

INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGES AND SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN THE INFO-TECH-ENABLED EFL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT: *The present research study assesses the impact of an ICT-enabled English language environment on students' intercultural exchanges and soft skills development. The major objective is to see whether an English course content that makes use of blogs, podcasts, and Internet-aided presentations allows intercultural encounters and boosts personal and professional development. The qualitative comments from the end-of-course interview are examined with regard to students' reflections on their learning experience. Research findings show that the use of ICT-enabled class content does not bring about any considerable changes in students' cultural practices, but stirs and triggers personal and professional changes (changes in attitudes) and allows learners to develop empowering soft skills, including personal development skills, communication skills, and conflict resolution skills.*

KEYWORDS: ELT, ESP, Information Technology, Intercultural Exchanges, Soft Skills

INTRODUCTION

The use of Information and Communication Technology in English language teaching has turned the classroom into a global learning environment allowing more interaction and contact between learners across the world and redefining the functions that both teachers and students should fulfill. It is true that this new experience has increased the expectations of most foreign language professionals and promised better learning outcomes. However, most research studies that have been devoted to the assessment of using ICT in the EFL/ESP classroom have not yet provided convincing answers to the questions raised about the utility, practicality and efficiency of digitalizing class content. More research is then needed to assess ICT-enabled teaching practices in the EFL/ESP classroom.

The present research study assesses the impact of Information Technology use in the language classroom on students' intercultural exchanges and the possibility of developing appropriate soft skills. Students have continually been required to reflect on and discuss their ICT-enhanced English language learning. The major objective is to see whether an English course content that makes use of information technology triggers changes in the cultural identity of the target learners, boosts their personal development and allows them to develop and acquire empowering soft skills. The qualitative comments from the end-of-course interview are examined with regard to students' reflections on their learning experience.

Participant students belong to the same age range, have almost the same English learning experience, own computers and have access to the Internet. Therefore, no socio-demographic variables are believed to make a difference and impact students' patterns of reactions to interview questions. The end-of-course interview includes four questions requiring students to reflect on their learning experience and react to issues related to the exchange of global cultural practices and values, the involvement in new learning situations and the development and

acquisition of soft skills such as communication and conflict resolution skills in an ICT-enabled EFL/ESP classroom.

The qualitative content approach is used for the presentation and analysis of research data. It does not require the use of extensive statistical measures, what is required is an identification of recurrent tendencies and patterns. The qualitative content analysis of students' answers will help answer the following research question.

Question: To what extent does ICT-enhanced English language teaching allow intercultural exchanges in the EFL/ESP classroom and boost students' development and acquisition of soft skills?

LITERATURE/THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Research devoted to ICT-aided English language teaching and its impact on students' intercultural exchanges, personal development and soft skills acquisition examines the role of ICT and the Internet in particular as it relates to English language acquisition and investigates whether the experience fosters students' problem solving skills, boosts their soft skills development and broaden their knowledge to include other perspectives and differences. (Conacher , 2004 ; Lee, C., 2005; Richardson 2008; Nur Hafizah, 2015; Anthony 2016).

'The use of ICT in the language learning process might have an impact beyond the language classroom, as students not only develop linguistic and socio-cultural expertise through ICT but also acquire ICT-related skills through the target language . On this basis, It could equip the individual to 'participate fully in all aspects of modern society within a dynamic and an ongoing process of perpetual transformation'' (Conacher 2004: 63). Lee, C. (2005) backs up Conacher's argument and claims that through learning, humans recreate themselves and re-perceive the world around them. The same principle of developmental learning, she adds, applies whatever learning technologies people use.

The potential of ICT-aided English language teaching in the development and evolution of students' perspectives has been investigated by few research studies and a large part of them has actually been devoted to the assessment of the impact on the development of students' problem solving skills (Mohamad, 2004; Stansberry and Kymes, 2007). It is true that a change in perspectives takes place in the classroom, but its efficiency and usefulness is only a potential.

It is well recognized from the English language teaching literature that the EFL experience even before the emergence of information technology has had many possibilities for mindset development and evolution. Research has shown that English language learners experience a change in their attitudes and perspectives. Three themes of perspective evolution experiences usually included in the answers of participants: Language learning, cultural awareness and personal development (King, 2009). Participants recognise a change in their assumptions about the language, a development in intercultural awareness and a feeling of empowerment and self esteem through the learning of the language and its culture.

