

ANALYZING INFORMATION, COMMUNICATIVE AND TECHNOLOGICAL SUPPORT IN SKILLS' DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN OMAN

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Abstract. *This paper aims at examining information, communicative and technological support of linguistic and generic skills' development of EFL learners currently existing in the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. It is founded on understanding the importance of contemporary progress in technologies for empowering language teachers and learners with a variety of information and communication tools (Scully, 2008) and computer software programs that imbibe from "all the specifically human characteristics of development" (Vygotsky, 1987, p.210) and reside on such features as flexibility, facility of access, open dialogue, prompt response to feedback, learning from all parties involved, collaborating, imitating, creating personal learning environments and shared information resources. The examination is conducted from a multidimensional perspective in relation to the concepts of source of learning, support to learning and teaching, stimulation and motivation, and reference (Dudley-Evans, 1998).*

Key words: *Language Centre, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman, technology-based learning, information resource*

1. INTRODUCTION

Many contemporary studies on culture and language learning (Hofstede, 1984; Aneas & Sandin, 2009; Shi, 2006, etc.) relate these concepts to the processes of cross-cultural and intercultural communication, which contribute to human "interaction with the world in a multiplicity of complex and diverse situations and contexts (Shi, 2006). Indeed, culturally based practices, settings and interactions are the primary vehicles which powerfully and necessarily affect both language teaching and learning processes (Poole, 1992 cited in Shi, 2006). Nevertheless, one cannot underestimate today's role of information and communication technologies in enhancing these processes since the progress in the domain of language education and pedagogy has created a strong impetus for implementing technology-based learning management platforms and systems across all contextually and culturally diverse educational domains and organizations (Nilesen, 2000). Moreover, the "arrival of rapid dissemination of digital technology" (Prensky, 2001, p.1), which resides on such features as flexibility, facility of access, open dialogue, prompt response to feedback, learning from all parties involved, collaborating, imitating, creating personal learning environments and shared information resources, have empowered

language teachers and learners with new tools, paradigms, resources, learning environments and provided for innovative learning experiences and situations of learning (Al-Busaidi & Tuzlukova, 2013; Demchenko, 1997; Scully, 2008).

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. This paper examines information, communicative and technical support provided to both teachers and students at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University in Oman in relation to the concepts of source of learning; support to learning and teaching; stimulation and motivation; and reference (Dudley-Evans, 1998).

2. BACKGROUND

Since its inception in 1986, the Language Centre has been one of the largest learning components at Sultan Qaboos University and language institutions in Oman. It prepares students for discipline-specific programs offered by the university colleges in English and provides various credit programs for Arabic-medium colleges. According to the Language Centre Strategic Plan, effective integration of e-learning and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) into curriculum, teaching and learning processes are among the opportunities for curriculum enhancement, making it more responsive to the needs of the colleges (LC Strategic Plan, 2007).

Recently updated infrastructure for effective independent computer and internet-based learning in the Language Centre includes seven computer laboratories for in-class and independent learning, Teacher and Student Resource Centers, a Tutorial Centre, a large library of teaching and learning materials, including digital ones, and teaching classrooms, equipped with OHP and LCD projectors, and computer software programs, e.g. Clarity, Turnitin, etc. The Language Centre has a strong Faculty Academic Support Unit [<http://www.squ.edu.om/tabid/13372/language/en-US/Default.aspx>] with qualified representatives from almost all the programs. It exists to create and develop a technology-integrated, networking culture in the Language Centre and enables all teachers to have easy access to and use of knowledge, information, practice, materials and support to improve their teaching. The Language Centre also features a Professional Development and Research Unit that has been established to organize teacher driven professional development that involves training in computer technologies, internet search, e-learning courses (Al-Siyabi, 2009) and aims at enhancing teachers' computer self-efficacy, i.e. abilities to use computers in their teaching and in their daily work life.

