Integrating ICT into EFL Context: The Case of the Public Education in Iraq

Inst: Hadher Hussein Abbood   Muhammad Abdul Razaq Ismel

University of Samarra

College of Education / English Department

Abstract:

English language learning is one of the most important educational programs of study in the world today. For trading, commerce and investment, English is main language companies and organisations communicate in; therefore having a proficiency or knowledge is fundamental. Using Integrating Communicate Teaching to enhance English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in the digital age, it is also important to have a good working knowledge of using computers; especially the online media for communication purposes. Language acquisition is important, especially in Iraq; a war-torn middle-eastern country that originally had the reputation for having a supportive and proud education. Before the early 1990s, the education system produced the lowest illiteracy rate in the Middle-East and North Africa region (MENA). The government invested highly to ensure all of the Iraqi citizens were able to read and write. In recent times, however, the country is plagued by many concerns that are slowly being addressed but some basic amenities and infrastructure are still to be resolved. This essay explored teaching EFL learning and the benefits it presents with the integration of ICT into today's modern digital society, with specific focus on the Iraqi education system. This essay has produced recommendations alongside other organisations to support the Iraqi Ministry of Education with implementing and progressing with these recommendations to improve the country's literacy rates.

Keywords

ICT, Iraq, EFL, Public Education

Introduction and Background

Integrating ICT into an EFL context is a relatively new concept; its use has been more important in the past 10 years or so. The focus of this essay is to look at how ICT can

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help enhance EFL teaching and look at how the Iraqi education system is introducing it into facilities of higher education namely in universities. English as a foreign language is the process of non-native speakers, learning a basic fluency of the language, enough for them to communicate effectively with native English speakers. This opens up the prospects for candidates to conduct business with western employers/investors and potentially grow their career progression much more quickly. English as a foreign language (EFL) has been developed and implemented into many countries across the world. The need for non-native speakers to learn English as it is used as the international language for business, is more important than ever. This would also complement the fact that ICT is also incorporated to make learning more interactive. There are many renowned organisations that deliver and support the program of EFL with ICT in many non-native English speaking countries. In the case of the Iraqi education system, which is the focus for this essay, organisations such as British Council and AMIDEAST provide English language courses for non-native speakers.

The country of study for this essay is Iraq;a Middle-Eastern country bordered by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Iran and Kuwait. The population consists mainly of Arabs, the main native languages spoken are Arabic and Kurdish. The official religion for the country is Islam. Iraq is an oil rich country that has been the target of western society through numerous different wars such as the Gulf War and the Iraq War. These wars have negatively influenced many different sectors such as infrastructure, culture, tourism, economic-stability and education. The education

system was massively impacted from the 1990s due to the Gulf War and then the early 2000s from the Iraq War.

Iraq is in favour of providing a high standard of education to all people of Arab or non-Arab nationalities. Before the early 1990s, Iraq made some pioneering efforts to education. Between the years 1978 and 1981, there was an economic boom and Iraq was able to develop its education, to make the country in 1985 free of illiteracy (UNESCO, 2000). As a result of this drive to build up national literacy, all people in Iraq were able to read and write in Arabic; this was due to the state policy to provide free education and eliminate illiteracy (Issa & Jamil, 2010). During the 1970s to the 1980s, education was free throughout its different levels: elementary, secondary and university, and commitment to the eradication of illiteracy (Issa & Jamil, 2010). In terms of basic education, Iraq was one of the best providers for equality and access to education in comparison with other Middle-Eastern countries. Up to the early 1980s, Iraq's educational system was considered one of the best in the Middle East and highly praised throughout (Shlash, et al., 2008). Before the Gulf war in 1990, the education system in Iraq was generally agreed upon that it was one of the best in the region in addressing both access and equality; however, this began to decline due to the numerous conflicts and economic sanctions (Qumri, 2009). This over the past few decades has changed due to the onset of war. Between 1990 and 2010, the Iraqi government had the policy of establishing a university in each governorate and thus created the foundation of 14 new universities (The Current Status and Future Prospects for the Transformation and Reconstruction of the Higher Education System in Iraq, 2005). The country is trying to replicate the previous higher standard of education that it held in such high regard. Based on the information here, Iraq is still keen on providing out of the wealth of oil to support its citizens and give them the

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education they can use for the future. Therefore focusing on an EFL in ICT context will show how the country can provide modern teaching methods in a university setting.

