

WHAT CONSTITUTES AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL TO OMANI/ARAB LEARNERS?

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Abstract

This research explores what constitutes an educational tool for students in the Sultanate of Oman, using a quantitative questionnaire with face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Students and teachers at Nizwa College of Technology and Salalah College of Technology participated in the study. Educational tools are widely used as part of instruction today, but they are still a relatively new aspect of education in this region. Accordingly, the findings of the study are relevant to educators in the Omani educational system, as well to educators of Arab learners in general. This study examines four specific educational tools, namely email, Facebook, instant messaging, and cell phones. The findings indicate that students and teachers agree on what is considered an educational tool but also lack information and knowledge of how to integrate them into their learning and teaching. This paper provides insight into the mindset of Omani/Arab learners and those educators responsible for integrating educational technology in the region.

Introduction

In today's globalized ESL/EFL world, the ever-expanding growth of information and communication technologies (ICT) has fundamentally changed teaching and learning processes in education. Higher education institutions around the world have increasingly adopted ICT as tools for teaching and student learning (Kumpulainen, 2007). The Internet offers a turning point in English teaching methods (Warschauer, 1996), for better or for worse. There are many advantages to using ICT in teaching and learning, but they are often under-realized (Surry & Farquhar, 1997). Studies have shown that most teachers use the Internet to send emails and plan lessons instead of indirect instructional use (Bebel, 2004; Pajo & Wallace, 2001).

This small scale study, carried out at two colleges in the Sultanate of Oman (College of Technology in Nizwa and College of Technology in Salalah), examines what Omani/Arab students consider to be an educational tool and why. There has not been much information gathered on exactly what Omani students consider an educational tool and the reasons for their

opinions. Hence, it is important from a practical aspect and of immediate relevance to practitioners instructing Omani/Arab learners.

Background

Educational technologies can be defined as “the theory and practice of design, development utilization, management, and evaluation of processes and resources for learning” (Seels & Richey, 1994, p. 129). The implementation of educational technologies is an important step in developing a university and its curricula, as Laurillard (2000) pointed out, for “engagement with others in the gradual development of their personal understanding” (p. 137). E-learning is a major force of change (Clark, 2008, p. 1) and certain changes might be required for its implementation and development; these changes are difficult and cannot be forced from the top to bottom. Instead, it needs to be the individual who is the primary focus of change (Fullan, 1993).

In certain cases, the adoption of ICT at universities is often poorly implemented and is based on unfounded optimism (Taylor, 1998). In other cases, a large number of faculty members are hesitant or reluctant to adopt technology for teaching tasks (Jacobson, 1998). Learners are also afraid to leave the well-known traditional classroom, and fail to accommodate to the unknown, a technological classroom (Galluccio, 2000). Research into this area has found several obstacles to fully integrating technology into the teaching and learning processes in higher education (BECTA, 2004).

In colleges of technology in the Sultanate of Oman, the normalizing of technology in language teaching is still in its early stages. Over the past couple of years, a seemingly endless supply of financial support has been given to the colleges to introduce technological teaching innovations. Nevertheless, as it stands now, many teachers and students have not responded favorably to these introductions. However, research in the United States shows that increasing the spending on technological innovations will help students to learn (Bialo & Soloman, 1997) and “key to the learning process are the interaction among students themselves, the interaction between faculty and students, and the collaboration in the learning that results from the interactions” (Palloff & Pratt, 1995, p. 5).

This rapid expansion of technology infusion in the Sultanate has created what Warschauer (2008) calls a “digital divide” between the rich and the poor, between those with

know-how and those without it. Howe and Strauss (2000) discuss how the younger generation feels more comfortable in the digital environment than in the world of traditional print media. Prensky (2001) refers to the younger generation as digital natives, whereas teachers would then be considered digital immigrants. In reference to the Sultanate of Oman, the younger generation cannot be considered digital natives in comparison to their western counterparts, since they have had a limited exposure to computers. According to the Internet World Stats, nine percent of the population in Oman uses the Internet (Middle East Internet Usage Stats and Population Statistics, 2009). Having Internet access at home as well as a workable knowledge of how to use a computer are currently considered status symbols among the students.