The impact is expected to be greater and more influential with the integration of ICT and the Internet in particular in the language classroom (Stansberry and Kymes, 2007). Though they are few, most conducted research studies show that EFL learners experience personal development and perspective transformation. The most common themes of the developmental

experience include the acquisition of problem solving and critical thinking skills. These skills can be applied in conventional language teaching settings and are more solicited in ICT-aided teaching settings where virtual mobility may surprise learners with a large set of unusual and unconventional issues and arguments.

The ICT-enabled English language teaching environment does not only provide opportunity for the development of critical thinking skills, but also paves the way for perspective evolution and transformation. Al-Salem (2005) concludes that Saudi EFL college females have experienced perspective transformation as a result of their exposure to the information provided by the Internet as well as the mode of interaction facilitated via the Internet. The experience has increased their self confidence, broadened their minds about other cultures and given them more opportunities to make social contacts.

The development of students' soft skills is always possible through the use of ICT tools in business communication courses (Anthony 2016). The implementation of Web Quest in the EFL classroom can be an effective ICT tool to help students develop and acquire soft skills. Soft skills are useful for higher education students to meet the requirements and expectations of their future employers (Nur Hafizah 2015)

Research has then clearly demonstrated that the use of ICI in English language teaching provides a favourable environment for intercultural exchanges and allows more personal and professional development, including the enhancement of communication skills and the development of the human characteristics of inclusion and openness. However there is no hard evidence that the changes that students experience are always appropriate and can be used to their advantage.

METHODOLOGY

A focus group interview is used as a qualitative research tool for data collection and discussion with a sample of students to investigate the impact of ICT-aided teaching material and content on students' intercultural exchanges and personal development. Participant students belong to an experimental group whose English language teaching included an extensive use of ICT-based class content, including blogs, podcasts, and Internet-aided presentations. They are asked to reflect on their learning experience and react to interview questions. The overall questions to answer in focus group discussions aim at investigating the extent to which the use of ICT in the English language classroom broadens learners' minds about other cultures, beliefs, and behaviours and demonstrate whether ICT-aided English classes have an impact on students' development and acquisition of soft skills. Appropriate qualitative content analysis of students' answers and reactions to interview questions is used. The main reason for conducting content analysis is to be able to investigate and establish, if possible, links between ICT use in the English language classroom and students' cultural exchanges and development of soft skills. When students are involved in ICT-enabled learning situations that include global cultural practices and issues, does it make them reflect on their learning experience, engage in intercultural exchanges and develop appropriate soft skills to handle different situations? The process of content analysis to be used in this section of research includes three steps: presentation of raw data, data reduction and conclusion drawing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative end-of-course interview includes the following reflection questions that have been used to conduct and articulate the investigation and assessment of the potential impact of ICT-enabled class content on students' intercultural exchanges and development of soft skills.

Table 1. Focus group interview questions

Question1: To what extent does ICT-aided English language teaching provide opportunities for intercultural exchanges?
Question2: Does the use of ICT-aided English classes provide learning environments for potential changes in learners' social and cultural practices?
Question3: To what extent does ICT-aided English language teaching create learning opportunities for students to address new situations and perspectives?
Question4: To what extent does ICT-aided teaching content allow learners to develop and acquire different soft skills?

Exchanges of global cultural values and issues

Participant students provided different answers backed up with arguments and examples. The main objective is to identify recurrent patterns and tendencies. (Please see figure 1 for a reduced version of students' reactions.)

