

Exploring Perceptions and Practices about Information and Communication Technologies in Business English Teaching in Pakistan

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Abstract

Language Reforms and potential use of ICTs has been a focal area of the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan. Efforts are being accelerated to incorporate fast expanding ICTs to bring qualitative improvement in language instruction in higher education. This paper explores how university teachers are benefitting from ICTs to make their English classes effective and what types of problems they face in practicing ICTs during their lectures. An in-depth qualitative study was employed to understand why language teachers tend to use ICTs in their instruction and how they are practicing it. A sample of twenty teachers from five universities located in Islamabad, three from the public sector and two from the private sector, was selected on a non-random (Snowball) sampling basis. An interview with 15 semi-structured items was used as research instruments to collect data. The findings reveal that business English teaching is facilitated and improved through the use of ICTs. The language teachers need special training regarding the practices and implementation of ICTs. It is recommended that initiatives might be taken to equip university language teachers with modern methodology incorporating ICTs as a focal area and efforts might be made to remove barriers regarding the training of language teachers and proper usage of ICT.

Key words: Business English Teaching, Higher Education Commission of Pakistan

Introduction

With the advent of fast changing modern technologies and accelerating process of globalization, human activities are influenced and affected in one way or the other. These revolutionary changes of information and communication technologies have

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also touched the academic and business communities which are being interlinked with expanding global contact. The institutions of higher learning are particularly focusing on the use and incorporation of ICTs in content and methodology. National Education Policy (1998-2010, p.88) states that our universities need to concentrate on information technology and should use its vast scope for delivering teaching learning resources and improving the quality of education as well as linking themselves with the scientists of other countries. The investment in information technology infrastructure and its network will bring our institutions of higher education on the world map. In 2003, the National Information and Communication Technology Strategy for Education in Pakistan stressed that teachers would learn ICTs skills as well as how to teach ICT as a subject or integrate it within the curriculum.

This emerging trend of ICTs has undoubtedly affected the practice of language teaching and learning (Warschauer, 2000), especially Business English. English has become a tool for global contact in business communication and its teaching through modern technology is an area of interest and investigation for the researchers (Okamoto, 2004). The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan launched an exclusive language based project of English Language Teaching Reforms in 2004, still in progress in order to bring qualitative improvement in English language teaching and learning to build capacity for effective and sustainable development of English language teachers in higher education of Pakistan. The ELTR project focused that the English Language Teaching Community should be trained through continuous professional development, short- and long-term courses focusing on pedagogical skills, communication skills, research skills, testing and evaluation skills and information technology skills like (such as) Computer Assisted Language Learning. (CALL)

With the help of CALL, the teacher would be able to make use of the latest tools of information communication technology and electronic communication to support language teaching and learning processes. The use of the World Wide Web has facilitated the teachers to a great extent to impart instructional material effectively. The UNSC in its 38th Session presented a “Report of the Partnership on Measuring Information and Communication Technologies for Development: information and communication technology statistics” that “During the last decades, advancements in the access to and usage of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been a driving force for changes in business and in society.”

The practice of teaching English, particularly business English with the help of technology affects the teaching learning process in terms of performance and quality of an organization or business school. According to Whitehead and Whitehead, Business English is the language of communication in international business and it is ordinary English related particularly to business use. Today, most of the (omit) organizations and

occupations depend on modern means of information and communication technologies regarding their performance and efficiency. Business English teaching in schools of management and business administration aims to inculcate good spoken and written communication skills required for market placement. In spite of expanding practices of Business English teaching, the teaching and learning of business English communication skills are not satisfactory and confronted with many challenges. One of the factors is the proper use and integration of modern technology in teaching learning process. To get the deeper understanding of the issue, it is necessary to investigate into the perceptions and practices of business English teaching and how teachers use ICTs in Business English teaching and what are the problems they face in implementing them in their classrooms.

Review of the Literature

Language teachers engaged in business English teaching might be thinking of new roles and responsibilities keeping in view how to integrate computer technology in language instruction (Fotos and Browne, 2004). There are things like online language courses, evaluating computer assisted language learning and website along with incorporating and dealing with multimedia language laboratories (Susser & Robb, 2004; Browne & Gerrity, 2004). However, in Pakistani context, teachers do not possess same level of skills, knowledge and experience regarding ICTs. Various aspects of an organization make its components and similarly business English is a part of language component of organizational communication in English language teaching (Hassan, 2005). Researches indicate that teachers face challenges and problems in all areas of language instruction while applying computer technology and institutional change is subject to change of organizational culture (Finely & Hartman, 2003). Studies reveal the barriers of pedagogical issues, of social and personal concerns and of technical nature (Ertmer, 1999). If organizational culture and environment do not support teacher to adopt or encourage introducing innovation, the teacher will feel reluctant to practice modern technology in their instruction. They feel a sense of uncertainty and sometime workload and limited time might stop them to implement their instructional plan (Chen, 2008).