Technology can develop independence and learning (Illich, 1971, p. 77) and much research has been done in recent years with an emphasis on the Internet, email, instant messaging, and mobile services as tools in learning a second language. Kitao (1998) found that Internet interaction in the second language facilitates the language learning process. Synchronous communication among ESL learners helps them develop fluency, with students having to react and communicate in real time and real situations (Wiburg & Butler-Pascoe, 2002). Therefore, “it is only logical to assume that language practice [using online chat] will reap some of the same benefits for second language development as practice through oral interaction” (Warschauer & Kern, 2000, p. 50). Asynchronous communication, such as email, which is one of the most widely used ICT tools today (Dudeney & Hockly 2007), can help develop deeper cognitive skills, with time for writers to consider accuracy, develop an argument, and rewrite their contributions (Sharma & Barrett, 2007).

Research Methods

The purpose of this study was to find out what constitutes an educational technology in Omani students’ and teachers’ minds. Methods of data collection included both quantitative and qualitative research methods, such as questionnaires and interviews.

To compensate for the limitations of the survey method, semi-structured interviews were also used to gather data. Interviewing is one of the most powerful tools used to understand people’s points of view, beliefs, and attitudes. Because of its interactive nature, interviewing has many advantages over other strategies of data collection (Best & Kahn, 1998). The interviews

compliment the survey instrument by providing better understanding of contexts, as they offer solid descriptions and explanations for the quantitative data in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The questionnaire consisted of four questions (see Appendix A) and asked what students and teachers consider an educational tool. The questionnaire elicited information in the following sub-areas: email communication, instant messaging, Facebook, and cell phones. On the other hand, the purpose of the semi-structured, one-to-one interviews was to explore further, provide depth, or clarify points raised by responses to the questionnaire. The interviews lasted approximately 10-15 minutes per subject, and subjects were asked about item responses on the questionnaire that turned out to be crucial to the present study.

Participants

The student participants of the study were second and third semester students attending a two- to four-semester intensive foundation studies program in English. There were 60 students participating in this study, half from Nizwa College of Technology and the other half from Salalah College of Technology, aged, on average, 18.7. The first language of all the student participants was Arabic. Thirty-nine of the student participants were boys and 21 were girls. All of the participants had graduated from high school in one of the Omani governmental schools. They were exposed to English 20 hours a week in the colleges.

The teacher participants in the study worked in the foundation studies program in one of the two colleges. There were 20 teachers participating in the study, half from Nizwa College of Technology and the other half from Salalah College of Technology. Their mean age was 43. All had a Master's degree in TESOL/Applied Linguistics or English at the time of this study and a minimum of two years of experience with Omani learners.

Results and Discussion

The first questionnaire item tried to ascertain if, overall, ICT is considered by teachers and students to be an educational tool. This is an imperative question to be answered on the outset because it relates directly to the core of the main research question. For ICT to be deployed and perceived as a positive useful and meaningful tool, the participants need to be aware of its benefits and best practices. All of the participants agreed that ICT is an educational tool. This in

itself is an important start, as Grabe and Grabe (2007) wrote, “technologies can play a role in students’ skills, motivation, and knowledge” (p. 18). To further substantiate the participants’ views about ICT, four educational tools were selected, namely email, instant messaging, Facebook, and cell phones. These were selected on the basis of being the most common educational ICT tools in the country, in order to identify and clarify how ICT is perceived within the colleges and the communities.

As expected, both students and teachers agreed that email is an educational tool (question 2). Today, email is one of the most widely used ICT tools (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007). Both students and teachers found it useful and effective form of communication. Students thought it was a great opportunity to practice their writing skills in a different manner and more interesting than “traditional” writing in class. This finding corresponds with Holliday’s (1999) comments: “...that the repetitive nature of email, in which writers quote and comment on each other’s messages, assists learners in understanding linguistics cues” (p.238). The teachers agreed that it was an easy way to communicate with students and it was an appropriate medium for inter-gender communication.

