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# Some Constraints in Using ICT and its Impact on EFL Teachers in Saudi Arabia

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## Abstract

Nowadays, our world is experiencing a technological revolution and witnessing an explosion in the field of information and communication. The use of technology in English education is one of the developments associated with this contemporary scientific and technological advance. This paper discusses some issues which Saudi English teachers encounter in using technology in teaching English subject at intermediate schools in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Taking a qualitative approach, the researcher focuses on the status of using technology in two intermediate schools. A discrepancy is found between intention and practice. During investigations and observations throughout the district, the researcher could not find a language laboratory in government intermediate schools. In this paper, the researcher will discuss three issues respectively as follows: teacher resistance, lack of training and self-confidence, and financial obstacles.
**Keywords:** TEFL; Foreign; English; ICT; Saudi Arabia; Teaching.

## 1. Introduction

One challenge for those supporting ICT is that the introduction of ICT has been closelyassociated with curriculum change more or less since its first introduction into education (Dias and Atkinson, 2001). Although primarily relevant in the context of maths teaching, Papert (1984) provides a benchmark for those advocating educational change, for according to Papert "the computer is going to be a catalyst of very deep and radical change in the educational system" as it will give more opportunities to change the conditions of learning by providing new relationships between knowledge and learning. Picking up this theme, Watson (2001) argues that ICT use in general should not be viewed only as a catalyst for change but also as requiring changes in learning approaches, teaching methods, and ways of accessing information.

New technologies have not only changed the way we live but also the ways we can teach. Technology holds many promises for teaching and learning. For example, using computers in classrooms may allow different and more varied modes of interaction. Networked technology can shift learning beyond traditional boundaries or settings and can support a shift to more learner centred or social approaches to learning. In the EFL context, using computers and online communication can better allow learners to access and even to participate within target language communities. Using learning environments learners can better decide what, when, and how they would like to learn. However, with the development of technology progressing rapidly, policy makers and teachers face a number of decisions when planning the use of ICT (Al-Madani and Allaafiajiy, 2014).

## 2. Definition of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

Blurton (1999), explained that the term (ICT) referred to a set of electronic tools and information resources used with computer hardware and software to create, store and manipulate information and to enable customers to reach and retrieve information.

It is clear that ICT tools are widely considered to be of great value in supporting all activities in educational process for improving both teachers' and students' abilities to cooperate with each other concerning using technology and search for information, as well as for improving interaction with their peers and with experts in the same field. Therefore, all of the above skills are integrated to prepare them for *distance learning*, which is totally dependent on ICT tools. This kind of cooperation will enhance students and teachers to think and understand teaching and learning strategies. In addition, this step will enable them to overcome problems in future (Al-Harby, 2014).

## 2.1. Background

Education Ministry aims to offer a modern education to Saudi students and the appropriate employment of such technology in Saudi schools and universities. To achieve this, a working group of specialists, experts, and academics was set up to work on a practical vision for the introduction of e-learning, distance education, and learning in higher education. The group had drafted a proposed model for e-learning and distance education in Saudi universities. The outcome of the group's activity was a definition of e-learning and distance learning and the establishment of the National Centre for e-learning and Distance Education (NCEL). The NCEL seeks to develop a variety of research and development agendas aimed at facilitating the next generation of e-learning. It is considered to be the main sponsor of e-learning in Saudi Arabia. NCEL plans to spread e-learning and its applications to become a substantial part of the educational system in Saudi Arabia.

Within this strategy, Education Ministry initiates many projects to develop teachers' ability at government schools. One project of relevance to this study was *Tatweer* (meaning: development), which was primarily focused on teachers' development in their major fields, technology use, administrative support, and educational supervision (*www.tatweer.edu.sa 2013*). Regarding ICT use, the programme drew on an international project, Intel tech to the future as a model for the vision of e-learning, and administration to be followed in Saudi school systems. 'Intel tech to the future' is based on a "train the trainer" provision of professional development, where one teacher would be trained and tasked to train other staff members within his school. However, the programme is still ongoing, and no official evaluation research has been published to date. In a case study to evaluate the impact of education policy development on practice within the *Tatweer* project, Alyami (2014) interviewed a number of participating teachers, head teachers, and a *Tatweer* official. She pointed out that the project had some positive impact in relation to developing learners' achievements and allowed teachers more freedom in regard to curricula consideration. However, she also pointed out some reported difficulties with the project. One main barrier was that many teachers appeared to resist change and regarded ICT use as not essential. She also quoted the *Tatweer* official as indication that some teachers had withdrawn from the project and asked to be allowed to leave for a normal school environment, while some parents objected to allowing their children to use computers, such as laptops, in their education. Such challenges with this programme have generated a huge debate in the educational field. Most educators criticised its outcomes and the participating teachers' attitudes towards ICT use.