The instructors are provided with abundant resources of educational technology with the increasing usage of World Wide Web. Today, the paradigm of traditional tutor directed learning is shifting towards self-directed learning that is, most probably easy and practicable with the help of ICTs (Van, 1997). It will undoubtedly change the whole scenario as from school education to university education; the system will incorporate and integrate the information and communication technologies that would equip instructor with extra skills, especially in areas of language instruction. The internet has taken the position of the most demanding communication platform for policy makers,

researchers, teachers and other social and economic organizations where it is providing opportunity to integrate computer technology in a form of an interactive marketplace. The institutions of higher learning of both private and public sector are benefitting from the useful functionality of World Wide Web and booming field of digital highways, superhighways and the information infrastructure are exerting tremendous influence upon academic and business communities all over the world (Black, 1996). Challenging initiatives were taken to meet global requirements of academic quality and facilities like digital library, Pakistan Education Research Network (PERN) and were provided to equip the teachers of higher institutions (HEC annual report, 2005-06).

With emerging and innovative technology, teachers need to get familiar with technological innovation that help in their instruction and need to know how they can get relevant information from available technology (Maeers & Cooper, 2000). However, it is not easy to fully understand the proper usage of computer technology as the traditional practice of instruction might find it difficult to absorb new trends of technological instruction (Davies, 2003). The teachers need to learn new skills of business English for effective teaching. They not only need to be familiar with new technology but also how to get benefit from it and how to use it in a business English classroom to enhance the communication skills of the learners (Chen, 2003).

These technological and information skills are also necessary for teacher training program because interdisciplinary skills can be developed and enhanced through the use of information and communication technology (Safdar, 2008). These skills are also needed to cope with the challenges and problems of teacher-learning settings of this global era. Some trends and issues which are concerned with teachers' instructional skills are flexible teaching-learning settings, growing technology use, a new picture of competition in higher education and the best possible use of technology to improve teaching-learning situation (Epper, 2001). The use of ICTs in language instruction, especially in business English teaching plays key role in professional development of the usiness English teachers. The emerging role of ICTs in Business English teaching is beneficial for continuing professional development of the teachers. Recent studies which have discussed some benefits of continuing professional development include:

- Understanding of technologies and their practice for meaningful instruction (Terwindt, 2000).
- Motivating teachers to acquire technological literacy skills (Browne et al, 2000; Slobodina, 2000).
- Training the teachers for how to use technology resources (Clark, 2000).
- Assessment and evaluation strategies to monitor students' progress (Shrivastava, 1998).

Contemporary higher education institutions are being equipped with new modes of media and ICTs to facilitate instructors to support teaching learning process.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to investigate the perceptions and practices of university teachers about information and communication technologies for business English teaching and to explore the issues and problems that they face while practicing and implementing ICTs in teaching business English. For this purpose, a qualitative method was used and the following research questions were designed to address the problem:

1. How do university teachers perceive the use of ICTs for Business English Teaching?
2. What are their objectives to practice ICTs for BET?
3. What problems and issues do they face while practicing ICTs in their instruction?

Method and Design

To get deeper understanding of the study, a qualitative method was used to explore teachers' perceptions and practices in Business English teaching and the use of ICTs. Marriam (2000) stated that the qualitative method is used to uncover or discover the various layers of meaning that people have set in their minds about certain phenomena. The qualitative study also attempts to investigate into the in-depth contextual implications of the problem and highlights the common themes and patterns which address the problem. The purpose of employing a qualitative method for this study was to obtain comprehensive replies/opinions of the respondents to what they feel about ICTs in their instruction and why they apply computer technology in their classrooms. It further identifies the problems and issues during their instruction. An interview was conducted and after an intensive descriptive analysis, was interpreted in qualitative terms.

Sample

The sample of this qualitative study was twenty teachers from five universities located in Islamabad, Pakistan. A Non-random (Snowball) sampling method was used to select the participants as only those teachers were included who were acquaintance with the researcher; referred to by the colleagues and knew the use of ICTs and practiced it in their instruction. These teachers were from departments of management and business administration and taught the courses of business English to the students of graduate and postgraduate level. Among the twenty teachers, twelve were male and eight were female and the five universities comprised of three from public sector and two universities were from private sector; sector-wise fourteen teachers were from public sector universities

and six were from private universities, (82% of universities in Islamabad are in the public sector and only 18% are in the private sector).

Research instrument

An Interview Set was prepared to use as instrument for data collection. The interview items were developed on the basis of literature review and the research questions. After the first draft, expert opinion was taken from experts in the field of business communication and ICTs and in the light of experts' suggestions, some interview questions were modified. The final interview was with 15 semi-structured items which was conducted with the selected teachers.