Even though one can send messages with Facebook in a similar way, Facebook was not seen as a professional and suitable communication method (question 3). There are two reasons for this: First, Facebook is mainly seen as a social network, a fun and informal way of communicating, and not an educational tool. Second, many students and teachers are not using Facebook and/or are not aware of how to use it educationally.

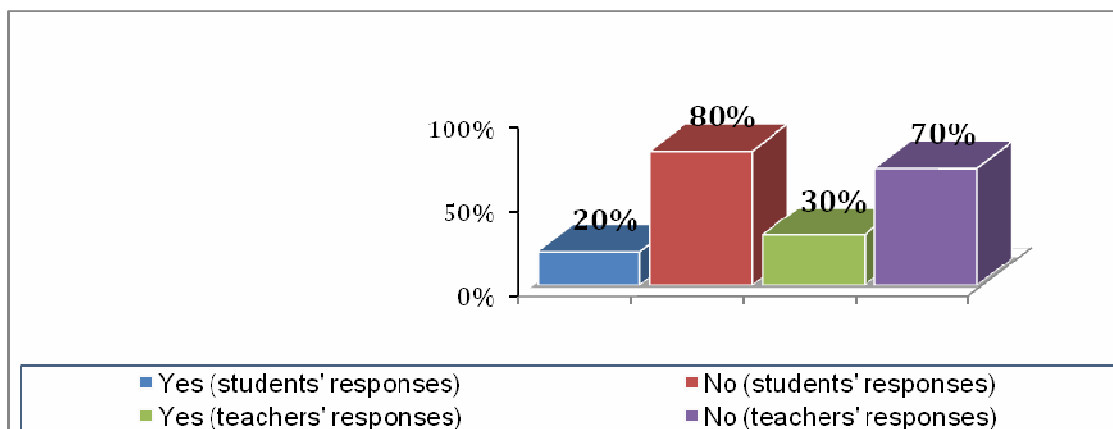


Figure. 1 Do you consider Facebook to be an educational tool?

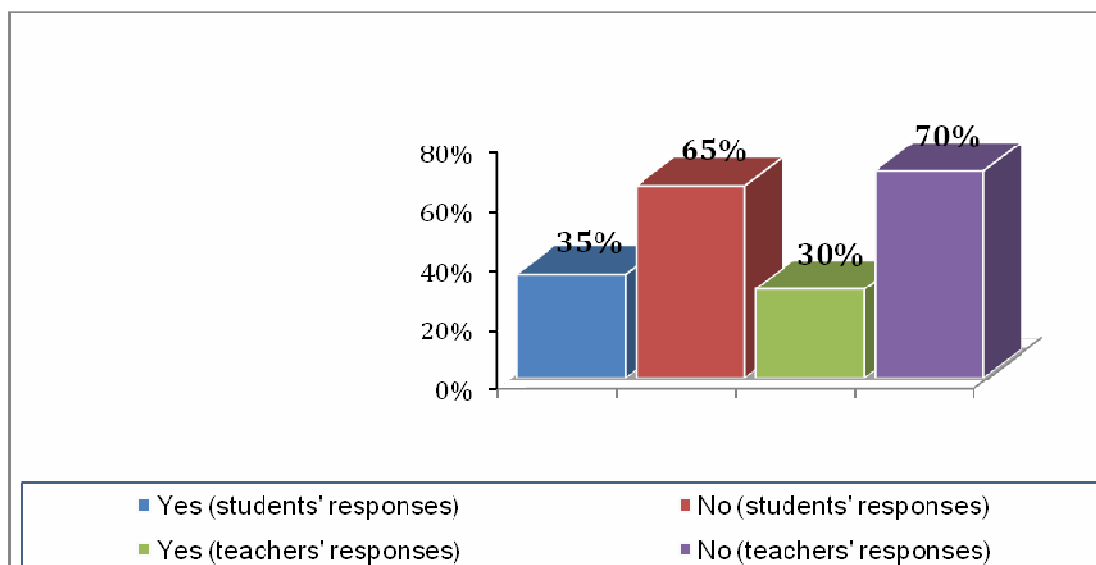


Figure 2. Do you consider instant messaging (e.g. msn/yahoo) to be an educational tool?

