



Fostering Communicative Competence through Technology

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Abstract

The article explores the use of technology in EFL classes to promote communicative competence. It elucidates communicative competence and explicates obstructions in communicative tasks. Moreover, it interprets the use of technology in fostering and supporting the development of communicative competence and explains how it is pragmatic in maintaining learners' level of motivation and interest in learning a foreign language. The present article identifies the significance and use of mobile phone, camera, computer and internet, tape recorder, projector, and language labs in EFL classes. Besides, it discusses the *use of technology* as an educational tool in language teaching and learning.

Keywords: Educational technology, fostering, communicative competence, language teaching, learning

1. Introduction

EFL teachers face several challenges including large-sized classes, lack of instructional material and technological support to plan successful lessons. Another huge problem is demotivated students who are busy with their mobile phones instead of participating in classroom activities. Non-cooperative and demotivated students are a serious problem and can easily disrupt the learning process. Often, daily activities revolve around class lectures and drills can contribute to the lack of motivation. As most of us know, project-based tasks help us solve the problem by allowing learners use their creativity and express themselves in a variety of enjoyable learning tasks. A project-based classroom focusing on learners' interests also helps transfer the formal setting into the real world where learners feel free to use individual learning styles and their choices. The idea of use of technology in language learning classes got popular in early 19th century. Use of technology in daily life is very common in countries like Saudi Arabia, America, England, Canada and many other developed countries of the world. Keeping in mind the extraordinary interest of the learners in technology, it could be utilized for learning in EFL classrooms effectively. It is a blessing but at the same time it also creates problems for teachers when EFL learners possessing latest technology (i.e. cell phones, e-pads, media players) are busy with it and behave in a very casual way in classrooms. Consequently, such learners are not easy to be managed and taught. The question arises how technology can be used for educational purposes in EFL classrooms. Instead of carrying old teaching techniques and traditional (teacher-centred) methodologies, teachers can enhance the learners' communicative competence by making atmosphere more interactive using latest technology (like cell phones, cameras, computer and internet, recorders and language labs). These devices can be used successfully in the conversations while interacting socially for a variety of objectives. They develop interpersonal skills, learning to exchange and monitor linguistic knowledge for communication, participation and learning curricular contents.

2. Communicative Competence

ELT in the U.S is based on the concept that the object of language acquisition is the ability to use the language accurately to achieve communication goals. The required result of the language learning process is the ability to interact effectively, not the ability to use the language exactly as a native speaker does. Initially, Spitzberg (1988) defined communicative competence as the ability to interact *well* with others. He explains the term *well*. It refers to accuracy, clarity, comprehensibility, coherence, expertise, effectiveness and appropriateness. Friedrich (1999) provides complete operationalisation when he says that communicative competence is well conceived as "a situational ability to set realistic and appropriate goals and to maximize their achievement by using knowledge of self, other, context, and communication theory to generate adaptive communication performances".

The role of communicative competence is very important in English language teaching. Achieving communicative competence in a second language involves not only learning the grammatical rules of a language but also learning when, where, and with whom to use the language in a contextually appropriate way. This needs more than knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary; it is about how to use English in communicative situations. Communicative competent person will know how to do things in English, for example purchasing something, selling something, convincing someone and expressing personal feelings. He will also know how to speak formally and informal language styles. Brown (1994) says that communicative language teaching (CLT) allows learners to practice English as it is actually used in a speech community and equips them with the language skills they will need when they leave the classroom for the real world. The teachers should consider the projects that match the rules of CLT while searching for solutions to large class sizes and unmotivated students. Rather to teach a structural syllabus with a preponderance of

grammar and vocabulary drills project work should be the focus, which allows students collaborate on tasks that require authentic, relevant and real life communicative interactions which helps learners to acquire communicative competence in a second language, much as a person learns his or her first language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The principles of CLT are very difficult to put into practice. The constraints in communicative tasks have been discussed below:

