

Teacher Autonomy in Integrating E-learning in English Language Teaching & Learning IS SUFFICIENT ATTENTION GIVEN?

Selvamalar Selvarajan

English Language Unit, General Studies Department
Politeknik Tuanku Sultanah Bahiyah
09000 Kulim, Kedah, Malaysia
E-mail: selvamalar@ptsb.edu.my

Abstract

This paper discusses on teacher autonomy in integrating e-learning in English Language teaching and learning. Though e-learning is constantly being debated on various issues, it is continuing to emerge. So, it is no more a question of whether to accept e-learning in English language teaching and learning process but a matter of how to implement e-learning effectively. In relation to that, teacher autonomy is a fundamental aspect as teachers are the implementers of e-learning tools in teaching and learning process. With the short history of research into teacher autonomy in the field of second language learning, the researcher sees that it can positively lead to learner autonomy in the usage of e-learning in English language learning. Hence, the degree of teacher autonomy among language lecturers in the implementation of e-learning should be paid adequate attention to realize the institution's vision. This paper focuses on the role and challenges of teacher autonomy particularly in utilizing learning management system (LMS) for language teaching purposes. Additionally, the pedagogical implementations of teacher autonomy in English Language teaching and learning are also presented in the paper.

Key words: Teacher autonomy, e-learning, English language learning, learning management system (LMS)

Introduction

Despite the continuous debates on the use of e-learning, there is an ongoing effort at administrative levels to deliver education and training by integrating e-learning or digital technologies effectively with all available electronic media for flexible learning. In defining e-learning as using computer technology [1] in Communicative English teaching and learning, it could possibly cover all relevant terms such as Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI), Web Based Instruction (WBI), Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Computer Based Learning (CBL), Web Based Learning (WBL), Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL), Web Enhanced Language Learning (WELL), virtual classrooms and digital collaborations. Based on this clarification, e-learning is discussed with particular emphasis and relevance to online learning and web-based technologies in this paper.

The role of technology in English language teaching and learning is undeniable. Numerous research studies have proved its impact on learner's language learning process. As [2] pointed out, teachers today are dealing with digital natives. A survey on e-learning readiness among 5779 respondents in Malaysia in 2004 [3] revealed that learners are more ready for e-learning compared to the perception of their lecturers. Undoubtedly, if any language teachers in the

current digital world aim to serve these learners' language learning needs, integration of e-learning is an essential aspect in their pedagogy. Without this integration and implementation, teachers could hardly engage learners in the language learning. Having said that, most language teachers and administrators are well aware of the importance of e-learning [4] but the successful implementation is still questionable. Thus, there is urgent need to look at language teachers' initiatives towards achieving this goal. In relation to that, the importance of teacher autonomy in integrating e-learning is explored in this paper. The challenges faced by teachers and some recommendations for pedagogical implementations are also highlighted in the discussion (the term 'teacher' and 'lecturer' are being used interchangeably in the present paper).

Statement of Problem

The Department of Polytechnic Education Ministry of Malaysia has started urging the implementation of e-learning in language classes since 2008 through the use of virtual learning environment. The major revamp in the English language curriculum resulted in the shift to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. Since then, more learner centred practices (Outcome Based Education, OBE) are fostered in the Communicative English courses. To support the effort, e-learning is urged to be practiced as a blended approach (face to face teaching with online or web based learning tools). English language lecturers in all polytechnics are constantly evaluated on the use of e-learning tools in language teaching by the superiors. Despite the various attempts of promoting the use of e-learning, particularly CIDOS (learning management system which is similar to Moodle), it seems to be less effectively practiced for language learning purposes. In most cases, the practice of e-learning in language teaching do not mirror actual e-learning practices that the department is aiming for. CIDOS implementation resemble what [5] referred as 'crawling period' of e-learning, though it is already been six years since the implementation. This could also probably due to the lack of theoretical and practical knowledge of CALL or WBL. Many workshops have been carried out to train and familiarize lecturers to CIDOS system since 2009. Unfortunately, many lecturers still need assistance for basic tasks in using it, such as creating a class group in the platform which has been shown or taught repeatedly to the same group of teachers. This clearly highlights the lack of teacher's initiative and knowledge, therefore urgent attention need to be paid to develop teacher autonomy among the teachers for successful integration of e-learning in English language teaching to serve learner's needs.

Integration of E-learning in CLT

In any attempt to integrate e-learning in language learning, the acceptance of the technology among the users should be first analysed. According to Technology Acceptance Model (Figure 1), perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness of technology are the main determinant factors in influencing user's attitude in accepting the technology. A recent study by [6] has highlighted the lack of perceived ease use and perceived usefulness of e-learning technology in teaching English. As this is the foundation for successful integration of e-learning, enough attention should be paid to raise the awareness.

