The Exploration of Integrating Information Technology into College English Teaching

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ABSTRACT: Since the 1990s, the information technology has been developing by leaps and bounds. The informatization in education as well as a series of teaching innovations increasingly give priority to integrate information technology into college English teaching. This essay aims to probe into the impacts of teachers’ concerns and literacy on their application of information technology, and highlight the necessity of teachers’ active participation in professional training of Internet-based English teaching.

KEYWORDS: Information technology; College English teaching; Integration

1. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has witnessed the explosion of information and technology. As the modern information technology develops rapidly, the application of IT in the field of education is becoming more and more extensive; therefore, teachers have to be orientated toward the informatization of teaching. It has been highlighted and integrated into language teaching and learning in China. In other words, the application of information technology is by all means a priority of college English teaching in this ever-changing world.

Most of the studies on Network-based college English teaching are committed to the impacts of the new teaching and learning environment on student achievement; the advantages and disadvantages over traditional teaching model; the transformation of teachers’ roles and so on. However, not many studies are conducted with respect to college English teachers’ concerns and literacy about the utilization of information technology in their real language teaching practices. This essay seeks to probe into this area and add some practical implications to effective teaching and teachers’ development in the context of education informatization.

2. BACKGROUND

With informatization and internationalization in education, a series of national reforms of college English teaching has laid increasing importance on Internet-based education. Language instruction assisted with the Internet and computer technology has become an irreversible trend of the development of college English teaching in China.

In the 2007 College English Curriculum Requirements issued by the Ministry of Education, the statement on the instruction models puts it, “Universities and colleges should utilize the modern information technology to the full extent, adopt English teaching models based on the combination of computers and classrooms, and improve the traditional single teaching model which is focused on teacher-centered instruction. The new teaching models should be based on modern information technology, especially the Internet technology, and make English learning more personalized, individualized, and autonomous, without the limitations of time and place.”[1]

Following the 2007 College English Curriculum Requirements, the Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010—2020) persists in highlighting the informatization in Education. It proposes that attention shall be given to the revolutionary impact of information technology on education development. Education informatization should be put into the state strategy for comprehensive informatization, and education information networks should be arranged in advance. By 2020, all schools in urban and rural areas shall be covered by a nationwide online educational service network, so as to promote modernization of teaching contents,
pedagogy and methodology. Quality resources and advanced technology shall be put into full use, operational mechanisms and management modes shall be renovated, and available resources shall be integrated, so that a sophisticated, efficient and practical online education infrastructure can be built. Computer terminals shall be popularized, the building of e-campuses accelerated, and accesses to the Internet broadened. [2]

In response to the reform and requirement, many universities and colleges have embraced the Network-based English teaching in their classrooms. The integration of the modern information technology into college English teaching has brought about unprecedented opportunities and challenges to both English learning and teaching in colleges and universities. For language learners, the new teaching model makes English learning more autonomous and individualized. More importantly, their learning is less confined to classroom instruction. For college English teachers, the Network-based teaching environment is definitely a brand-new and challenging experience, which the teaching efficiency and effectiveness largely depend on how smoothly and how successfully they can integrate the positive functions of modern information technology into their language instruction. Consequently, there are concerns as to how college English teachers utilize various technical tools in different curricular areas effectively and what difficulties they come across when integrating information technology into language instruction.

3. INTEGRATING INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY INTO COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

Language teaching in higher education is undergoing a transitional period. There is no doubt that the appropriate use of technology with new pedagogical approaches can enhance student learning performance and accordingly lead to effective teaching. But in many instances, college English teachers have to figure out on their own how they might choose the appropriate technology to create online instructional materials and design learning activities. The following aspects appear to be central to teachers’ use of information technology in second language teaching. All contribute to the effective and efficient integration of information technology into language instruction.

3.1 Teachers’ Concerns over Utilizing Information Technology

In order to effectively deal with and make good use of information technology in language instruction, teachers must develop more different kinds of knowledge and skills than those needed in the traditional environment. Besides, when teachers are expected to embrace this instructional transformation, their school needs to provide them with the support and the resources necessary for integrating information technology into language instruction, which is essential to the successful utilization of information technology in teaching practices.

Ertmer [3] holds that the barriers in technology integration include logistical and technical concerns, and pedagogical and organizational issues. As teachers know their own constraints as well as the limitations of their educational contexts, they may lack confidence in effectively using information technology in their teaching practices. Teachers wonder if they can effectively link the utilization of information technology in language instruction with the content areas of teaching curriculum and the different stages of students’ learning process. To connect the relationships among teachers’ pedagogical beliefs, instructional practices, and the application of technology is not an easy job. Therefore, they need assistance to keep up with the ever-changing and developing technology.