2.1 Obstructions in Communicative Tasks

In large size classes receptive activities are more favourable for the teacher as they are less demanding and less time consuming, so the teacher finds it easier than productive activities involving speaking and writing in group activities which result in teacher-centred instruction that does not provide learners with critical unrehearsed language practice and individual attention. Another obstruction is the fact that learners can be shy or embarrassed to speak in class in English. This type of performance anxiety and other feelings learners have in the language learning process, have long been an important consideration in ELT. The situation becomes worse when learners' reluctance to participate in communicative activities may be because of cultural differences. Since the communicative approach is of western origin, it is best suited for the interactive classrooms of Western cultures, where communicative activities are more common (Harmer, 2001). In cultures where the teacher-centred classroom is still the norm, learners may not respond willingly to communicative activities (Richards, 1985). To overcome these problems teachers must be creative and trained in finding methods according to their learners' needs and interests to make their classrooms more communicative. Teachers can take advantage of learners' interests in the latest technology by designing project-based tasks. Use of IT (Information Technology) has made English language learning and teaching much easier than even before. In a country like Saudi Arabia, you will find hardly a student without a mobile phone in his or her hand, a classroom without a projector and audio/video facilities. Language labs also exist in almost all universities. Teachers are well equipped with the latest technology including laptops along with internet facility. So, it is not very difficult to cope with the barriers of CLT.

3. Application of Technology in EFL Classroom

The idea of use of technology in EFL classes was beyond perception some decades ago but at present EFL classes without use of technology seem to be boring and dull. How variety of technology facilitates EFL teachers and learners is discussed below:

3.1 Mobile- assisted Language Learning

Nowadays, mobile phones along with ever-increasing functions are gaining popularity among learners. So this technology can be used to facilitate L2 learning in a variety of ways i.e. outside or inside the classroom. Not all the activities necessarily demand particular knowledge or extra hardware/software. There are many reasons to acknowledge the usefulness of mobile phones in the L2 classes. It is a social tool that aids authentic and relevant communication which proves it as an ideal tool to assist Situated Learning Theory (SLT). According to SLT (Lave & Wenger, 1991), "learning is more likely to take place when information is contextually relevant and can be put to immediate use". With the help of mobile phones, language learners can access to pertinent phrases and expressions of a language regarding opening an account in a bank or to express their feelings to an English friend. Mobile phones have decreased the distance between the classroom and the outside world.

The new trend in the potential for mobile phones or other portable devices to assist teaching and learning has been driven from the fact that the mobile phones are increasingly powerful and relatively cheap. It is quite usual that the learners are more accustomed to mobile phones than computers.

Young Japanese learners prefer use of mobile phones for many activities, from emailing to reading books as reported by Thornton and Houser (2003). The study on the use of mobiles for the availability of vocabulary material to EFL learners in Taiwan reveals that learners enjoy using their mobile phones because of easy access to the material and the convenience to practice anywhere and anytime; in addition, some learners like the screen size limitations which make the amount of content more manageable than that of other teaching materials (Chen, Hsieh, & Kinshuk, 2008).

Latest mobile phones have a feature that allows users taking notes and EFL learners can use this feature to take notes on the target language they come across outside schools. The learners can send same notes as a text message to their teacher or present them in class. In spite of assigning a regular boring homework, the teacher may ask the learners to hunt for specific language forms, for example adjectives, nouns, pronouns. To learn new vocabulary items "reminder function" can be utilized. Moreover, free programme like Ever note, can be used to upload notes or pictures to the account. The interesting feature of the programme is that it recognises words in pictures and converts it into text very accurately. Thus, the learners may organise personal notes in their accounts and share it with their classmates. Most phones have "memo recording feature". It helps to accumulate language samples from TV and radio. It is quite useful in analysing a language. The learners may record interviews and discussions outside their classes. Reinders & Lewis (2009) used this idea to send learners to quest to gather information from sources in the community including from the native speakers.

3.2 Camera- assisted Language Learning

With the help of this technology teacher can design a project-based video task. This task motivates students, they enjoy video recording. When they do so in group they receive approval, cooperation, and support from their peers, which is an important factor in their adolescent psychology (Hamer, 2001; Senemoglu, 2005). There is agreement in ELT literature about the motivating effect of dramatization (Arditto, 2006; Gill, 1996; Hyacinth, 1990; Miccoli, 2003). This will help to break the monotony of routine class teaching and is enjoyable and stimulating. A drama project is the best method to get

learners to apply different communicative functions in English, including description, narration, identification, debate and decision making (Millroad, 2001). Drama also involves four integrated skills (reading, writing, listening & speaking skills), as learners write English scripts, involve in peer correction, and design the video in English. In addition to fulfilling the objectives of communicative language teaching, it also addresses problems such as large class size, bad behaviour and performance anxiety. Participating learners are encouraged to communicate to share their insights, test their hypotheses, and jointly construct their knowledge. In particular, drama-based tasks have been identified as the most efficient tasks for eliciting valuable communicative interactions. However, drama activities require optimum space, time, and materials that are difficult to provide in large classes with limited lesson time (Royka, 2002). But, not all the activities have to do in the classroom, students can complete a large part of the filming outside the classroom.