The current situation is far from improving in the Iraqi education system; this is mainly due to the many troubling years of conflict that the country has had to endure. Many of the communities around Iraq are without a habitable school building for teaching to take place. The basic needs to be provided by a school are limited; the environment for education to be taught is poor. According to Blais; schools are poorly maintained with unclean toilets and no access to drinking water. There are insufficient numbers of classrooms; they have no windows and no heating, and lack chairs and tables. Toilets are often dirty and clogged, libraries and computer equipment are inexistent. The poor state of school infrastructure, particularly in primary education, is an important factor in explaining the high dropout rate (Blais, 2010). Also it has been found that due to the conflict and unstable nature of the country in the current climate; many qualified teachers have left the country. As a result there is a national shortage of teachers in Iraq and other people have had to attempt to fill the gap. This of course means that there is no motivation for students to attend schools or universities due to the lack of basic needs of a building with basic facilities and teachers that can teach. So even in relation to ICT in EFL teaching context, this need can't be met at this current moment of writing, due to the lack of basic teaching facilities. Computer-related infrastructure would consist of hardware such as telephone lines, fibre optic cables, servers and computers. All of these different pieces of equipment require electricity to function first of all; however; in Iraq over 10 years since the war, there

has been a mass shortage of electricity due to poorly maintained infrastructure and lack of electricity sources. According to the BBC, this is one of the most common scenes across Iraq's urban landscapes wich seems to reflect much of what is wrong with the country's electricity sector - crumbling infrastructure, unreliable services, and a tangled web of bureaucracy and corruption. The country's electrical problems have been a major issue since the end of the war in 2003. The Iraqi government will need to invest in basic infrastructure, utilities and education if they want to secure a better future for their citizens.

ICT in EFL Context – Enhancing Learning

Traditional English as Foreign language teaching would rely on paper-based dictionaries and hard-copy textbooks as well as delivery from a suitably qualified teacher or lecturer. These traditional teaching methods work well however in the modern digital age of social media and technology to support and help delivery of EFL teaching; it's beneficial to gain support at times outside of the classroom using the latest teaching methods. ICT makes the field more up-to-date and interactive without relying solely on the input from the teacher.

Early uses of ICT in ESL/EFL pedagogy were either for drilling of language features or as a respite from the classroom for teachers. The other use of ICT in ESL/EFL was for fun activities,peripheral to the main goals of the language classroom (Murray, 2008). Students can work more independently and self-support themselves using the latest software and online platforms to help with language acquisition and proficiency. Interactive teaching methods would greatly help the standard of education in Iraq improve and with careful implementation develop to standards of the western world. It is important that any developments in ICT software for EFL have adequately knowledgeable and experienced input to ensure their accuracy. New programs have

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been developed and created over the past 20 or so years; the foundations for EFL learning have been implemented and ways to make them more interactive and supportive have been developed even towards modern day. Murray (2008) has researched into what stimulants learners need and how they progress. Students need: feedback that is specific and learner controlled; to be challenged and stretched with material that gradually increases their critical thinking; social interaction; the ability to link previous knowledge with new knowledge; to be supported to ensure help is available when they need it; and finally they need an environment that stimulates but does not create anxiety. EFL software needs to support the students not to discourage them from using it. Murray argues that ICT takes part of the role of the teacher as it is designed to specifically teach language (ibid). Software programs from the British Council and Cambridge ESOL are designed to support the basics of English language acquisition without the reliance on the teacher. Online support and guidance is available from qualified English teachers to support with any specific needs or requirements. As ICT develops the teaching of EFL; more interactive methods will become available to utilise to make language learning more effective and tailored to individual needs.

Most of today's generation are ICT savvy and in the era of the digital age it is important to have these crucial skills to use in employment and business. Therefore, incorporating this type of technology into EFL teaching would enhance and encourage students to learn. This would give them both language acquisition skills and technological skills to use for the future in employment and/or business.Once computer systems were implemented in education, language teachers have been in the forefront of using such technologies to facilitate language learning and teaching