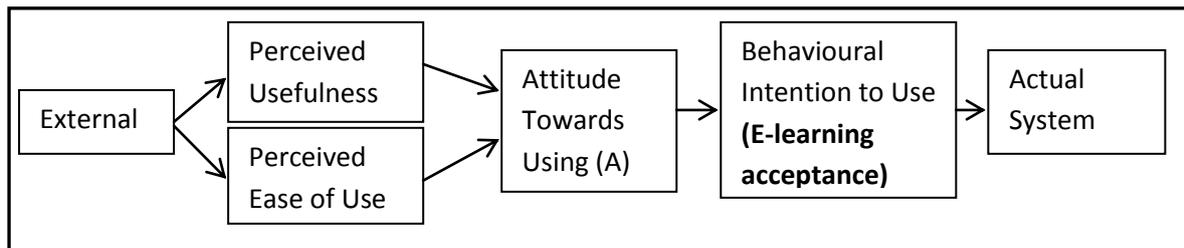


Figure 1: Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

Source: Davis et al. (1989)

Once teacher's acceptance of e-learning is known, the integration would take place much easily and effectively. CLT approach is focused on developing learner's communicative skills with learner centred language activities in classroom. As compared to non-authentic materials (often in decontextualized way), Communicative English could be best taught with authentic materials as learners need exposure to how language is used in the real world. E-learning enables the use of variety of freely available online resources on the World Wide Web such as video clips (YouTube, Vimeo, Daily Motion, Ted.com), podcasts (BBC website), interactive activities (Hot Potatoes), animations, simulations and other language learning materials which offer rich language learning opportunities. Learners could easily relate the learning with real world knowledge which is crucial in enhancing their understanding and appropriate use of language. This experiential learning would benefit the learners more than conventional teaching method. In addition, the Communicative English syllabus used in the context covers limited scope (social skills, process and procedure, instructions, presentation skills, interview skills) of communicative skills. Thus, teachers could utilize e-learning tools like virtual learning environment (CIDOS) and WBL to provide more input to increase learner's communicative competence. For example, vocabulary learning (the heart of communicative competence) is not a major focus in CLT thus very minimal time is spent for it in language class, in which doesn't guarantee the detailed learning. In this case, e-learning provides the solution where intentional vocabulary teaching is applicable with various interactive online tools and learner's progress could be easily monitored. More importantly, e-learning brings the native English environment closer to learners as they don't get enough exposure to the language in ESL environments [7]. The synchronous (forum discussion, chat, etc) and asynchronous (quiz, assignments, etc) activities provides learners some alternatives in which they could enhance their classroom learning with additional tools. This is very helpful to learners as teachers do not have enough time for individual attention in limited class period. On the other hand, e-learning offers teachers an array of choices on easily adaptable learning materials to suit their learner's level and language needs. In cases of large class sizes (about 40-45 students per class), integration of e-learning in CLT is a platform for individualized learning. Even though there are some drawbacks such as learner's computer knowledge, facilities, accessibility and connectivity, the advantages of e-learning certainly outweigh them.

The Role of Teacher Autonomy in Integrating E-Learning

Implementation of e-learning in language learning created challenges to teachers as they now need to organize teaching activities in a computer based environment and at the same time guide student's in self-study [8]. Table 1 highlights the current multi-role of a teacher in a learner-centred classroom (as CLT approach is implemented in the target context) which demands teacher's knowledge in various aspects of language learning. Therefore, teachers themselves

should become autonomous language learners [9], [10], [11] to promote learner autonomy and language learning among learners.

Table 1: Changes in student and teacher roles in teacher-centred and learner-centred learning environments resulting from ICT integration

Learning environments	
Teacher-centred	Learner-centred
Student role <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passive recipient of information • Reproduces knowledge • Learns as a solitary activity 	Student role <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active participant in the learning process • Produces and shares knowledge, participate at times as expert
Teacher role <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge transmitter, primary source of information, content expert and source of all answers. • Controls and directs all aspects of learning 	Teacher role <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Learning facilitator, collaborator, coach, mentor, knowledge navigator and co-learner ✓ Gives students more options and responsibilities for their own learning

(adapted from Anderson, 2005 [12])

Multi-dimensional views have emerged in regards to teacher autonomy as researchers perceive it from different insights. Teacher autonomy often defined as the perception that teachers have regarding whether they control themselves and their work environment [13], [14]. With the control, they have the freedom to prescribe the best treatment for students [15]. This definition seems to suit learner autonomy as the learner decides on his/her own on what to learn without any influence of external factors. Contrastively, teachers could not take full control of their teaching as they have to obey certain conditions, superiors and syllabi. How could teachers take control if they're working in an organization which limits their decision making? It is obviously impractical in real context of teaching.

