

THE ROLE OF THE ARABIC LANGUAGE TEACHER DURING THE ERA OF TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

One of the issues surrounding the use of computers in language learning is that of its ultimate role. Will the computer eventually replace the language teacher or will it be used as a supplement by the teacher? Whatever the final outcome, Chute, Thompson, Hancock (1999) point out that "The role of the instructor or faculty member is changing. Internet-based distance learning enables the learning instructor to take a much more learner-centered approach". Those working at the teacher and student interface know that the computer will not replace the instructor as the human presence of a facilitator is essential to mediate, at least initially, between the student and the computer. Access to the Internet is an extra spin-off from the presence of computers in the classroom and can add enormous scope to material a foreign language teacher can draw on. One of the more important ways is that it can provide a wide and varied input of the target language. This paper highlights the changes that information technology imposes on the Arabic language teacher and raises the important question of how prepared and ready are they to accept these. By comparing the past and present role of the teacher of Arabic and the challenges inherent in the transition, it is hoped that the teachers of Arabic as a foreign language will be better prepared to cope with the new responsibility technological advances are forcing on them.

INTRODUCTION

If we look at the world today, we find that technology is advancing rapidly (Levy, 1997:1). Each day there is some new and important technological breakthrough. Education is one field, of many, that has been significantly affected by this. This raises the question of whether teachers are ready and prepared to accept and use the new technology in education. It seems that many teachers are not. Many show a tendency to be frightened of innovations and avoid them, preferring the safety of older, more familiar methods. However it must be recognized that whenever a teacher keeps himself away from trying new technology he is also depriving his students of the most up-to-date educational facilities.

universities and schools have to encourage and train their teachers to use the new technology in the classroom in order to make the learning process more efficacious, fun and enjoyable. Teachers need to know how to install software as well as other basic computer skills such as typing. Word processing techniques such as copying, pasting, saving and printing are essential skills these days. A teacher must have some experience of computers if he wishes his students to benefit from CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning). He must, himself, be prepared and trained to act as guide, advisor and facilitator.

The most up to date theories of language learning stress that the student is the center of learning. It is the job of the teacher to focus on the student rather than the student to focus on the teacher. The teacher must pay considerable attention to the student's abilities and needs in terms of learning. Before beginning any computer-assisted lesson the teacher has to be sure the students are sufficiently prepared to cope. He may need to explain (Scagnoli, 1998:1) the basic elements of a computer, what to expect from the particular software and how to use a mouse and keyboard (tab, shift, caps lock, control, alt, delete, print, copy, past, save). The modern language teacher (or any other for that matter) has to teach computer skills in addition to the traditional material.

Teachers themselves, even if computer literate, still need appropriate on-going training to keep abreast of the constant innovations. They need help with selecting the software appropriate for their classroom from the variety available. Teachers cannot be expected to buy software from the ordinary computer shops so need to be given information on what is available and guidelines and advice for making a choice. Teachers themselves need supervision and instruction in the many factors that need to be taken into consideration. Actually, as the cost of software is so high, universities and schools, or better still, departments of education should recommend the software and buy it or begin producing it themselves.

THE INTERNET

Chute, Thompson, Hancock (1999) point out that "The Internet is a network of networks". What do they mean by this? Initially, "the Internet was established in the 1970s as a packet network with multiple-path routing because the U.S. Department of Defense wanted to build networks that could withstand partial outages during national emergencies"

The Internet has come a long way from this early beginning but essentially holds the same format in that information is made available openly and without restrictions, and can be accessed by many different routes by anyone with access to a computer, regardless of location. The expansion in commercial use has brought many more websites and developments in software and these can be exploited for educational purposes.

The Internet can provide supplementary activities that often are much more fun than traditional lessons. Singhal (1996) notes that "Internet provides supplemental language activities which provide Student, with additional practice in specific areas of language learning. These include reading lists and composition, question, grammar, exercise, pronunciation close test, vocabulary exercise, etc so for student. Students can search the web for such sites, or teachers may recommend specific sites on the web."

The worldwide web immeasurably enriches the ways of learning a language. Foreign language teachers can exploit this in several ways, the most important of which is to give their students access to a wide input of the target language.

Leloup and Ponterio (1998) point out that, "Foreign language teachers used to strive to simulate the target language atmosphere in their classrooms, now they can connect directly to target language countries, culture, and speakers by using the Internet". They go on to say, "Computer technology has much to offer the foreign language teacher. Teachers can integrate new tools into the curriculum in meaningful ways."

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

If students are trained in accessing the world-wide web, is it possible that eventually the computer will replace the teacher or will the teacher remain an essential component in language learning?

Chute, Thompson, Hancock (1999) point out that, "The role of the instructor or faculty member is changing. Internet-based distance learning enables the learning instructor to take a much more learner-centered approach." They go on to say that "The advent of the Internet will not lead to the replacement of the instructors any more than did other technologies, but instructors will need to take on new roles." They go even further in suggesting that "Good instructors cannot be replaced by technology, but they can become better, by using technology."