process. In the 21st century with the widespread use and application of ICT in education, the teachers' role in using ICT has been shifted from being the mere main knowledge providers to facilitators of learning languages via ICT (Rahimi, 2010).Given that English has become one of the most common used languages of the world, and the universal language of communication, all people around the world have to learn this language. The pace of life has been accelerated due to advances in technology, and the world hasbecome one small village. Therefore, a lot has happened in the way people communicate and get in touch with each other. Thus springs the need for learning English which is a worldwide language. Due to the various bilateral relations between the Arab world and the West, there is an urgent need to learn English (Mahmoud, 2015). In Iraq, there is limited access to qualified educators; having ICT or interactive learning materials would be beneficial to learning EFL. Students would still need some contact with qualified EFL teachers for topics such as reading and writing, where the support can be tailored towards individual needs. But for topics such as pronunciation, speaking and listening, students can use online interactive materials from social media websites and YouTube. This would allow students to work on specific topics online; they can repeat and watch at any-time. A vision of the future of English language teaching and applied linguistics needs to be informed by the contributions of all three of the perspectives. All agree that technology is a force worthy of consideration, whether one wishes to focus on the technological potential, to examine pragmatic technology use, or to criticize both (Chapelle, 2003).Technology is used to enhance everyday activities and EFL is no exception. EFL enhances learning through social media to communicate with other students and

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teachers to develop, progress and achieve. The use of social media as a communication and sharing service is the most convenient way to learn and practice English. Students can ask for advice and support in developing their understanding and meaning of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Of course, having physical access to a computer and the Internet only opens the door to opportunities for participating in English language speech communities that may be beneficial for language development (Chapelle, 2003).For spelling there are many online games through social media that can develop and improve written language skills. Most Iraqis would need to be trained to become ICT proficient. UNESCO found that the country's ICT facilities and applications are very weak; most teachers have either very little or no ICT literacy at all, and thus are ill-suited to play their role to help create a new generation of ICT literate students. Delivering ICT in education system in Iraq will help overcome this problem by fostering greater ICT literacy among students, teachers, school principals, and Ministry of Education (MOE) staff. This renewal of Iraq's educational system is vital because Iraqi youth will determine their country's future (UNESCO, 2016).

Modern EFL teachers will use interactive computing systems because the field of foreign language education has always been in the forefront of the use of technology to facilitate the language education process (Lafford and Lafford, 1997). Furthermore, language teachers have identified countless uses of ICT in the language class, including the use of the web as a tool for obtaining information, project writing, communication among a group of students through e-mail or an online chat-room, web-based course programs and publishing project work (Lee, 2000; Alvine,2000;

Lee, 2003). However, the integration of ICT into delivery has been a major test for every teacher because they are expected to be capable of exploiting the extensive capabilities of ICT to create more effective teaching and learning activities. Teaching needs to ensure EFL teachers are up-to-date with the latest operating systems and programs available to use in the classroom. If we have any hope of permitting imminent language teachers to use ICT tools in ways that will capture new learning styles and create pathways for learners living in a digital era, then the institutions need to ensure full backing of equipment and resources.

In English or any language for that matter it is important to practice the skills learnt in the classroom. Some people need English for career considerations, and those seeking employment look at English language (EL) as their only way to travel around the world and get involved in the Western societies so they can have better future lives. In a nutshell, English is the very language of our time, so learning it helps Arab countries keep a place with their time (Mahmoud, 2015). It is important for students to use the language skills with each other to support development; using language in a social setting is a good way to communicate. Most English teachers would agree that their students need to practice using English outside the classroom if they are to increase their communicative competence, but "practice" can consist of many different types of English language use (Chapelle, 2003).In the modern digital age, most students have some form of mobile device that can be applied to learning using online technology. Mobile devices can be easily utilised for language applications to help with learning the skills in the classroom. But as discussed by Chapelle (2003) it is difficult to estimate the extent to which English learners around the world have access to and take advantage of such English-using speech communities on the Internet. Once the EFL students have Internet access it is

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important to take advantage of this and use it to communicate on the move. In reference to earlier; it is important to develop social skills and awareness with EFL; therefore, using mobile devices in a social setting would help students to interact with each other face to face and virtually using the support they need.

ICT integration in EFL would be useful for the Iraqi education system as the country needs to modernise and expand after the war. This would make EFL learning more appealing to students that want to become literate. The system is available at the students' convenience to support them outside of the classroom. In the case of Iraq it is useful to note that some communities are remote and away from the major population centres of Baghdad and Basra; therefore having some form of ICT infrastructure with a form of communication device would be beneficial to the local community. The ICT equipment would be preinstalled with the relevant language learning software as well as a form of internet access and it would allow students to develop their literacy without travelling across the remoteness of the desert. In the case of Iraq in relation to online technology, the communications and media commission need to ensure that the mobile providers have internet capabilities installed with wireless and mobile access to ensure social media and online applications can be accessed remotely.