Furthermore, instant messaging was not considered an educational tool by the majority (question 4). The main reason was that few of the participants could see any real educational value in synchronic computer-mediated communication. Also, instant messaging allows for anonymity and is "...a place where people often end up revealing themselves far more intimately than they would be inclined to do without the intermediation of screens and pseudonyms" (Rheingold, 1993, p. 27). This was an interesting observation, especially since chatting has many similarities to oral interaction: "[It] is only logical to assume that language practice through Network Based Communication will reap some of the same benefits for second language development as practice oral interaction" (Warschauer & Kern, 2000, p. 50). Also, chatting has been found to increase motivation and decrease nervousness in using the target language (Kern, 1995).

It was indicated in the interviews that teachers found it uncomfortable to be contacted by students with chat clients; they found it to be intrusive and disruptive. Instant messaging represents a level of informality that many teachers are not comfortable with, and both groups do not see it as an effective language learning tool, despite research to the contrary (Wu, 2010). However, it should be noted that 35% of the students did consider instant messaging to be an educational tool and thought it a great way to practice language in an informal way with a native speaker. On the other hand, the majority of the teachers had not given any thought to the

effectiveness of chatting in learning a second language. However, research shows that “writing intensifies the sense of self and fosters more conscious interaction between persons” (Ong, 1982, p. 179). Furthermore, both students and teachers (Muslim) pointed out that it would be inappropriate for the different genders to have direct contact online and out of class. Therefore, as a safety measure, it was discouraged by Muslim teachers as a form of gender interaction.

A positive aspect of the study was that both teachers and students found the cell phone to be an educational tool (question 5). Students used their cell phones as dictionaries as well as to transfer mp3 files, which their listening teacher had assigned, from campus computers to their cell-phones. This was an interesting observation because m-learning, in this case transactional communication is relatively new and is more commonly used in developed learning environments and countries, such as Japan and South Korea (Dudeny & Hockly, 2007).

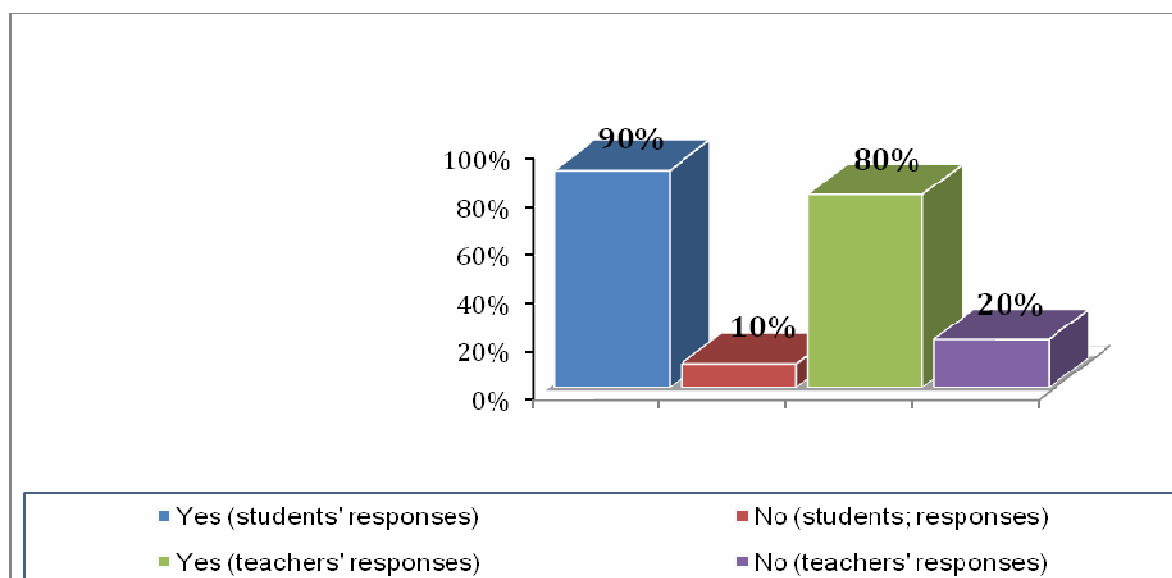


Figure 3. Do you consider cell-phone to be an educational tool?

