

# THE EFFECTIVENESS OF USING TECHNOLOGY TO TEACH ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on the effectiveness of using technology such as e-mail and websites in teaching and learning English. Around 50 in-depth interviews were made with teachers and students in the College to examine the effectiveness of using technology, such as e-mail, websites as teaching tools. Through such analysis, we can develop a better understanding on the students' and teachers' perception of their language abilities and effectiveness of using e-mail and websites for teaching. If there is a wide discrepancy between teachers and students' perception, it is better to equip our teachers with better understanding of the students' problems when using such technology.

## INTRODUCTION

Developing an effective curriculum has always been a major concern of teachers. Changing technology has changed the nature of many jobs including the ways of teaching. Teachers need to keep up with the latest development in communication technology. However, new technology alone does not make teaching operate smoothly and learning effectively. It is essential for us to decide which technological tools we will use to enhance the teaching process and effectiveness.

In Hong Kong, the College of Higher Vocational Studies of the City University of Hong Kong particularly aims to provide programs to meet the needs of students, their future employers and the community of Hong Kong. Teaching quality is particularly emphasized in the College. Business and industry are beginning to acknowledge the benefits of language skills and seeking to employ people having them. Better specification of vocational needs is needed. In addition, more language resources should be made available for teaching languages. With the fast development of advanced technology, such as Internet, e-mail etc., it is inevitably important for teachers to use technology as one of the delivery modes of teaching (Cox, 2000.) This paper is to examine the value of using technology in terms of delivery mode in teaching English as a Second language. Finally, suggestions will be made on how to optimize the use of technology for teaching English as a Second Language.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

"Learning is seen to occur by making sense of knowledge one is exposed to and with which one interests by way of mental processes and interaction with other people" (Pachler,1999, p.7). For behaviourist ideas, learning is broken down into a sequential series of steps, each covering a piece of subject domain. Computer is essential for modeling the role of tutors offering some input or information that the learner can "drill and practise" followed by provision of feedback. As

mentioned by Warcheur (1996), repeated exposure to the same material is beneficial or even essential for learning. Internet can provide huge amount of information, which can serve as a very good modeling role for students to learn English. For students with low proficiency, they can also refer to the computer program repeatedly for more controlled and guided practices.

Cognitive theory of learning sees the learner no longer as passive recipient but as mentally active participant in the learning process. As such, the learning of brains in terms of rules and models of information intake, storage and processing is emphasized. As teachers, we need to present the students' required skills in ways that meet the varied learning needs and learning styles of students. Using technology can make a significant contribution to this process because information can be packaged in a variety of contexts and styles.

It is also a prevailing view that is beneficial for teachers to be aware of students' preferences of their learning environment (Pachler,1999). According to (Ellis, 1994), students can be categorised into four learning styles, concrete learning style, analytical style, communicative learning style and authority style.

### **General learning Styles**

#### 1. Concrete learning style

### **Main characteristics**

Direct means of processing information; people oriented, spontaneous; imaginative; emotional; dislikes routinized learning; prefers kinesthetic modality.

#### 2. Analytical learning style

Focus on specific problems and proceeds by means of hypothetical-deductive reasoning; object-oriented; independent; dislikes failure; prefers logical, didactic presentation.

#### 3. Communicative learning style

Fairly independent; highly adaptable and flexible, responsive to facts that do not fit; prefers social learning and a communicative approach; enjoys taking decisions.

#### 4. Authority-oriented learning style

reliant on other people; needs teacher's directions and explanations; likes a structured learning environment; intolerant of facts that do not fit; prefers a sequential progression; dislikes discovery learning.

Source: Ellis (1994) p.506

Certainly, there is still uncertainty over which learning style works best, this aspect of cognitive psychology is of relevance for teaching in general and the use of technology in particular (Pachler, 1999). It is advisable for teachers to be aware of the variety of preferences among students about the learning styles. Teaching approaches and methods need to be varied. New technologies only offer one of the many possibilities to provide varied learning opportunities. Thus, it is essential for teachers to collect feedback from students and teachers regarding their perception of the preferred modes of learning in order to create an appropriate learning environment for the students.

## METHODS

### Procedures

Around 50 interviews from students and teachers were conducted to collect the feedback on the effectiveness of using technology such as website, email, discussion board, and PowerPoint presentation for learning language. A summary of the data was collated in Table 1 and 2.

