around. Therefore, teaching pedagogy should always be well reflected in the contents of online teaching materials. No matter how technically brilliant an online material maybe, it will be of limited use if its methodology and objective are dubious [7]. We should not forget that wonderful technical features do not necessarily mean effective teaching or learning; it is important to look beyond that trimming to see what the real content is.

However, as has been noticed that many web-based language learning programs have been led primarily by the interests and goals of practitioners rather than an overriding theoretical model. Some developers rely only on their intuition as teachers rather than on research on learning to develop online learning materials, while others place relatively high emphasis on the capabilities they perceive the web to have. Some even try to reconcile their pedagogy or methodology with the capabilities of the technology. Therefore, many online learning materials may lose their intended pedagogical value and cannot reap satisfactory outcome.

In the process of using web-based resources for learning, it should be stressed that web-based learning is only of real benefit if it contributes to a clearly enhanced learning environment, the quality of this environment will be determined by its human input—the pedagogical content of web-based activities, the motivation and initiatives of students, and the guidance which they receive. Though the web-based language learning materials do not have to be highly theoretically motivated, it is helpful and more productive in the long run if it is. Theory is important because it can provide a direction for research and development and a basis upon which to evaluate designs to see if they work or not. Therefore, if theory is not present explicitly in web content design, then teachers must ask on what basis, and with what criteria, the content will be evaluated. They must be careful not to rely too much on it in language learning process [2].

Thirdly, what matters more than technology is how the technology is used for learning, and how it is integrated into the daily classroom scheme so that active engagement in acquisition-oriented work take place [8]. Good use of technology can add value, but simply adding it to a bad learning program won’t improve it. While transforming some content to a multimedia format may be a ‘cool’ and popular thing to do, it by no means ensures learning gains. As a result of the greatly increased power and lowered costs for creating and delivering multimedia, there is an emerging feeling that teaching can be improved by extensive use of multimedia in large lecture courses. Therefore, it is proposed that the developing web-based teaching do not mean a simple transfer of its content from traditional textbook to hypertext. Instead, the appropriate use of technology depends largely on a clear understanding of the features of the technology, a sound learning theory, and a set of well-defined and justified goals to be achieved.

In web-based language teaching, too often teachers move to an online learning environment carrying their paradigms of classroom training. The result is online learning materials with lots of lessons and lectures followed by electronic forms of traditional paper and
pen test. As has been noticed by Lewandowska, Osborne and Schulte [9], though there is an abundance of online testing materials, much of it is simply a computerized version of existing test format, and therefore offers only the advantage of more immediate feedback, which reflects only the beginning generation of computer-based language testing. Teachers need to have a level of expertise that enables them to use learning technologies comfortably and online teaching needs to be part of the practicum experience for all teachers.

Teachers’ pedagogical skills to mediate online materials are crucial. While the electronic environment is significantly different to the face-to-face environment, what is common is that there are no easy answers that will work for all students and in all environments. The skills called for are: vigilance, timing, involvement, appreciating silences, listening, understanding and respecting the participants. To summarize this view, it is what people do that is central concern, and then as a corollary, how computer help them do it better.

By making a sensible and effective use of the web resources, students are expected to develop their potential to the greatest possible extent. There is little doubt that well-conceived and well-organized online project will have motivational strength and bring valuable benefits to teaching and learning, however, we have to realize that the commonly known “drill and practice” way of instructional strategy, the badly written questions with minimal feedback can never fulfill the educational need. With the change in delivery strategy, instructional strategy needs to be changed as well.

Last but not the least, the change of learning environment inevitably calls for parallel changes in teaching and learning procedures. Most online teaching materials were created for a specific purpose and a specific audience and, most importantly, for a specific environment. To get the best from Internet resources, teachers need to find the information that can best suit their students’ levels and needs. They should provide adequate guide to students in their learning process. They need to know more and to do more in order to facilitate interactions in the web-learning environment. As is said by Fullan [10], “The more powerful technology becomes, the more indispensable good teachers are”. It would be foolish to assume that clicking in to an education website will generate the same opportunities as in a classroom.

Learning is an interactive and dynamic process. Online teaching materials can have quite different effects for different users. Its effectiveness resides in how it is put into use. A teacher should always be a good instructor rather than a mere computer operator while using the resources. Apart from devising and organizing appropriate tasks, one of the teacher’s role should be to act as a kind of ‘super proof-reader’, identifying linguistic problems that might acquire more explicit treatment and more focused practice offline, providing explanations, supplementing or clarifying practice made by students, guiding them in the use of both the online and offline resources. Besides, he/she should always try to stimulate students’ interests, and pay attention to the importance of the role of a student as a researcher and experimenter in the process of learning. As to the online information, it is designed to perform certain functions which may or may not lend itself in some way to language learning; it is a source that help reach the teaching objectives; it is only ‘a means to an end’; a catalyst to promote interaction among students and between students and teachers.

3. Conclusions

With the rapid change of technology, ideas and implementations, it is still not easy to provide a definitive picture of web-based language learning. While the web is providing an increasingly rich share free resources to language teachers, the often alluded to ‘radical rethinking’ still has a long way to go. The goal remains to use the web for meaningful, realistic activities, to rethink the teaching approach, and to exploit the various communication resources available in the most motivating way possible. Fig.1 may well reflect the nature of web-based language instruction that should properly involve input from language processing, pedagogy and teaching. And the decision-makers are the teachers, who are best capable of deploying the result of technology and pedagogy to their own or their students’ advantage.
many important benefits to students. Available technologies can greatly enhance both student-teacher and student-student interaction and can afford students increased opportunities for self directed learning. However, to be most effective, technology must be used to support well-planned curricular goals and should involve carefully designed activities that provide students with meaningful educational experiences. It needs to be considered in relation to how it might be used in language teaching or learning, and what methodology is appropriate for its use. Used appropriately, technology can be a valuable tool in building the skills students need to succeed in college and the workforce.

References