The Language Centre teachers, working in different language programs and teaching a variety of English courses are committed to providing their students with additional assistance to enhance their linguistic and study skills using computer and communication technologies. They are also eager to improve their students' critical thinking, independent learning and team work, and to create a communicative student-centered language learning environment which treats the learner as a co-creator in the teaching and learning process

(Barr & Tagg, 1995). This eagerness is further improved in value, quality and desirability by the fact that technology is available and can be easily accessed. It is also enhanced by the established understanding that technology, when used appropriately, can help teachers create the learning environment that supports the enhancement of students' certain skill areas, provides social interaction and collaboration which are vital in this era of advanced technologies (Ginosyan & Tuzlukova, 2015, p.67). All these factors taken together, as well as the encouragement of the administration of the Language Centre has led to a number of the centre-wide initiatives aimed at information, communicative and technical support of the language programs.

3. SUPPORT TO LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Technology-based teaching and learning environments are essential for contemporary language education because they combine the full potential of modern technology and the opportunities related to group and individual communication (Katz & Rice, 2002, p.352). They also involve innovative teaching methods and techniques that feature computer-based tasks and assignments suitable for their "digital native" (Prensky, 2001).

To facilitate internal upward-moving, downward-moving and horizontal-moving communication and the exchange of information among the faculty members, and in order to add internet-based technology to its courses and students' autonomous and independent learning, the Language Centre utilizes the Moodle Course Management System [<http://moodle.squ.edu.om/>]. The list of the Language Centre virtual courses on the Moodle platform includes The Virtual Language Centre, Turnitin online tutorial course, Clarity integration course, Virtual student support hub, Independent learning centre course, etc. The Virtual Language Centre, for example, is a course used by the faculty for various types of internal communication and information exchange and for posting news, updates and events. It contains such components as online services, a discussion forum, official documents, general information and resources, etc.

The Moodle Course Management System is also used for designing, posting and upgrading instructional materials for virtual language learning courses at both foundation program and credit courses' levels. The ideas behind the virtual courses involve creating technology-based support to learning and teaching that corresponds to the traditional courses in goals, objectives, content and structure with the aims of a) enhancing students' productive (speaking and creative writing), receptive (e.g., different reading strategies, summarizing and note taking), reflexive, study and project skills; b) activating students' vocabulary and developing their communication skills and confidence in speaking and writing, so that the students can give opinions and express their attitude and feelings in English, etc.

The Language Centre implements a number of principles that serve as a foundation for designing virtual courses and teaching materials related to the use of a virtual learning environment. These principles include but are not limited to: a) linking traditional and virtual course in goals, aims, objectives and structure; b) addressing individual student learning needs; c) personalizing and individualizing; d) stimulating and providing a clear and understandable entry into the foundations of English grammar, lexis and functions; e) exemplifying students' own experiences and culture in addition to the target language culture and universal topics; f) bringing together global and local by incorporating local and authentic materials; g) incorporating strategies and procedures of blended learning

(face-to-face and computer-mediated) that would serve as a reference, a source of learning, and a support of learning; h) providing motivation and stimulation; i) matching students' culture, i.e. "patterns of thinking, feeling and potential acting", "mental programs" (Hofstede, 1984), educational environment and broad context of learning; j) corresponding to learning strategies that help to form concepts and organize information, and to the practicality of students' linguistic, communicative and pragmatic needs; k) providing students with cognitive tools needed for their development (Vygotsky, 1987) and a smooth transfer from school-based language learning experience to the university educational environment; l) focusing on causing a lasting impression and reflecting on the on-going process of learning; m) managing learning, monitoring progress with evaluation and self-evaluation (tests, quizzes, etc.) and providing opportunities for learning with others (chats, forums, etc.), self-study, supervised and not supervised practice and practice transfer (scenarios, Web quests, etc.); n) providing training, content and technical assistance for teachers to enhance their computer self-efficacy and confidence in using technology as a social and cultural mediating tool that simulates group and individual environments for language teaching and learning (Rozina, 2005; Jandt, 2002; Lustig (1999).