**Table 1**

<b>Comments from students</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>Website</b>	
Very user friendly and easy to use	36 (90%)
Very useful for collecting data for writing papers and presentation	38 (95%)
Could improve reading skills by reading the information from relevant websites and also samples of documents	32 (80%)
Too much information, have difficulty in selecting the relevant information	14(35%)
Time consuming	10 (25%)
<b>E-mail</b>	
Good for communication	35 (88%)
Quite a lot of technical problems	5 (13%)
Could save time and money when submitting assignments	38 (95%)
Never read e-mail messages	2 (5%)
<b>Discussion Board</b>	
Interesting and could get feedback from teachers and students	4(10%)
Have difficulty in giving comments to other students' work	15 (38%)
No time to take part in the discussion	34 (85%)
<b>Downloading notes or materials from websites</b>	
Too expensive	25 (63%)
Could provide more flexibility to the students	30 (75%)
Too slow	35 (88%)

**Table 2**

<b>Comments from teachers</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>Websites</b>	
Good for retrieving data and information	9 (90%)
May not be able to guarantee quality work	5(50%)
Should provide more guidelines on the selection of materials from websites	8 (80%)
Teachers need to be more aware of the learning goals and learning styles of the students when using technology as a delivery mode	9 (90%)
Ethical problem	2(20%)
<b>e-mail</b>	
Good for communication, speed up the communication process	10 (10%)
Time consuming to give feedback to students' messages or assignments	7 (70%)
<b>Downloading notes from websites</b>	
Visual impact on students- raise motivation	6 (60%)
Technical problem when uploading the materials on website	5(50%)
Could provide more flexibility for students	7 (70%)
Save time and money	7(70%)

**Websites**

Around 90% of students and teachers agreed that websites were very user friendly and provided a lot of information for learning and acquisition of skills. In particular it was a very good tool for providing samples and information package. Most students made use of internet to collect information, materials and sample work. It was rather difficult for some students to find the appropriate websites, for example, one student pointed out that she had great problem in finding a website on which she needed to make comments as an assignment. One student also pointed out that she spent a lot of time in searching the appropriate materials for her project because she could not enter the right key words. Four students indicated that they could not make use of internet to collect information regarding the current controversial issues. A few students mentioned that they had difficulty in surfing the internet because they were not very familiar with the availability of the websites.

## **e-mail**

Students favoured email communication very much because it was very user-friendly and convenient. They would be very frustrated if teachers never sent them feedback. Some students responded that submitting assignments through e-mail could save money and time for them. Even so, around 10 % of the students never read email messages.

Teachers found e-mail a very convenient channel for communication. However, sometimes there would be email jam and virus problems if there were too many email messages. It was quite time consuming to retrieve assignments and reply email messages every day.

## **Discussion Board**

A few students (only 10% or even 5% for some of the courses) responded to the discussion board. Around 80% students found it time consuming and those who had participated in the discussion board usually found this activity interesting and worth doing. They could make improvement from the feedback of the tutors and peers regarding the content and style of the assignments. For peer discussions, students needed encouragement for giving comments on others' essays. Ten students said they did not know how to give comments.

Teachers generally favoured a more interactive approach for web teaching. It was sometimes time consuming to give feedback to students but students' work could be improved a lot if they actively took part in the discussions. Teachers should monitor the progress and encouraged the students to participate. More importantly, the design of the activity should tie in with the learning goals and learning styles of the students.

## **Downloading handouts, notes from website**

Most students found it convenient to download materials from websites but some of them commented that the process was too slow. Some responded that it was rather expensive and time consuming to download materials. It would be good to use the materials as references. Some teachers did not favour the idea of uploading the handouts on the websites because students would tend to be absent from classes if they found all the materials on the websites. The outline of the lectures could be uploaded for students to browse before they attended the lecture. It could be money saving and time saving to upload the materials on the website from which students could have more autonomy for learning.

## **Others**

Most students found that Power Point presentation could be very boring if the presentation was too long (for example, more than 20 minutes) but using Power Point for short presentation(10 minutes) was very advisable. It was rather surprising that a few year one students were not very familiar with the use of computer. They found it very confusing to use software even Microsoftword for typing. They had a lot of problems with the use of internet. One teacher found that it was time consuming to use high technology for teaching and this teacher tended to withdraw from using it and did not find it a very effective teaching tool either.

## SUGGESTIONS

Learning is a part of our life. The term "learning" denotes a broad range of activities and process, which could be regarded as a cooperative interpersonal communication process between persons that mutually play different roles. An increasing portion of the human effort is devoted to the challenge of coping with increasing amount of knowledge and with rapidly changing demands for skills required by the business world and the private world. An individual has to find effective ways and means to keep up with these challenges and changing conditions (Muhlhauser,1995). It seems that it is unavoidable for teachers to use technology as one of the delivery modes which can help us keep abreast with the rapidly changing world. Based on the above findings, it is concluded that in order to increase the efficiency of teaching, the following issues should be addressed to create an appropriate learning environment for using technology (Muhlhauser,1995).

Learning goals

Learning styles

Learning reduce instruction time

Increase retention rate

Control the learning process

When using technology, we need to consider the learning goals, the subject and requisite skills, for example, if we emphasize on process writing, tutors' comments may be essential to the learners. The use of email tutoring or discussion board (Coogan, 1998) may be better than sampling documents on the websites. Understanding the learning styles of the students could enhance the learning environment. Students' language needs, learning styles, and computer knowledge should be considered when using the technology for teaching to adapt to learners' preferences and individual learning needs. Increase the retention rate is by raising motivation. Using technology will have a visual impact on students, which can increase their motivation and retention rate. Finally, it is very essential for the teachers to monitor the learning process by using technology. He or she must be aware of when and how to acquire new skills and knowledge.

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