Learners can think over a wide range of topics to produce a drama project. They may collect new ideas from television programmes including game shows, talk shows, cartoons and derision. It can be a short film or a documentary suitable to different age groups. Students will have to decide whether to base it on fact or fiction. Students can also make a commercial by considering an idea from an existing commercial or it can be of their own mind.

Drama and role play may still cause embarrassment, and not every student finds it easy to perform in a second language. One way to cope with the problem is that hesitant and shy learners have the option of creating their film in a non-threatening environment like home or neighbourhood where they feel comfortable. With this experience and rehearsals, students can be able to speaking and acting in front of an audience. The students who are still shy to be in front of the camera can take responsibility of writing the scripts and dialogues and slowly and gradually take minor roles to perform. So anxiety can be reduced by offering numerous choices for learners with different interests and abilities.

3.3 Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL)/Computer-mediated Communication (CMC)

Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Computer-mediated communication (CMC) may be defined as human communication via computers. The communication resulting through computers is unique as it has characteristics of both written and spoken discourse. It is neither pure writing nor pure speech but somewhere in between. Some of CALL's benefits are that "networked exchanges help all individuals in language classes engage more frequently with greater confidence and with greater enthusiasm in the communicative process than is characteristic for similar learners in oral classrooms". Computer-assisted Language Instruction (CALI) seemed to imply a teacher-centred approach or teaching oriented; language teachers are, however, more inclined to a learner-centred approach, CALL began to replace CALI. It strongly emphasises on learner-centred material that allows them to work on their own. This kind of material can be structured or unstructured. CALL is essentially a tool that supports the language and learning process. It can be used to evaluate what has been learnt in the classroom and as a remedial to assist slow learners who required additional help. SCMC (synchronous computer-mediated communication) use with language learners is very beneficial in face-to-face communications. Three aspects of computer assisted language learning are text-based interactions, the lack of turn-taking competition, and the absence of nonverbal cues positively aids negotiation of meaning. The design of CALL materials focuses on principles of language (teaching learning and methodology) which may be derived from different learning theories (e.g. behaviourist, cognitive, constructivist and L2 learning theories such as Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis).

3.4 Internet-assisted Language Learning

Technology plays an important role in recording learners' oral production whether these are basic drills, minimal pair exercises, real-time chatting, or online conferencing (Egbert, 2005; Chinnery, 2005). The equipment and media used to teach language has a vast range with the requisite software already loaded or available free on the internet. Learners can take advantage of a variety of possibilities to develop record and deliver oral work using synchronous communication (real-time interaction, such as Instant Messaging) and asynchronous communication (delayed interaction, such as email).

The reality is that the writing is associated with dull assignments and a vindictive environment of negative feedback and criticism, so most of the time, learners do not enjoy educational writing but surprisingly if we consider writing as any of textual communication, we will come to know that students actually write too much. Text messages, status update on social network sites (e.g. Facebook, Tweeter, MySpace and instant messages sent by the average young learner) are amazing. Based on this, one can say that a lot of writing is going on where there is fun. The fundamental challenge is to embolden the type of writing that help learners learn English. If learners do not enjoy writing essays, teacher can help them to develop their writing skills in shorter texts by taking advantage of social networking sites. Facebook has gained huge popularity around the world. Teacher can start an activity of creating a story by writing start of the story in his/her status update, where learners develop a story together by writing comment one by one. Each learner writes a sentence or two. This is very effective and non-threatening way of polishing learners writing skills and involves them in writing with different text types like narratives, reports, instructions and warnings.

The popular social network sites like Facebook, Twitter and MySpace allow groups of people to post their messages, to meet, interact and share pictures online in a number of ways. Mostly, discussion takes place in writing and simply asking learners to use English in lieu of their L1, produces a great deal of writing practice. Presently, teachers actively use these sites to keep in touch with learners or to organise online activities.