Most virtual courses designed by the Language Centre faculty have a flexible and friendly model. This allows flexibility in bringing more communication and dynamism into the classroom; encouraging and using electronic materials, tasks and assignments; practicing functional English; developing linguistic, communicative and autonomous learning skills, and most importantly, customizing the courses to meet the needs of a wider cohort of the students in the Language Centre, including the students who take foundation program courses, remedial courses and courses for academic or career advancement, or for social or personal reasons.

In addition to virtual language courses, students have a variety of supplementary language activities on Moodle: program-specific on-line materials and tasks that relate the context of the texts to the students' own world and conceptual framework; stimulate their interest and encourage them "to develop a sense of curiosity and interest in language" (Foundation Program Curricula, 2010:11). To support an extensive reading approach, the Language Centre students are also encouraged to use Moodle Reader module [<http://moodlereader.org/>] that provides quizzes on over 3000 graded readers and books, so that teachers can have a simple way to assess the work of their students. All quizzes are randomized with a time-limit for their completion. This allows students to take the quizzes open-book, even at home, while minimizing the possibility of cheating.

4. REFERENCE AND INFORMATION RESOURCES

Designing and implementing research projects aimed at creating information resources is important for language education at the tertiary level in Oman, especially since it is currently transitioning to a multilevel system that includes English foundation program, and, as a consequence, is facing multiple educational, pedagogical and methodological issues (see Al-Busaidi & Tuzlukova, 2013 for more information). Therefore, the main concentration of late at the Language Centre has been on searching for innovative methods of creating information resources and sharing content and technical information, for example, "Virtual professional development for language teachers".

This search is rooted in a growing body of studies and research projects that emphasize the importance of providing access of local language educators to global knowledge base and creating electronic information resources on teaching and learning and data bases for supporting these processes. To exemplify, Krauss (2000) indicates the effectiveness of using the wealth of resources for creating increased meaningful practices in and outside the language classroom and motivating language learners in overcoming psychological and socio-cultural barriers. March (1995) emphasizes the role of information resources as representation of the “variety of human connection”. Ter-Minasova (2000) argues on the potential of web-based platforms as a “source of materials and information” for communication skills development that can give language learners additional opportunities to learn outside the familiar context and to get a deeper understanding of other cultures and social groups (Tuzlukova & Eltayeb, 2008).

The literature also indicates a number of successful research projects aimed at creating information resources for language teaching and learning (Rozina, 2005). For example, projects by the Innovative Language Center at Tomsk State Pedagogical University (<http://www.lang-complex.narod.ru/ILC.htm>); Institute of Distance Education of the Novosibirsk State University (<http://ido.nstu.ru/>); Institute of Distance Education of Tomsk State University (<http://ido.tsu.ru/>); Institute for Information Technologies in Education, UNESCO (<http://www.iite.ru/iite/news/?id=33>) in Russia. Another example is an internet-based research project on learning English in Russia that is a part of “Open College” distance learning project (www.English.ru) developed by Physicon (www.physicon.ru) with a goal to analyze, put together and constantly update a large collection of on-line tests and quizzes for the language course on business writing, and regularly publish reviews on new language learning and testing programs.

According to Academia.edu, digital information resources are those resources that deal with both born digital and digitized materials which can be either accessible from a library's in house database or from the world-wide-web, the born digital materials. They include e-books, e-journals, e-newspapers, e-magazines, theses, dissertations, reports, websites, www-resources and other related materials. They can be either permissible to furnish information in full text or limited to metadata, and can be either freely accessible for anyone from anywhere in the world or can have limited accessibility due to the library's policy and for cost related issues and also for the authentication [http://www.academia.edu/260084/Definition_of_Digital_Information_Resources]. Other guidelines and ideas that have been reported as required for developing information resources include financial issues, organizational issues, reputational issues, technological issues related to the use of unique software products and tailored information system architecture, and human resource issues that refer to knowledge, training experience (see: [<http://toolkit.smallbiz.nsw.gov.au/part/20/100/457>] for more information).