In contrast, [9] define teacher autonomy as teacher's capacity to engage in self-directed learning, which leads to their professional development [16] in formal educational contexts. He further demonstrated that autonomous teachers show greater work satisfaction, high degree of professionalism and less stress. As many of the definitions state no relation to learners, [17] has defined it more holistically; the capacity of teachers in managing knowledge, skills and attitudes in regards to the learner's language acquisition as the aim of teacher autonomy is to serve the learners' pedagogical needs. However, [18] view is contrary with [9] where he claimed that teacher autonomy is the teacher's responsibility to develop learner autonomy in class. Teacher autonomy is willingness to venture into the unknown to enable oneself deal with complexity of pedagogical practices in the institution [19] and empower him/herself as a teacher [20]. Once the teacher has acquired autonomy, he or she is qualified and able to promote learner autonomy.

With the various definitions and less consensus over its meaning and significance [21], [22], the term teacher autonomy still remain opaque [18], [19] and demands further clarification. However, in general, all the above mentioned definitions show the importance of teacher autonomy as it drives dynamic and on-going career spanning professional development. Thus, for the purpose of discussion in this paper, teacher autonomy is defined as the ability and willingness to take responsibility for developing appropriate skills, knowledge and attitude to foster self-directed professional development [23], [24], [25], [26] to integrate e-learning successfully in Communicative English teaching and learning.

Challenges in Developing Teacher Autonomy for Integration of E-Learning

In relation to e-learning, Table 2 shows the four overarching goals to incorporate technology in language learning which was developed for The Framework of TESOL Technology Standard for Language Teachers [27], [28], [29]. The TESOL standards demonstrate the importance of technology in language teaching and learning and the teachers' vital role in the implementation, which is the focus of present discussion.

Table 2: The Framework of TESOL Technology Standard for Language Teachers

GOALS	
1	Language teachers acquire and maintain foundational knowledge and skills in technology for professional purposes.
2	Language teachers integrate pedagogical knowledge and skills with technology to enhance language teaching and learning.
3	Language teachers apply technology in record-keeping, feedback & assessment.
4	Language teachers use technology to improve communication, collaboration & efficiency

Looking at the goals, language teachers now should equip themselves with sufficient knowledge and skills about the use of technology in teaching. It seems that teachers have no reason not to acquire the knowledge if they wish to address themselves as language teachers in the world of e-learning.

The unprecedented opportunities of implementing e-learning are not without challenges [30]. First of all, every individual teacher is different in their own way. Their perception and attitude towards e-learning differ according to their teaching preferences. Therefore, not all teachers are ready to accept the innovations in language teaching. Most teachers especially the experts are very convenient with the conventional teaching methods. As mentioned by [22], some teachers in the target context are reluctant to adopt the changes as they are in the 'comfort zone' and feel threatened by having to move from the role of teacher to facilitator or mentor (Table 1). It seems to be a hard work for them to change their perception and accept transformations in language teaching. Thus, cultural [3] and psychological changes are needed in this context as e-learning can only be successfully achieved with teachers' positive attitude [17].

Second, shallow knowledge of e-learning integration limits the effective implementation. Teachers may assume that they incorporate e-learning but actually not. Effective integration of e-learning should be planned well with e-pedagogical, content and technical knowledge. Studies have shown that 'when', 'how' and 'why' are the three most important notions in deciding whether e-learning is providing advantage or disadvantage in a particular pedagogical setting. Looking back to the teachers in the context, this seems to be questionable as there is hardly any effort or time spent on improving their knowledge of e-learning pedagogy. Lack of teacher autonomy, highly limits their ability to make appropriate decisions.

Next, the fear of technology use among language teachers is an aspect which could be a barrier for successful development of teacher autonomy for e-learning integration. As we know, dealing with technology needs thorough preparation, expertise and problem solving skills. Anything could go wrong at any time, even with careful preparation. The Skills Pyramid Framework [31] has proposed that teachers should possess basic competencies (basic ICT competence, specific

technical competence and ability to deal with constraints and possibilities of the medium which are at the lowest level of the pyramid) in order to integrate e-learning. In this case, some lecturers lack courage to face the risks. They prefer to avoid technology or e-learning wherever possible rather than challenging themselves to learn about it. From my experience of working in the context, lack of self-initiative is the key aspect which prevent them from using e-learning. Even though they are well aware of the enormous benefits of e-learning, they simply choose not to try it out as they fear of the risks which is due to lack of ICT skills [32].