3.5 Recorder-assisted Language Learning

Tape recorders are still useful in many underdeveloped countries to teach English language. Learners collect language samples which provide the opportunity to analyse the language. They can record interviews or conversations, obviously considering privacy issues and obtaining permission before doing interviews either with each other or native speakers. They can play the interviews and conversations in class for feedback and discussion. Now tape recorders have been replaced with iPods and mobile phones but objective to teach the language remains the same as these engage learners use the language as much as possible.

3.6 Projector-assisted Language Learning

The recent innovations and developments in new-tech have made ELT functional and unique. It has changed the concept of language teaching dramatically. Nowadays, classes are well equipped with technology and teachers are using projectors in their classes. The learners need not to gather around a PC to view presentations or training programmes. Projector-assisted classes are gaining popularity. It engages learners directly and this kind of technology hub has a positive impact on each lesson. Multimedia projectors affected teaching and learning experience by visual aid. It is more flexible for substituting teaching methodology, increased pedagogical samples and developed learners' information. With the help of multimedia projectors, teachers are able to provide various contents to all the learners simultaneously. It allows the learners to have a pleasant experience during the presentation. It helps make abstract concepts simpler to follow. It does not force the teacher to depend only on books. It provides knowledge to the learners explicitly. It converts traditional classroom into a modern one. All the learners can see the big visual together at the same time without encircling class computer as experimented and observed by the researcher.

It has simplified teaching IT (Information Technology) subjects and how to demonstrate new software applications effectively. It captivated the learners and focused their concentration and motivated them. The projectors also help in viewing learners work and showing it to his/her fellow learners. Projectors are being used for a variety of curriculum-specific applications. In language classrooms, a teacher can link up to an author's website to provide greater insight and impact to a reading assignment as well as illustrate plays with the ability to pause, reverse and update them spontaneously.

3.7 Language Labs (Language Laboratories)

The real purpose of the language lab (laboratory) is to make the learners ready for better communication. With the help of labs, the learners are accustomed to listening skills and improve their pronunciation. They may record the dialogue and listen to it for personal assessment. This provides a place for exercising linguistic abilities by using communicative learning activities. The language learners improve their listening of L2 by using language labs. It consolidates learning. Following are the important functions of the language labs:

- a. Opportunities are given to all learners to hear the instructions
- b. The learners listen to the listening material individually under the supervision of a teacher
- c. Each learner has his own headphone to practice listening for acquiring correct L2 sounds. Learners are psychologically satisfied and realise that they have their privacy when they have separate headphones. Everyone knows that listening skill is very important aspect in language learning and a language lab helps learners to develop good listening skills. The learners come across the correct pronunciation when they listen to the dialogues wearing headphones in the lab.
- d. The learners are more attentive towards the sounds in the lab than merely listening to the teacher in the classroom. This way, speaking ability is promoted for successful learning. The learners are encouraged to talk to motivate the shy learners and practice pronunciation according to RP (Received Pronunciation) standard which helps them to speak with right accent.
- e. The lab is quite useful for shy learners. Any good classmate may monitor individually in a way that they are facilitated if the problem arises. Such learners usually don't speak in the classroom when teacher communicates with them but they practice language confidently in the labs.
- f. The learners use the lab materials in order to improve their language skills effectively. It boosts the learners to speak independently. They slough off their weakness when they speak in front of others. The use of lab makes learners confident.

The learners can concentrate on programme materials used in the lab since it permits the learner to listen to the programme individually. The language lab makes the learners more attentive to learn pronunciation and structures efficiently. Learners may try their voice and test it. This test will bring the learners on the right track for learning English. There is provision to record their own sounds for the learners along with master stimulus. The learners may work on variety of segments within the same or different material/exercise/unit. The teacher may make exercise for role play or any other speaking activity as a follow up. They can be divided into pairs or groups to act in class and hold conversations. The teacher has enough time to prepare material and monitor learners' activities instead manually controlled console feature.

4. Conclusion

It may be concluded that practice and exposure to the L2 through use of technology elaborates a lot of variation in learners' success. So, one can say with conviction that any technology that can enhance learners' access to the target language will contribute a lot to their language learning process and progress.

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