In the area of language learning and teaching the requirements are added by content issues related, for example, to ensuring the authenticity of the content and its appropriateness in relation to the established theory and practice (see, for example, information resources on the websites of TESOL [www.tesol.org], IATEFL [www.iatefl.org], NATE Russia [www.nate.vsu.ru; www.eltrussia.ru], ThaiTESOL [thailandtesol.org], TESOL Arabia [tesolarabia.org], etc.). Moreover, the developers of the information resources on language teaching and learning suggest adopting the principle of methodological pluralism to present the contextual and linguistic diversity which exists in the global community of language educators (see, for example, “Multilingual language learning resource” on [<http://garshin.ru/linguistics/>]

languages/language-portals.html] that features directories with information on languages, language families, etc., portals to resources in many languages, links to the web sites on language education and pedagogy, etc.).

Currently the Language Centre is working on further developing the existing information resources on the Moodle-based platform to make them more useful for both teachers and students. This strategy is supported by adding some elements, typological parameters and functions of interactive and traditional information resources (Rozina, 2005, Tabanakova & Kovyazina, 2007, etc.). For example, Tabanakova and Kovyazina (2007) argue that lexicographic information resources are distinguished according to the following functions: normative function, pedagogical function, systematizing function and reference function (p.170). As for the online information resources, they have more “functional variability” (Tabanakova & Kovyazina, 2007), and serve to perform the following functions: a) analytical and predictive function that encompasses a variety of techniques aimed at data mining and analyzing contemporary and historical facts about local and global language education and pedagogy to make predictions about future, e.g. electronic library and/or links to other resources; b) normative function that refers to conforming to the existing standards or models of language teaching and learning through, for example, digitizing and accumulating locally published teaching materials and research; c) communicative function that relates to informing, sharing knowledge about best practices and experience, and motivating; d) instructional function (Onwu & Stoffels, 2005), e.g. posting instructional resources and studies that can help better understand the teaching and learning that takes place in the local context and teacher perspectives on their current classroom practices; e) systematizing function that encompasses but is not limited to systematic and/or thematic presentation of knowledge and information, e.g. contemporary teaching and learning practice in local and global educational environments; f) reference functions that serve to provide different types of information, e.g. for clarifying the content of teaching concepts in relation to culture inclusive educational phenomena, facts, processes, etc.; g) cognitive function aimed at processing thoughts, e.g. in order to perceive and comprehend new ideas, experiences and practices about language education and pedagogy in the world; h) function of demonstrating and enhancing practice in the field of language education in local and global educational environments. These functions are viewed as special purposes and/or activities for which the information resources are created to exist.

In spite of the Language Centre initiatives to venture into the technology-based domain of teaching, learning and research, there is still a need to enhance integration processes that are hindered by many factors, most of which are not technology-based. For example, the insufficient integration of technology partially stems from the approach that acknowledges the essentially human element of the instructional process: the learners and the people who help them to learn (Jaaffar, 2002).

5. CONCLUSION

This paper examined information, communicative and technological support currently existing in the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University in Oman and provided some practical illustration of this support. The examination that utilized a multidimensional perspective in relation to the concepts of source of learning, support to learning and teaching, stimulation and motivation, and reference (Dudley-Evans, 1998) helped to

reveal that the global progress in technologies and technology-based language learning played a role of crucial importance in relation to empowering language teachers and learners in the local educational context with meaningful and dynamic perspectives (Nunan et al., 1987) supported by a variety of communication and information tools, computer software programs, infrastructure, training and professional development. It has also inspired language educators in Oman for creating personal learning environments and shared information resources.

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