Creatively designing learning activities assisted with information technology to create an authentic student-centered language learning environment and promote students’ active participation is an issue and a concern for teachers. [4] Teachers realize that the Internet offers an abundant source of potential learning resources and that some students learn better in an interactive environment. Currently, more teachers are aware that well-designed Network-based learning activities and innovative online learning materials can bring the educational possibilities of Internet communications, and engage students’ knowledge construction. [4] However, not all teachers perceive that they are capable of using technical tools effectively or creating digital materials successfully.

3.2 Teachers’ Information Technology Literacy

Teachers’ information technology knowledge and skills, together with their previous experiences in using the Internet and computer, are of significant importance in the development of their ability to further use information technology. Besides, when teachers realize the advantages and the convenience of utilizing technology, it is more likely that they will adopt innovative teaching methods in their instructional practices. [5] On the contrary, if teachers feel seriously uncertain or have doubts about their technological performance, they are unlikely to make instructional changes and reluctant to invest much time and effort in integrating information technology into their teaching practices [6].

As the integration of information technology into language instruction requires time and effort, the
investment of large amount of time sometimes conflicts with the worth of making instructional transformation. Before planning and creating technology integration activities, teachers have to find related resources, acquire new knowledge and skills, and become familiar with software or other technical tools. Advanced information technology skills may not be as easy to grasp as the traditional or old-fashioned ones, many of which only require simple skills to operate.

Therefore, teachers might be subject to tremendous pressure at first about acquiring technological knowledge and skills, and later might find it difficult to keep up with the development of information technology. Teachers are concerned about where to get digital materials and resources and how to obtain innovative technological knowledge and skills. They are also concerned about how to utilize new technical tools in their teaching practices successfully. Therefore, it is very likely that teachers have feelings of incompetence with regard to utilizing information technology, and feelings of uncertainty about whether student learning can be enhanced by integrating information technology.

To sum up, the need of ongoing acquisition of knowledge and skills in technology use calls for continuous professional development because whether teachers consider themselves as technology literate affects their utilization of it. Whether teachers successfully and effectively accomplish the goal of integrating information technology into curriculum and instruction relies on their level of technology literacy to large extent.

4. TEACHER TRAINING ON INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION

The success of technology integration can result in teachers’ job satisfaction, and in return teachers’ willingness to use technology for instruction can be enhanced. Therefore, teacher training is crucial in the integration of information technology into language instruction.

Nowadays, college students who have grown up on the Internet and computer have been accustomed to the online virtual world. Educators cannot ignore this fact and still apply traditional methods without any change. Teachers need to feel comfortable with and confident in using information technology. Continuous professional development can provide teachers with more rewarding experiences and help teachers gain insight into technology skills, improving teachers’ abilities for monitoring student progress. Through teacher training, teachers can enrich their teaching strategies and reflect on their own thinking through discussions or by sharing materials with others. When teacher training helps teachers experience the benefits of technology, teachers will be more positive about using information technology and will attempt to use it in instruction.

Teacher training not only provides necessary knowledge and skills, but also develops teachers’ confidence in using information technology in their own teaching practices. It also helps teachers change their pedagogical beliefs about student learning. There is no denying that teachers’ beliefs affect what they teach and how they teach. Teachers’ instructional practices will be transformed as their teaching beliefs’ change. Teachers’ cognition of information technology integrates into language instruction will be naturally enhanced and it is very likely that teachers can obtain a sense of achievement from their own teaching practices. When teachers are positive about applying technical tools to instruction, they would like to embrace the rapid development of information technology and try innovative teaching methods.

Turkle argues that professional development should go beyond skill training and should provide teachers with insights into how actual instructional practices can match their teaching beliefs. Teachers are encouraged to exchange ideas and share experiences with experts and colleagues to explore the integration of information technology into language instruction. Those teachers who have received professional development and cooperated with other teachers in intensive training environment are more likely to utilize information technology in their language teaching practices.

5. CONCLUSION

With the rapid advancement of science and information technology, a succession of teaching reforms appeals to integrate information technology into college English teaching practice. With these teaching innovations, it is vital to make sure that new technical tools are effectively utilized. Furthermore, as the innovation of information technology develops rapidly, it is advisable for teachers to keep up with the advancing technology in order to use it in their instructional practices more effectively. They also need to have comprehensive knowledge of the potentiality of information technology and the possibilities for instructional application. Therefore, college teachers are now faced with learning to integrate information technology into their language instruction, which may be a new and challenging task for them. Teachers’ personal concerns and beliefs about using information technology will greatly influence the actual use of it in their instructional practices.

In teaching practice, teachers have different needs for utilizing technology. They need to consider how
students learn better, what they should learn, and what kind of teaching is best for them when designing learning activities integrated with information technology. Therefore, it is of importance that various professional training opportunities should be provided for teachers to enlarge their scope of technological knowledge, to share teaching ideas and experiences of using innovative methods, and to develop their technical skills so that they can adapt to the transformation in language instruction more quickly and smoothly.

REFERENCES