Data Collection and Analysis

The Interview was conducted in person (face to face)with all the selected teachers except for two teachers who were interviewed telephonically (over the phone). Almost all the interviews lasted from thirty minutes to forty five minutes. The collected data were carefully coded and studied intensively in order to develop themes. An Inductive method was used for data analysis and consequently results were drawn to build up common themes regarding the participants' perceptions and practices of ICTs and business English communication.

Results

Several themes emerged from these twenty interviews. Common responses and views were put together that took the shape of common topics. The interviewed teachers were given fictitious names to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

Research question 1. How do university teachers perceive the use of ICTs for Business English Teaching?

a. Flexible Teaching and Learning Opportunities

Computer technology provides flexible teaching and learning opportunities. It shows a vast horizon of new ideas and experiences. Most of the respondents said that they used modern information and communication technology because it facilitated their classroom instruction and gave chance to gain additional material to enhance classroom teaching and learning activities. Hassan said, "Use of internet gives us chance to get material related to our classroom instruction that also motivated the students to expand their learning opportunities".

Robina thinks that ICTs make her instructional practice easy as today online learning is fast becoming a part of business communication and students find ways to interact with and benefit from available online resources. Zakariyya replied,

“I get chance to find easy material for listening skills and writing strategies for my business English class, and similarly my students can find online learning opportunities side by side the usual classroom practices”.

b. Improving Listening Comprehension

With the help of information technology, teachers and students get benefit from plenty of available web material on listening skills that is a part of communication courses in many institutions. The respondents opined that they make their business communication classes interactive by getting students involved in online free listening courses. Saqib described, “First I searched software that can be downloaded freely and help in recording audio files. I guided my students to practice audios in class and they did it interestingly”. Amina tells her experience that she added some of internet instructional audio material along with the usual curriculum and taught the students how to benefit from web resources. I made each student share his/her audio file so that other students might listen it and in this way, teaching and learning the listening skills became an interesting, motivating and interactive experience for my class.

Hassan was also of the opinion that use of ICTs creates a self-directed learning environment in communication classrooms. I introduced online news that my class listened three days in a week. Then students themselves searched online news broadcasts as most of them now are available. Thus ICTs becomes a continuous source of professional development and links people to improve their skills.

c. An Emerging Trend

The interviews revealed that incorporation of ICTs in teaching Business English in new and in initial phase in Pakistani higher education institutions. The data showed that the practice of computer technology was expanding but presently it is being implemented in a limited circle. Robina said, “Yes it is a new and innovative technique for classroom instruction, however it is still emerging and yet not fully understood and applied”. Most of the respondents agreed that the teachers, especially in the field of media, business communication and language teaching are learning the use of ICTs and thinking of strategies as to how to engage their students in such practices. With the help of web resources, teachers and students are developing online teaching and learning activities.

Research question 2. What are their objectives to practice ICTs for BET?

Data indicated that different teachers used ICTs for different purposes. Some of the common themes are:

a. Variety and Innovation of Instructional Material

Most of the teachers interviewed use modern information and communication technologies as they provide a variety of courses and methods. Web search opens a door that is innovative and presents teaching-learning material in abundance. In this global age, teachers use innovative methods and apply new media to make their instruction effective and innovative. Tahira said, “I use technology as it is full of variety that helps us in our instruction”. Saqib opined that, “I always love innovation and it is internet and web surfing that is always innovative, and it satisfies me in my instruction”. The respondents agreed that modern technology is vibrant source of diversified and innovative instructional material.

b. Interesting and Motivating

Another theme that emerged from the data is that the teachers practice ICTs in their instruction because their use catches students’ interest and motivates them to improve their communication skills. Zakariyya described his purpose of practicing modern technology that is an interesting experience, “Online techniques are different from traditional ones, as traditional are stereotyped and boring while student take keen interest in using computer, internet and media. I give them assignments to prepare on computer and sometimes they use PowerPoint and they have to get material from web that they feel very interesting and they help each other during these activities”. Amina mentioned, “I use information and communication technological tools because incorporation of such tools motivates my students. They feel motivated while using digital resources and they share their online experiences, even in using hardware and software they help each other; videos and graphics are also motivating for them”. Thus ICTs become a continuous motivation for professional development.

c. Authentic, Updated and Worldwide Material

Modern technology offers an updated and authentic knowledge about new topics of teaching learning strategies. The World Wide Web gives opportunity to get cross-cultural understanding on the subject you are teaching. Rizwan said, “I introduce updated language teaching strategies and give assignment of listening and reading on which students get online worldwide material that is offered by some authentic websites”. According to Tahira, “some of our text-books are out of date and are not updated. Online material gives us latest information on teaching of speaking and listening skills”. She thinks that we can make modern technology a part of instructional practices to keep ourselves updated.