## 2.2. The Present Study: Context, Methods and Participants

What follows is based on an interpretive, qualitative study carried out in Riyadh, to explore teaching English. One of the issues investigated was availability and use of ICT. An intensive case study was carried out in two state intermediate schools containing 400 students, age 12-15 years and made interviews with 100 students and some Saudi English teachers.

## 2.3. Teacher Resistance

Factors influencing integrating of ICT in English education are commonly classified into internal and external (Assulaimani, 2019). Internal factors, generally, are associated with teacher-related barriers, attitudes and beliefs towards computers and confidence levels when dealing with computers. Becker (2001), pointed out the process of instruction and teaching were highly influential to their use computers in education can be understood by identifying their educational beliefs. Cox *et al.* (1999), found that teachers who avoid using computers are unwilling to change their attitudes and have a low level of personal change-management skills. Hermans *et al.* (2008), reported that teachers' beliefs influence their ICT in classrooms, and that traditional approaches to teaching have a negative influence on ICT adoption. Sadaf *et al.* (2012), reported that teachers' intentions to use ICT are closely related to their beliefs regarding educational process, and users of ICT might seek to develop students' engagement. Inevitably, a key factor for the successful integration information technology is the ability of the individual to exploit the computer's usefulness (Dusick, 1998).

One original teacher reported that he does not believe that kind of activity would lead to any progress in students' performance. He expressed similar doubts concerning language laboratories. Further comments by another teacher, with more than 20 years of experience and close to retirement, suggested that his view may have been coloured by his feeling of being under pressure. For instance, he says that he has no time to use language laboratories, because he has to teach 24 classes per week and this did not leave enough time for language laboratories.

From my experience, most Saudi English teachers have not strong desire to departure from the current methods, particularly in the direction of more student participation, would result in a breakdown of discipline and a failure to take learning seriously. This was related to a general perception, even among those who favoured the use of technology, that the purpose was primarily entertainment – to make the subject more 'fun', rather than to achieve their goals. In this respect, they seemed to misperceive not only the potential role of computers but also the attitudes of students, who in discussions with me expressed a strong need for access to computer facilities in order to develop their linguistic ability. For example, one intermediate student said, "Between time to time, our English teacher invites the whole class to watch English programs by using his laptop." He suggested, "We will graduate from Intermediate and go to high school with a very good background in English."

According to the above information, teachers simply do not want to use it. This may be due to a lack of technical proficiency and confidence in using ICT and/or a lack of pedagogical awareness of how to use and employ it effectively in EFL. That this may be the case is suggested by the greater willingness to use ICT among trainee teachers, who were familiar with computer technologies through their university preparation.

## 2.4. Training

External factors affecting teachers' practices are those related to the surrounding environment. Access (e.g., (Hammond *et al.*, 2009)), time constraints (e.g., (Cuban *et al.*, 2001; Egbert *et al.*, 2020; Khouj, 2011), lack of facilities (e.g., (Mumtaz, 2000); administrative support (Osika, 2006; Watson, 2001), curriculum considerations (Al-Nafisah, 2007; Al Ruz and Khasawneh, 2011), technical support (Cuban *et al.*, 2001), teacher development programs and financial issues (Lam, 2000) all affect the implementation of computers in educational context.

In order to use technology in teaching English, teachers must have a degree of competence and confidence in using the technology, as well as some understanding of how ICT relates to learning theories, and of its potential in specific subject areas. For example, Saudi students at English Department study at least two courses on how to use technology in teaching English at government schools.

In some institutions, however, graduates in Arts and other subjects, may have had little or no exposure to computers, as computer skills are not a requirement of graduation; any computer access or training available tends to be confined to students of Science and Mathematics.