Time constraint is another challenge in developing teacher autonomy in e-learning. Innovations in language teaching with e-learning requires lots of time, energy, preparation and overtime work [10]. Teachers are overwhelmed with many additional duties (including bureaucratic tasks) besides teaching. These 'non-teaching' tasks overload teachers and limit their capacity and capability to think about effective materials for their e-learning teaching practices. I. Barbosa [20] pointed out that school cultures, routine, personal histories, political contexts may often affect teacher's commitment in their professional development.

Despite, the lack of technical support in the institution is another challenge. Lecturers have to develop their e-teaching skills without sufficient institutional support [33]. The language lecturers have to solely depend on the institution's IT officers to rectify minor problems, which could be solved easily if only they have basic knowledge of computer skills. The enthusiasm of using e-learning would depreciate if lack adequate support and training from institution [32]. With my five years of teaching experience in the context, I consider the technical equipment available is sufficient for initiating e-learning integration, but less attention is paid to train and develop lecturer's technical knowledge.

On the other hand, teacher autonomy might be considered as a problem as it foster isolation and promote staleness. With the luxury to work alone, teachers might feel unappreciated as their work is unknown. Looking at this perspective and the claim of about 27 years back, it is no more relevant as the currently available online tools connect people together from all over the world. An important point to note here is teachers do not only work alone by having teacher autonomy, but even without it. To summarize, teacher's role is critical in pursuing innovation in the application of e-learning. However, the personal preferences, attitude and tight accountability structures act to constrain the willingness to engage with change and push teachers towards a culture of innovation aversion.

Pedagogical Implementations

Autonomy of teachers is critical to any initiative's implementation and success [34]. As e-learning is capable of providing a range of learning options, extensive efforts should be undertaken to maximize teacher autonomy which would help to promote learner autonomy. [9] argued that genuinely successful teachers have always been autonomous in regard of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching. Looking back to the country's report as mentioned earlier, it had highlighted ICT skills, knowledge worker (p.4) and individual initiative (p.25) are crucial in determining successful implementation of e-learning.

The successful integration of e-learning in language teaching begins with the teacher becoming familiar with computing infrastructure [35]. For that, teachers should devote sufficient time and effort to equip themselves with the relevant knowledge and experience. Regardless of any external force, teachers should come forward voluntarily to adapt to the innovations in language teaching for the benefit of their learners. Autonomy should be earned, not given [36]. By

increasing knowledge and expertise in using e-learning tools in teaching, teachers could build their autonomy.

Teachers should be educated on various aspects of e-learning such as effective use of virtual learning environment, designing online materials, developing e-content and making use of language learning websites. [37] argued that in the midst of initiating e-learning implementation, it should not only focus teaching how to prepare slides, webpages and etc. but also on teachers' conception of learning which has a major influence on the development of teaching strategies. Without knowing and understanding the true potential of e-learning in language teaching, teachers could not integrate it effectively. Teachers should be enlightened on the impact of e-learning to learners, its benefits as well as drawbacks, so they could evaluate its value themselves in language teaching. Exposing teachers to examples of language teaching with effective integration of e-learning and conventional teaching method for the same lesson would probably provide them the awareness. By changing teacher perception to accept innovations in language teaching, efforts on increasing teacher autonomy in e-learning could be more focused.

Studies have proven that developing digital portfolios gives teachers a meaningful context to learn how to integrate technology in language learning [38], [39], [40]. This seems to be an effective way to develop teacher autonomy in e-learning implementation as teachers would explore a variety of e-learning materials to produce their own portfolio, knowing that material development is an important part of being effective teacher [41]. In the midst of exploring, they would encounter various technical problems and errors which could at the same time enhance their technical knowledge for pedagogical implementation. These trial and error sessions would make teachers to become more autonomous as they experience the learning themselves rather than an instructor helping them to be away from mistakes.

Apart from that, teachers should be encouraged to attend conferences related to e-learning or ICT in language teaching. As institutions could not effort to provide all necessary current information on e-learning for language teaching, attending e-learning symposiums, ICT for language learning conferences, International Academic Conference on Education, Teaching and E-learning (*IAC-ETeL*) and etc. would help to widen lecturers' existing knowledge on current development and resources in language teaching. Furthermore, it extends the opportunities to meet and share knowledge with delegates from various institutions and build network for future pedagogical needs. This valuable experience would also bring many e-learning related research study links (such as CALICO, ReCALL, TOJDEL, AJSS journals) to their attention for self-development (tools to evaluate their current practices of e-learning). Consequently, the active participation in the conferences would enable teachers to share experiences with colleagues in their own institution and enhance their autonomy in integrating e-learning effectively for language teaching.