The Internet does open the door to independence from the teacher as students are able to contact native speakers through the Internet, but this is the desired end to a process that requires the teacher's assistance.

Teachers need first to familiarize themselves, and then their students, with all aspects of computer use so that eventually the student is able to go it alone: how to open, use, and close it, how to browse the Internet, how to download language programs, how to send and receive E-mail, how to share their findings with colleagues, how to attach files, how to design web pages. The teacher must be able to offer all or any assistance that his students need, seeing his role as lightening the burden the new technology imposes.

Leloup and Ponterio (1998) point out that, "The Internet can also help the foreign language teacher further their professional development by keeping them abreast of theoretical, pedagogical, and technical developments in the field." They go on to say that "Internet use clearly supports the national standards for foreign language learning in the areas of communication, authentic language use, culture."

What specifically are the new roles that the instructor of a foreign or second language is taking on? "Basic keyboard competence seems to be the preliminary requirement before the teachers can embark on CALL." (Pilus 1995, pp. 8-9)

After the basics have been acquired, the teacher has to, first, familiarize himself with the software (Gaer, 1998:5) in order to anticipate the likely problems the learners will face before they can be left alone with confidence to use it at any time they want. Without this essential preparation on the part of the teacher the students may find the learning experience too frustrating and become de-motivated.

CHALLENGES FOR THE LANGUAGE TEACHER

New technological advances have challenged teachers of Arabic (and most others too). They have had to reassess their pedagogy in the light of this new technology and bring its benefits to their students. They have had to plan and design different learning strategies for their students that incorporate every new advance. As Hannafin and Peck (1999: 237), stress, careful planning is the key to effective lesson development. However, there has been, more often than not, a gap in communication between the teacher interfacing with the students and the software designers. Planning reduces or eliminates the number of blind alleys a designer follows and clarifies the design strategies to be implemented and yet the teacher has not always been consulted in the planning stage of software development.

Scagnolic (1988:1) makes the very important point that teachers do not want to become computer scientists. They would rather only know how a computer could help them in their every day business of teaching. As language teachers they already have sufficient responsibilities, which now include the extra task of training students to use both hardware and software. [Class, 1998 in Scagnolic, 1998: 1] Teachers must now train students in computer skills, which are as much part of the classroom as pencils and chalk.

WELL-TRAINED TEACHERS

The role of the teacher is still central, which might appear to contradict the equally true statement that the student's needs are the main focus. Only well-trained teachers are able to do the focusing! The teacher is still THE most important and vital element in language learning. The teacher must have an adequate understanding of the learner's needs, the

learning process AND be able to make full use of all the advanced technological tools available. In the not too distant future perhaps, all Arabic language teachers will have a good knowledge of Arabic computational linguistics but at the moment they need help. Equally, the software programmers need help in understanding the complexity of the Arabic language, which their efforts aim to assist the learning of.

"If technology is to be used by students, then teachers must possess the confidence, understanding, and skills to effectively incorporate technology into their teaching practices. This will only occur by providing adequate training and development of teachers." (Brand 1998, p 13)

Students groups	Cp 1	Cg 1	C p2	Cg 2
CALL hours per semester	30	7	20	3
Pre-test scores	149.3	140.4	143	142
Post-test scores	224	143.9	180	144
Pre-to-posttest gains	74.7 %	3.5 %	37 %	2 %

Table 1: Students achievements (differences between post-test and pre-test scores)

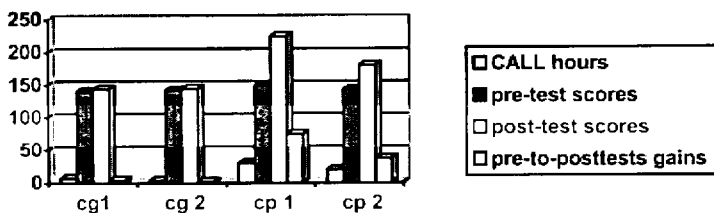


Figure 1: The graph of correlation between the CALL hours and students performance

The student's active participation in the learning process, through their involvement in task-based activities, is another important factor in making computer assisted learning attractive to students and teachers alike.

TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

A teacher needs to be given the time to practice and familiarize him or herself with the CALL software available. The whole phase of preparing the teacher would be speeded up if there were more opportunities for colleagues to observe or attend some classes held by a CALL trainer. At the moment teachers have to face the challenges in isolation. In order to assess the impact of the new technology on the learning process some form of evaluation of the student's progress needs to be made and, once again, teachers are left to develop these measuring tools themselves. We need to develop ways of sharing experiences between colleagues.

LANGUAGE GAMES

Games have proven to be an especially attractive way to encourage students to use the target language. As Schwartz (1988) points out: " Educational games can be effective tools when used in concert with others learning materials to reinforce work in grammar,

function, and usage". However, as teachers we often find that although the game produced by the software writer is fun, it is not tailor made for our class. At the moment there is no consultative body that allows the developers and uses of the software to communicate. If CALL is to expand and reach its full potential, the software companies producing the programs need to be made aware of their customers needs. At the moment all the software is aimed at the "general public". As CALL software is used more extensively in classrooms, there needs to be a means of feedback from the teaching interface back to the software developers. Language classrooms are a potentially global and large market for software and the commercial companies involved in production seem unaware of this.