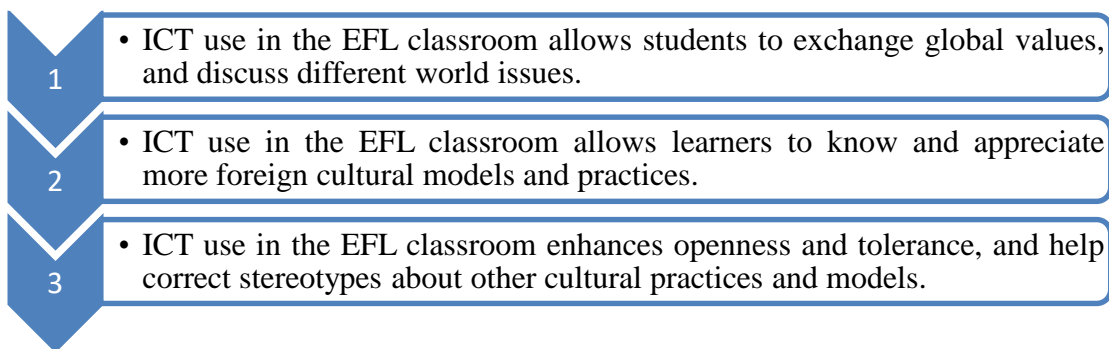


Figure 1. Reduced version of students' answers

Participant students' answers to question 1 from the end-of-course interview include different reactions and attitudes. Figure 1 of data reduction shows that answers cover three major trends. The objective is to see whether ICT-enabled EFL environments allow an exchange of global cultural values.

Most students reportedly believe that the use of ICT provides an interactive platform for the discussion of global issues and boosts the dissemination and sharing of global values in the EFL classroom. They attribute the efficiency of class delivery to the use of Internet web material and applications such as videos, podcasts, blogs and pictures. Very few participant students believe that the use of ICT in the EFL classroom may go beyond the dissemination of

global values to broaden mindsets and encourage learners to appreciate and pick up foreign cultural practices and values.

The remaining respondents have even attempted to give examples of value themes that are enhanced and disseminated in ICT-enabled learning environments. These include mutual respect, participation, openness, tolerance, cooperation and an increasing awareness of global values and issues. An overall assessment of participant students' answers to question 1 reveals that the use of ICT in the EFL classroom broadens learners' knowledge about global issues and update them about current issues, but is less likely to trigger any potential adoption of unusual cultural practices.

Potential changes in learners' social and cultural practices

When asked to provide their perceptions of the possible developments in the personal and socio-cultural value systems of students in an ICT-enhanced EFL classroom, participant students gave different answers. Figure 2 includes a reduced version of students' answers.

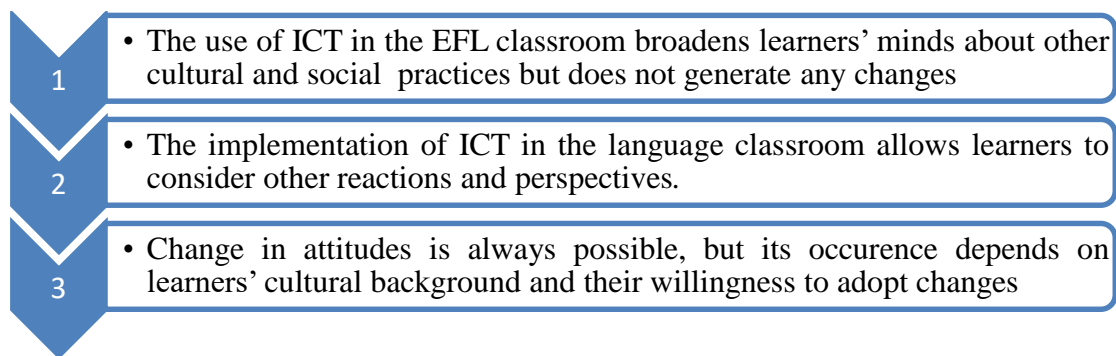


Figure 2. Reduced version of students' answers

Answers to question 2 from the end-of-course interview have revealed different attitudes and reactions. Once more, the assessment of students' responses shows that they include three major positions. The objective is to see whether ICT-enabled EFL environments trigger changes learners' socio-cultural practices.

The observed patterns of students' answers show that most participant students believe that the use of ICT in the EFL classroom broadens learners' minds about other cultural practices and value systems but does not trigger any change or transformation in pre-established cultural values and practices. However, very few participant students argue that the implementation of ICT in the language classroom is more likely to produce changes in the socio-cultural and value systems of learners. The remaining respondents admit that change of mindsets is always possible, but its occurrence largely depends on the learner's willingness and readiness to adopt new perspectives and views. An overall evaluation and assessment of participant students' answers to question 2 shows that students are actively involved in a cultural dialogue provided by the ICT-enabled teaching environment. Exposure to web cultural content that is different from students' cultural frames of reference does not necessarily trigger big changes in their socio-cultural and value systems.