In this situation, in-service training could clearly have an important role to play. In theory, there are various kinds of training available. Special training courses on various topics are provided free of charge at the Training Centre in each educational area all over the Kingdom. The centre sends official letters to specific schools, inviting teachers to attend. There is, however, a problem of take – up of such courses, due to the inconvenient timing and conflict with teachers' other responsibilities. Courses are commonly held in the morning, clashing with teachers' regular teaching duties (they attend from 6.30 – 12.30) and staff shortages make it difficult to arrange cover in order to release teachers for training. One teacher told me, "Even if I had received an invitation from Education Ministry to attend a course in ICT, I couldn't have attended for that reason." However, it appeared that courses held in the evenings would be no more popular, as teachers preferred to keep the evenings free for family duties. It seems, therefore, that careful thought needs to be given to the manner in which training is provided, and to how teachers may be enabled and encouraged to attend.

## 2.5. Budget and Resource Constraints

During my visiting some government schools, I noticed that some Saudi English teachers bring their own laptop computers into school, together with CDs of supplementary teaching materials, which they had provided at their own expense. However, not all teachers were able or willing to do this. As one teacher commented, "I don't want to pay money from my pocket to buy a laptop and English programs and bring them to school to teach English. Education Ministry is in-charge to provide us with ICT facilities. Another, discussing the shortage of facilities in his school, expressed impatience with the delay involved when facilities were requested from the government. He complained, "We need an English lab, but you know the bureaucratic process in our country."

We discussed the possibility of a room being cleared, in order to set up a small English lab, and on a subsequentvisit, I found this had been done. "What do I do now?" asked the headteacher. I gave him contact details for a Sony representative based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), who set up labs in schools across the Gulf countries, and would be able to advise on what equipment could be fitted into the room, as well as a quotation on price, to be forwarded to the Ministry of Education. He submitted a plan for 25 computers with headphones, and the official request was made. More than two months passed without a reply. The headteacher made repeated calls to follow up his request, and was told he would have to wait, as no budget for the project was available. Eventually, Education Minis announced its rejection of the project on financial grounds. This disappointing experience is by no means uncommon in schools that request provision of resources, however desirable these may be in educational terms.

# 3. Conclusion

This article has highlighted important issues associated with using technology in intermediate schools in Saudi Arabia. ICT equipment was often unavailable and even where available was underused. It seems that the explanation for lack of computer use must be sought in a complex interaction of factors, including bureaucratic confusion, lack of teachers' awareness, perceptions of student roles, the nature of the centrally prescribed curriculum and budget constraints.

In relation to the causative conditions that might enable greater use of ICT, it was found that teachers' ICT training needed to be tailored to the participants' training needs. A casual condition for ICT use in the classroom was for teachers to have access to technology in both contexts, although a number of constraints restricted their use of ICT, including: working hours, lack of support and lack of particular facilities and budget. Although the training was 'informal' in the sense that it did not lead to formal accreditation, all the participants showed enthusiasm by volunteering for the training in the first place and almost all of them completed the training.

In regards to intervening conditions that allowed or restricted participants' use of ICT, it was reported that class time, motivation, and curriculum restricted some ICT use. From different sets of data, participants indicated that class time restricted their use of ICT in the school context, as the length of each class was shorter than in the university context.

Teacher's competence and his commitment is crucial for countries, like Saudi Arabia, that are seeking to promote educational improvement through ICT. Most important of all, however, is an environment in which teachers are not simply passive implementers of educational directives, but are encouraged to be dynamic professionals, engaged in career-long learning and actively sharing in the development of policy and practice.

Thus, the overall conclusion of the study is that ICT can have an impact on EFL teachers' practice if the appropriate conditions are met and provided. However, it was found out that prior teaching attitude towards ICT and enthusiasm play a crucial role in teachers' uptake and adoption of ICT in their teaching.

## Recommendations

In the light of this conclusion, the author suggests the following recommendations:

1. There should be more emphasis on developing some teaching skills such as classroom management.
2. There should be more emphasis on modern teaching methods using aids such as language labs and over-head projectors. A scale can be developed for this purpose including qualification, experience in supervision, teaching and training, willingness for participation in training, familiarity with the training programs in technology, behavior at school and relations with colleagues.
3. Include teachers in the designing and planning of the EFL curriculum.
4. Develop facilities to allow greater access and use.
5. Build on the ground work of teachers, some of which will not be known; give them opportunities to disseminate ideas and lead development.
6. Allow practitioners more control over the curriculum while providing general teaching objectives.

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