DISCUSSION

The teacher has always had a central role in teaching Arabic as a foreign language and this has not changed because of the introduction of computer based learning techniques. However, even though he remains central, his role is changing.

If the full potential of CALL is to be reached attitudes towards the use of multimedia presentation should be monitored. Too often the teacher is left isolated in the classroom, facing the challenges of adapting to the new technology alone. Language teachers are trained to teach language, not to solve computer software problems. As the software was developed without its use in a classroom in mind, aimed rather at a very general "public", the teacher often finds the software is potentially useful if it were more tailor made for classroom use. When faced with this the teacher has, at the moment, nowhere to turn and this can lead to a negative attitude towards this new technology.

Lack of experience plus lack of support on the part of the teacher becomes an obstacle to the effective use of CALL in the classroom. As the potential benefits for the students are immense, any obstacles to its continued incorporation and expansion of use in the classroom need to be addressed.

In order for teachers to effectively meet their student's needs, they need more training and support in the use of computers and available software. There also needs to be a recognition by the software developers that teachers hold a wealth of experience that can assist the developers in producing ever more widely applicable programs, which in turn would assist their business goals.

At the moment there seems to be no channel of feedback from the users to the producers. Members of the general public buy the software and that is the end of the interest paid by the software companies. If they could be made to see the huge potential in classroom use for their products they might be more inclined to do some market research in this area. If this were to happen then the wealth of experience of teachers could be drawn on to the mutual benefit of all concerned, our students, the software companies and teachers themselves.

SUGGESTIONS

It is obvious to any teacher of Arabic that the software developers are unaware of several difficult aspects of the language that learners face, such as syntax, morphology, and grammar. There needs to be some way the software developers can access the experience of the classroom teachers. If a means of communication between teachers and developers could be activated, this would benefit all concerned, developers, teachers and students.

There needs to be much more awareness on the part of education ministries of the challenges that classroom teachers are facing as a result of this new technology. All too often teachers are isolated. They need much more support and back-up in re-training programs and seminars to share feedback. Teachers need to be trained in how to install software, how best to use it, and all the general skills related to the use of computers. This has to be an ongoing process as new technology is emerging all the time. We now have the potential to use voice recognition software but without some form of training we might tend to shy away from even trying it. If the teacher is encouraged to overcome the large obstacles that face any new user of CALL, he then is in a position to gain experience of its use. Ultimately it is well trained and well supported teachers that can offer the students the best advantage.

It may not be obvious to a software developer in his lab, or a school or college administrator in his office just how big a challenge this new technology is to a teacher in the classroom. The teacher has been left alone to cope and train himself as best he can. All the very basic skills have had to be self-learned: how to use a computer and surf the Internet, how to type his handouts, how to develop means of assessment after students have been exposed to CALL. The teacher has been left alone to search for Arabic language sources on the web and the ways and means of sharing his experience with peers and colleagues around the globe.

Universities and institutions should offer much more support to their teachers, including crash courses to enable them to deal with the technology effectively. Arabic language teachers should be helped to attend workshops, conferences, and seminars annually in order to share their experiences.

Most important of all, however, is the need to recognize that teachers at the interface between the software and the students should participate in some way in the design stage of Arabic CALL software. At the moment design is left entirely in the hands of commercial companies looking for the widest possible market for their product. This results in less than effective software from the teacher's point of view. Universities and institutions of learning must play a more active role in software development. Some of the most effective language teaching software was produced in Spain as a collaborative exercise between several universities.

When working with the available software it soon becomes obvious that there are so many features that could be improved. Often there is more emphasis on only one of the skills areas of listening, talking, reading, rather than on an adequate balance and integration of all these which a teacher knows is essential. As teachers we know what our students need, perhaps more flexibility to repeat work already done but in a new format, or less confusing instructions, or more pace options. To date there is no way for the teacher to feedback his experience to the software developers. If education institutions were to be more involved in software development they would find they already have easy access to this feedback.

There is much scope for more sharing within the whole education establishment. It is vital to end the isolation of the teacher. Accreditation committees could be set up to assess the designs of the best Arabic language software in each country. There could be more competition between universities and companies to design the best Arabic language software. Curriculum developers need to work out ways that allow more flexibility so that the benefits of Arabic language software can reach our students.

The impact of new technology on teaching in the classroom is not a one off. Advances

are made every day. Teachers have to plan and design different learning strategies for their students that incorporate every new advance. Teachers of Arabic have had to integrate the available Arabic language software into their classroom curriculum. In order to do so, they have had to study the new technology themselves to enable them to deal with the different challenges presented by the computer hardware and the Arabic language software. They have been left to do this with very little support from the institutions they work for.

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