Besides, institutional or collateral support [35], [42] to implement e-learning is crucial to build teacher autonomy. [43] suggested that teachers need more autonomy in deciding how to reach a goal when successful goal attainment is highly unpredictable. In this case the administrators should be supportive of teacher's efforts. According to [44], it is the school system that provides a foundation for each country's future development of intellectual contributions and teacher's competence in information technology [45] is key to achieve pedagogical and institutional goals. In relation to that, institutions should play its role in educating teachers and increasing teacher autonomy by providing necessary training on e-learning and technical courses. Effective training and continuous support for teachers [46], [47] will boost teacher autonomy in independent learning. In addition to pedagogical and content knowledge, instructor technical competence is one of the key factors in determining successful implementation of e-learning

[48]. Realising the importance of training for e-learning, [49] has proposed to extend TAM (Figure 1) by including three institutional related variables: facilitating conditions, training and institutional technical support. By combining the institutional training and existing pedagogical knowledge and teaching experience, teachers are able to raise their autonomy and would be capable of producing better e-learning materials.

In relation to that, space for “communal warmth” [33] is regarded as essential where teachers can share experiences, tips, and support to gain knowledge and increase confidence in e-learning integration for language teaching. For example, teachers who are enthusiastic in e-learning form a small group to initiate the effort. In the long term, hopefully more and more teachers would join the group as there is ‘positive pressure’ to update them with current teaching practices. To initiate the effort, I have compiled the materials and list of e-learning and language learning related websites which I learned throughout my Masters study to be shared with the teachers in the context. This knowledge sharing would help them to explore new ideas in which give impact to the way the teachers teach language. This collaborative learning is highly anticipated to increase teacher autonomy and indirectly foster interactive professionalism [10]. To further increase teacher autonomy, teachers could also be rewarded intrinsically for their effort on e-learning integration as it is proven to be more powerful than extrinsic ones to motivate them [14].

Language teachers should be introduced to ways of evaluating and adapting to new technologies and resources. As there are numerous online materials for language learning, teachers should be able to choose the most relevant and suitable ones for their learners. According to [51], language teachers today should be able to choose, use and refuse technology in some instances for their learners. Guidelines such as CALL software evaluation framework [52], [53], criteria for CALL appropriateness [54] can be of help to teachers in evaluating the online language learning materials. It would be better if workshops are organized in the institution to demonstrate the effective use and create platform for teachers to critique and suggest other variables to add or substitute those in the frameworks to suit the context. This would help to develop teacher’s critical thinking which leads to teacher autonomy.

Conclusion

Personal development is the fundamental aspect in increasing teacher autonomy and becoming techno literate to facilitate e-learning in English language teaching and learning processes. As the demand for technology savvy teachers is increasing for successful e-learning integration, language teachers/lecturers should be assisted in understanding the value of teacher autonomy in convincing way. E-learning or technology can never replace a teacher, thus teacher autonomy is worth given sufficient attention for teachers to successfully integrate it. Though the effectiveness of conventional teaching methods without the integration of e-learning or technology is undeniable, it is not sufficient for the digital learners in the current learning environment, especially for Communicative English syllabi. So, the integration is an added value to the pedagogy and serves the need of digital learners. The competency of pedagogical regulation is crucial for all teachers in any form of teaching, either face to face or computer assisted learning. Teacher’s expert knowledge is needed to provide timely assistance to assist the learners’ language development. With this notion, it is crystal clear that teacher autonomy is pivotal in promoting e-learning for innovations in English language teaching and learning. By providing the necessary support mentioned above and improving connectivity and accessibility, the institution can hope for increased teacher autonomy in integrating e-learning in language lessons.

Unlike the role of books in language learning, integration of e-learning or technology is certainly debated or researched, proving there are advantages and disadvantages. Thus, it is crucial to increase teacher autonomy by constantly acquiring sufficient knowledge and skills in order to make appropriate decisions (when, why and how) in integrating e-learning to serve learner's needs. When teacher autonomy increases, teacher's experience, expertise, excellence, empowerment and professionalism will increase concurrently. Therefore e-learning could be implemented effectively to enhance learner's proficiency and competency in English.

To answer the question that this paper dealt with, though attention is given and action has been taken, but they are still insufficient to build teacher's autonomy for successful integration of e-learning in the target context.

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