Second, because it was not interactional communication between the two genders, it was deemed acceptable by all parties. Even though use of cell phones is not interactional but transactional, it implies that the students are trying new methods to acquire a better understanding and knowledge of English (Smith, 2003). Also, m-learning increases the flexibility of learning for students who are able to study in intervals between other activities (Clark, 2008, p. 19) and fits Omani learners well who do not have access to computers outside of

the colleges. It should be noted that several of the teachers pointed out in the interviews that the use of cell phones inside the classroom could be conceived as disruptive to the normal pattern in the class and needed to be monitored closely.

The Internet is a global phenomenon, but with distinct regional profiles (Anderson & Eickelman, 1999), and there is no doubt that computer-mediated interaction requires re-consideration of many traditional Islamic norms. The conflict brought about by Internet use and exposure to Western culture fundamentally shapes perceptions of the younger generation. In the case of social networks such as Facebook, several male students thought it was a great way to expand their social skills. However, as with instant messaging, Facebook creates conflicts when both genders interact online. The female students experience more conflict in their use of the Internet than their male counterparts (Al-Ani & Redmiles, 2004).

Recommendations

As proven in the previous research, ICT enables teachers to be more creative in their lessons (Gillespie, 2006). Therefore, it is imperative that current and future teachers receive adequate training and resources to effectively incorporate the latest and/or available technologies in their classes.

There are three aspects of the preceding discussion that have direct implications for the student and teacher usage of ICT and the following recommendations can be made:

- Educate students and teachers in “basic” IT/ICT skills; by doing so, they will become self-confident in using ICT inside and outside of the classroom.
- Educate teachers in integrating technology in the classroom. By providing workshops, seminars, and lesson plans to teachers that show them how to use chat, email, instant messaging, and/or Facebook with their students, they will become aware how ICT can enhance their lessons.
- Educate both students and teachers about the positive and negative aspects of ICT, so they will be able to make well-informed decisions in regards to its use.

This would provide students and teachers with an advantage: they can effectively prepare themselves for a workplace already dominated by technology.

Conclusion

This small-scale study contributed to the growing body of literature on what constitutes an educational tool in Omani/Arab learners' minds. The three main findings of this study are: (i) email is considered an educational tool and acceptable form of communication tool between the two genders; (ii) instant messaging is not acceptable between the two genders, and few of the student and teacher participants are aware of its positive benefits in language learning; and (iii) cell phones are considered an educational tool but are limited to transactional features only, as dictionaries and extensions of listening classes.

The use of ICT as an educational tool in Oman with Arab learners still has a long way to travel before it becomes "an indispensable tool in education of today's students," as *Netday* described technology in March 2005. The use of educational technology is increasing, but teachers need to support it, develop a pedagogic culture, and train students to see the value in using ICT as a tool in learning English. In addition, because of this pioneering study, the policy makers in the Ministry of Manpower and Ministry of Higher Education will be more informed about Omani students' viewpoints and the factors that facilitate the implementation of educational technologies in colleges of technology in the Sultanate of Oman.

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Appendix A

Student Questionnaire

Age: 18- 20 21- 23 24- 25
Specialization: IT Business Engineering Science

1. Do you consider ICT to be an educational tool?

- Yes
 No
 Please explain your choice: _____

2. Do you consider e-mail to be an educational tool?

- Yes
 No
 Please explain your choice: _____

3. Do you consider Facebook, to be an educational tool?

Yes

No

Please explain your choice: _____

4. Do you consider Instant Messaging, such as MSN, to be an educational tool?

Yes

No

Please explain your choice: _____