Conclusion

Integrating ICT into EFL is a modern form of developing teaching and learning towards the future. It is important for students to gain proficiency with English as a language that can be used in commerce and business. It is important in the country of Iraq to develop the trading prospects due to the decades of war, therefore developing

the literacy rates through EFL would increase the fortunes of the country's economy. ICT makes the learning form contemporary with the rest of the world and in today's digital age it is important to have computer knowledge to use in business or employment. Combining the two entities would quickly improve the education system in Iraq to even higher standards than the previous successes made before the war. Interactive and technological advances in teaching have made ICT a more engaging platform to learn with. The variety of different applications and software that are orientated towards EFL are vast; students can use different methods to help their individual learning rather than solely relying on a teacher.

In the case of Iraq; integrating ICT into EFL still needs some development before it can be effectively introduced. The education system is still in need of reform and investment by the government to replace the facilities that have been lost during war. The system needs to be built back up to the previous standards first before any new teaching methods commence. After the education has been rebuilt and adequate resources are in-place then integrating ICT into EFL teaching can take place. But to ensure its effectiveness and improvement for literacy it is important to have previous system's foundations in place then introduce it. The final section presents recommendations from this essay to support the delivery of ICT integration into EFL in Iraqi public education.

Recommendations for Integrating ICT into EFL in Iraq

Using interactive technology in Iraq would need some fundamental issues to be addressed first before integration into English language learning. It is important to have all the hardware, software and infrastructure in place to enable effective ICT learning to take place. Even before that the ministry of education needs to re-build the

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foundations of the education system to enable more modern practices to be introduced. As it has been referencedearlier; Iraq produced the most successful education system in the MENA region to reducing illiteracy rates before the conflicts already mentioned. The government committed to this through funding and development of the education system previously they need to emulate this from before like during the 1980s.

Firstly the issues of facilities and teachers needs to be addressed. There is a shortage of qualified professionals able to teach English and as a result unqualified people are being allowed in. The universities need to ensure that prior to any development in ICT integration to EFL; they have adequate staffing available of professionals that are experienced and qualified enough to deliver language programs to Iraqi students. Once Iraqi intuitions have adequate staffing to deliver EFL programs, they need to provide basic resources. Fundamental resources for EFL students need to firstly consist of a hardcopy dictionary and writing books to store class work. But as stated earlier some institutions need major structural work to ensure they can provide an environment suitable for teaching. The Iraq and Gulf Wars caused lots of structural damage to buildings that need fixing – utility lines such as water, and electricity need to be reinstated; and infrastructure such as paved roads needs to encourage students to study at an Iraqi institution. The primary resource for all computers is of course electricity; the BBC found that it is one of the most common scenes across Iraq's urban landscapes and seems to reflect much of what is wrong with the country's electricity sector - crumbling infrastructure, unreliable services, and a tangled web of bureaucracy and corruption (BBC, 2013).According to 2008 data, Iraq needs about 4,731 new schools and 70% of existing buildings must be renovated to meet quality

standards. As for higher education, 84% of facilities were either burned, looted or destroyed, and only 40% of destroyed buildings were rebuilt (Blais, 2010).

These recommendations are general findings that would apply to any discipline of study in Iraqi education. A finding that has been found from this essay, is to ensure that before the Iraqi Ministry of Education starts implementing the ICT into the curriculums; they adequately train staff who may not be familiar with the protocol and to ensure that the university has the infrastructure in-place. The teachers need to be regularly trained to ensure they are up-to-date with the latest teaching materials that are used in collaboration with ICT. There are many providers and software companies that offer interactive teaching aids that can be used.