Exposure to new situations and perspectives

Participant students listed a set of perceived negative influences. Figure 3 includes a reduced version of students' answers.

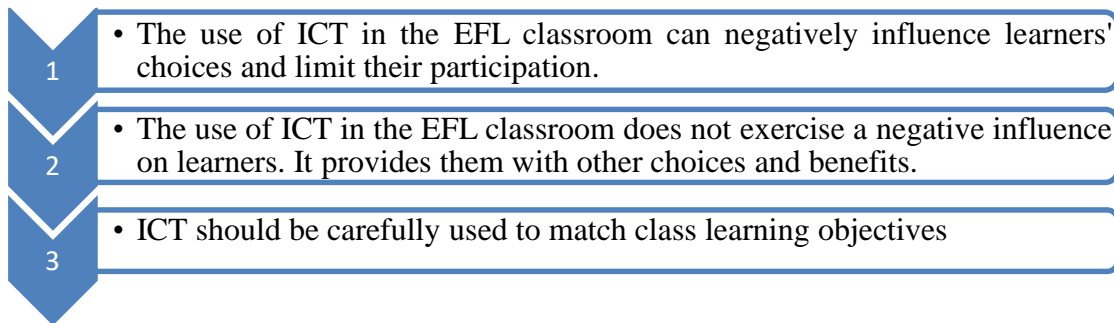


Figure 3. Reduced version of students' answers

Participant students' reaction to question 3 from the end-of-course interview has revealed a set of different answers. The categorization of responses into units has shown that they fall under three major categories.

Observed patterns of participant students' answers show that a big majority of them reportedly believe that learners are motivated and engaged in the classroom when class content is relevant enough to meet their needs. Students are quite aware of the new function that teachers should fulfill in the classroom. Whether it is ICT-enabled or not, class content should always meet learners' expectations and boost their learning. Therefore, foreign language professionals including teachers and professors should reconsider their pedagogies and methodologies of the implementation of ICT in EFL classroom in order to provide a more productive teaching.

A minority of participant students insist that the implementation of ICT in the EFL classroom may have a negative impact on learners' cultural identity and limit their participation in the classroom. The remaining respondents argue that the use of ICT in the EFL classroom does not exercise a negative influence on learners. They reportedly claim that learners are qualified enough to address different cultural views and maintain their cultural choices.

An overall assessment of participant students' answers to question 3 reveals that participant students do not deny the possibility of exposing students to unusual and irrelevant cultural content in the ICT-enabled EFL classroom, but they are all aware that the use of ICT should meet their expectations as well as the objectives of class content. Monitoring and regulating class content will ensure balanced learning. This can be achieved through the use of appropriate digital class content that enhances the global identity and meets the expectations of students as local learners of English.

Contribution to learners' personal and professional development

When asked to answer question 4 and say whether the exposure of students to ICT-enhanced English classes contributes to their personal and professional development and facilitates the acquisition of different soft skills including communication skills, social skills, cooperation skills and conflict resolution skills in an English ICT-enabled classroom, students' answers

revealed a set of different attitudes. Figure 4 includes a reduced version of students' reactions and perceptions.