Research question 3: What problems and issues do they face while practicing ICTs in their instruction?

a. Lack of Workshops on Technological Literacy

The data revealed that the teachers felt deficiency in one or other area of technological literacy. Although the teachers interviewed were those who knew computer technology and were practicing ICTs in teaching business English communication, yet they were of the opinion that they needed more skills of technological literacy which could be arranged in the form of refresher courses, workshops and diploma courses. Hassan stated, “My colleagues and I need training on technological literacy that might be a continuous program for our professional development. He further added, “Teachers will keep abreast of technological innovations if they are provided continuous awareness on ICTs, and that would be quite helpful and motivational”.

b. Compatible Pedagogical Knowledge

The responses indicated that another problem which the interviewed teachers faced was that they were not sure about how to make content and methods compatible. Despite the fact that they were familiar with technology literacy and were practicing it in their instruction, they were lacking the appropriate teaching methodologies which should be compatible with the instructional content. Khalid said, “In language teaching, problem of compatibility becomes more important, as I have to know which teaching strategy is appropriate is for certain type of content, i.e listening or speaking skills need different methods”.

c. Organizational Commitment

Organizational environment plays a key role for (in) mutual understanding and collaboration among the teachers. Lack of funds and administrative indifference also affect the application of modern technology, especially in (the)case of young teachers. Sometimes teachers cannot afford software and hardware, and institutions too do not provide financial assistance, even do not show interest and commitment in this regard. Online Program development is not common in Pakistan and teachers have to depend on their own limited resources or the available university digital access. The data indicate that it is really difficult for language teacher to use ICTs with insufficient material or to create their own online material unless full institutional support is ensured.

d. Uncertainty & crumpling of network

The problem of uncertainty also hampers the teachers to use ICTs in their instruction. Robina said. “I feel anxious about sudden viruses and hackers which is difficult to manage. During online instruction, server stops working or sometime network is overloaded and suddenly goes down if all students starting working online at the same time”. Other anxious feelings might include extra time and cost that is required in language teaching and learning.

e. Job Timings & Workload

Job timings and workload is(are) a critical issue(s) for the usage of ICTs in teaching communication skills. Most of the teachers were of the opinion that teaching and research at university level takes time and incorporation and implementing ICTs further aggravate their concerns regarding time and workload. However, teachers having strong technology background feel easy to practice it. Saqib said, “I develop my own online material and search many web file and references that my students find useful and interesting, but sometimes I am left with no time to practice them due to other job responsibilities”.

Amina stated, “Many teachers intend to create material for online courses and some of them create their own but the issues of workload and time to apply them slow down their passion and devotion”. She further highlighted, “I have ardent desire to use technology in my classroom but due to the lack of time, I do not join training session for application of ICTs”. Many teachers opined that they knew to create online material but later when they had to adjust it and sometime write type and retype it, they could not continue it as they are already under stress due to time and work constraints. Khalid stated, “I often use internet and get easy material from it, but most of the time I depend on text-book which is only way that saves my time”. Teachers also save time because administration does not allow them to go beyond a certain limit and use of ICTs is left incomplete even with high intentions.

Discussion and Conclusion

Above findings indicate that the usage of ICTs in teaching language communication skills is a growing trend. Modern technology provides easy, flexible and innovative teaching-learning opportunities to teachers and the students as well. The teachers are practicing it to improve their students’ listening, reading, writing and speaking skills. They are benefitting from online courses which provide them diversified content and innovative methodology. They aim at incorporating web resources in their curriculum and applying it in their instruction to make it interesting and motivating for the students.

They also take it as a provider of authentic, updated and worldwide knowledge. However, there are certain hurdles and issues that need to be solved by the concerned quarters. The teachers are not satisfied with available funds as they are insufficient to support the implementation of ICTs properly. One major problem is the lack of professional training courses that the teachers direly need to keep abreast of the latest developments in computer technology. Continuing professional development would help them practice technology effectively and make it a regular part of their instruction. Then the issue of time and workload is not negligible as the teachers avoid many important teaching tasks due to these constraints.

Recommendations

Keeping the above scenario in view, following recommendations are given for future course of action:

1. Professional training courses may be arranged to get the faculty familiar with technological literacy.
2. Teachers should be given professional training in content areas as well as pedagogical patterns.
3. Organizational environment may be improved by facilitating and supporting each other with needed equipment and mutual understanding.
4. Policy makers should provide sufficient funds to eliminate the feelings of uncertainty.
5. The administration should minimize workload to the maximum level so that teachers may get sufficient time to practice ICTs in their instruction smoothly and confidently.

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