Teachers need to be trained adequately to adopt ICT into their planning and lessons. Lessons need to be uploaded to whichever online platform the university decides to use and they need training to use it. Other interactive methods that use ICT such as interactive learning games need to be implemented in the classroom. In developing countries; teachers need to be influenced and guided by teachers from westernised countries where the technology is widely used and available. These software programs have capabilities for tracking, assessment, resources and even independent learning aids. Teaching can have a demanding workload and the emphasis is always going to be on results and data; therefore the software needs to demonstrate how this can statistically improve the success rate and decrease the workload to ensure teachers attitudes are influenced towards ICT integration. Teachers need convincing that it is a learning aid and will enhance their teaching strategies; this will only happen with adequately planned strategies from the university. A recommendation for this would be to introduce a timescale that introduces computing systems gradually and slowly into the teaching environment. Training should be provided first to ensure all teaching

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staff are up-to-date with the latest software and delivery methods. Then once the teaching staff come to a consensus about their implementation of ICT into their programs specifically EFL for this essay; then the university can start purchasing hardware, software and online platforms to utilise. Teacher competence and commitment is crucial for countries, like Saudi Arabia [similar culture to Iraq], that are seeking to promote educational improvement through ICT (Al-Maini, 2008). Using ICT would help Iraq become competitive with other MENA countries adopting interactive practices using ICT.

The university needs to ensure all the hardware and systems are up to date with the latest software and technology to be suitable to use with today's online media. Without this vital piece of infrastructure; ICT in EFL learning will not be as effective and this can cause more problems rather than providing an effective solution. The role of the teaching staff is ultimately to ensure each student leaves with the skills to be literate in English as an aim of joining the university course. Therefore a deciding factor is whether or not ICT in EFL will affect the success rate; this factor needs to be determined. A recommendation is that if the university wants to go ahead and develop EFL software to use in-house; then they need to invest and install a fast and efficient wireless network as a minimum requirement. They also need to ensure the hardware can handle a large amount of data efficiently and effectively; otherwise they need to upgrade this. The hardware needs to be up-to-date as services and software are constantly upgrading; some older computing technology may not have the capability to work with upgraded software. Before any new program of mobile learning is introduced it needs to be trialled and tested with the hardware system available; then an evaluation of what the requirements are should be justified. Overall introducing

ICT needs to be cost effective to the university; therefore, upgrading the infrastructure and training staff effectively should yield better results and higher influxes of students to the universities providing interactive teaching for all their courses.

Therefore if a university wants to stay competitive in fast growing educational system of the developed world; a recommendation would be for the adopting university to put in a realistic timescale to introducing ICT systems with capable online facilities. The development of computer technology in an institutional setting requires comprehensive strategic and implementation plans (Al-adwan & Smedley, 2012). If the university is seen to be up-to-date with modern teaching methods; then in today's digital age that could result in students that are likely to study there.

Adoption of ICT systems across all programs can be an important decision for the university. There needs to be feedback regarding the use and development of the technology after its introduction or its increased use if partially used already. The success rate of the courses on offer needs to be affected positively with higher statistical results.

UNESCO produced a report to find out the current status of the Iraqi Education system. The report summarised the main issues, needs and priorities that need to be addressed as soon as possible. The report commented on the destruction of the infrastructure of the higher education system and now lacking a reliable source of electricity and potable water.

The unstable and dangerous environment for normal academic activity – 48 academics have been assassinated since 2003 and many are under daily threat. This has served to demotivate academics and many have left the country. The quality of higher education has been steadily deteriorating since the imposition of authoraritian rule in Iraq. This has been exacerbated by a sequence of wars first with Iran, the Gulf

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war and now the invasion of 2003 with sanctions compounding the problems; it is estimated that 30-40% of the best trained professors have emigrated since 1990; its research centres have suffered from isolation by the international academic community. Only about a third of the academic staff hold doctoral degrees; this together with long periods of isolation make the retraining of staff to international standards an urgent priority. There is a need to equip more than 2,000 scientific laboratories and for 30,000 computers; libraries are in a poor condition and are in urgent need of restocking with new books and journals in both Arabic and English; journals in electronic format are required (UNESCO, 2005).

A recommendation to the Iraqi Ministry of High Education is that they should focus their attention on firstly infrastructure, and the teacher shortage. Then direct their attention to curriculum development and university funding. These recommendations to the education system as a whole would benefit the citizens, then a specific focus on ICT in EFL teaching would benefit language acquisition. It is important to note that the international language of business is conducted in English. In a country that has struggling economy due to the aftermath of war, it is crucial for Iraq's citizens to have some form of education and communication they can use to conduct business with other foreign countries. If Iraq commits to re-developing its education to the system they implemented before the years of conflict, then they will have one of the best education systems in the MENA region.

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