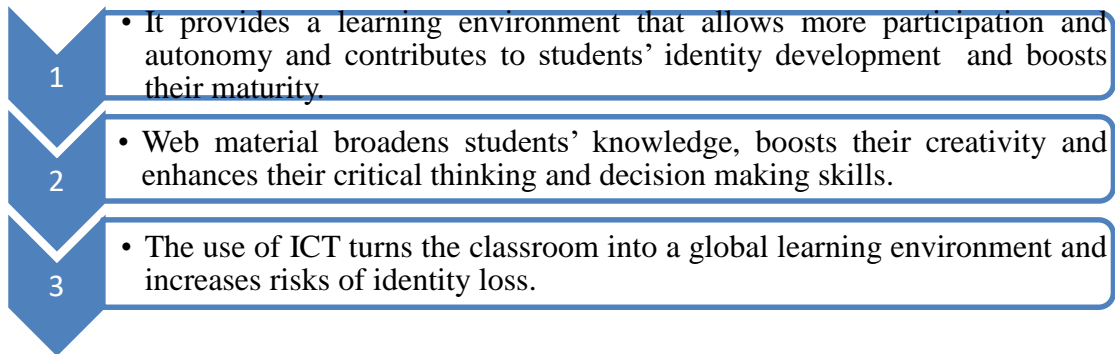


Figure 4. Reduced version of students' answers

The objective of question 4 from the end-of-course interview is to elicit answers from participant students about whether the implementation of ICT in the EFL classroom contributes to learners' personal and professional development, and allows the acquisition of soft skills. Figure 4 shows that answers can be grouped into three major categories.

Almost a third of participant students provide a detailed description of the different learning skills and opportunities that enhance and contribute to the personal development of learners. Encouraging participation, boosting interaction, promoting autonomy, enhancing creativity and broadening minds about other cultural practices and values consolidate learning experiences, reinforce lifelong learning and play a key role in equipping learners with appropriate soft skills for a better integration in the future socio-professional life.

Almost one third of participant students argue that the use of ICT in the EFL classroom contributes to the development of learners' personal and professional development but they do not include any detailed description of the developmental process. The remaining respondents believe that ICT-enabled learning environments may open the door for an overwhelming global cultural model. It is an open learning environment where some learners may be left unattended in an alarmingly sweeping global identity.

An overall assessment of participant students' reactions to question 4 reveals that ICT-enabled EFL teaching environments contribute to the personal and professional development of learners and facilitates the acquisition of major soft skills that are necessary for a better and more successful professional life.

IMPLICATION TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The examination of answers from the-end-of course interview shows that the use of ICT-aided English language teaching provides an interactive platform that allows intercultural exchanges between learners, boosts skills development, introduces content and strategies that help disseminate and share global issues, and promote values of participation and cooperation. ICT-aided EFL classes are also believed to contribute to the personal and professional development of learners, foster the evolutionary learning characteristics of tolerance and openness, and allow

the acquisition of soft skills including social skills, communication skills, cooperation skills and conflict resolution skills.

The ICT-enhanced learning environment allows students to play active learning roles and seize opportunities that involve them in cross cultural learning interactions. This boosts their social and critical thinking skills, and empowers them to address issues and reconsider views they have been introduced to in the language classroom through the development and use of appropriate soft skills. However, there are always fears that the use of ICT may, if not carefully used to enhance class content and objectives, open the classroom environment for a possible dominance of global cultural practices.

Teachers and foreign language professionals should make good use of the learning opportunities that ICT offers and engage their learners in interactions with their counterparts from different corners of the world. This allows an authentic use and practice of the language, broadens minds about other cultural and social practices and contributes to the making of world citizens. The educational purpose of the foreign language classroom is not only to provide opportunities for learning the language but also to create favourable learning conditions for an exchange of ideas and cultures to help correct stereotypes and forge global identities.

CONCLUSION

The observed patterns from participant students' answers from the end-of course interview reveal then that the use of ICT-enabled class content triggers changes in understanding of the self and boosts behavioral transformations allowing them to experience personal development and acquire empowering soft skills including the adoption of advanced communicative skills and cooperative learning strategies. The experience may be a substantial step forward to promote tolerance, bridge cultural gaps and contribute to the making of good global citizens.

The use of information and communication technology in the language classroom has brought about new learning environments that challenge the traditional ways of class delivery and redefine the functions that EFL/ESP teachers should fulfil. The global EFL/ESP classroom allows more interaction and contact between learners from different learning environments and provides opportunities for both personal and professional development.

Future Research

Most language education professionals would agree that the use of ICT provides more opportunities for learning foreign languages and turn classrooms into interactive platforms that allow more participation and openness. However, they always express their need for practical methodologies and learning scenarios that will allow them to use these new technologies to the advantage of their learners. The digitalization of class content is a new teaching and learning philosophy that requires the use of new methodologies to fulfil the function of the global classroom.

Future research should be then geared towards turning these new teaching philosophies into classroom learning actions and routines to meet the needs and expectations of teachers and learners. Research should address issues related to class digital content, methodologies and learning scenarios that allow an optimal use of information technology and broaden learning opportunities.

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