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THE ROLE OF MEDIA LITERACY IN TEACHING ENGLISH CLASSES IN DEPARTMENTS OF ENGLISH AT THE LIBYAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN POST-COVID-19

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Learn
English

ENGLISH
CLASSES

Abstract

Purpose

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate the reality of using virtual online programs in teaching English classes at Libyan state universities, highlighting the pros, cons, challenges encountered, and remedies provided.

Design/Methodology/Approach

The researcher used a qualitative research method, based mainly on interviewing a sample of instructors at Libyan state universities as primary resources of the study in addition to a literature review as a secondary resource.

Findings

The data analysis of the participants' interviews showed various challenges regarding using online programmes in teaching. These challenges included the continuous disconnection of the Internet, loss of electricity, lack of technology devices, unfamiliarity with using online educational programs, and lack of interaction with students.

Research limitations/implications

Based on these findings, the paper gives some recommendations, focusing mainly on training instructors to deal with online educational programs and handle them effectively. There is also a need to motivate teachers and students to enter the globalised world through the Internet.

Introduction

As we all know, 2020 saw a fatal virus that affected all facets of life, including education: COVID-19 shut down schools and universities all over the world. Therefore, it has become essential that Ministries of Education look for remedies to tackle this unexpected situation. As with other Ministries of Education all over the world, the Libyan Ministry of Education made the decision to use media literacy to shift classes from traditional education into hybrid education, based mainly on the Internet with few face-to-face classes. However, this unexpected shift has caused various challenges for instructors, students, and administration. This paper discusses the effects of this new experience in Libya on the students' and instructors' interaction.

It is known that online virtual worlds have become an integral part in almost all activities in life, including education. Almost all facets of life are run through online websites that dominate our movements, beliefs, and ways of thinking and behaving. In this vein, Omar (2014) emphasises that "technology, namely the Internet, is used nowadays to shrink the gaps of time, place, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and education among people" (p.59).

As for teaching and learning languages, such online virtual worlds have played an indispensable role in any teaching and learning process. Such virtual worlds, in fact, provide teachers and students with an educational environment that includes the 3Ds – Discover, Discuss, and Demonstrate – that have become core in any process of language learning and teaching in the 21st century. Without a doubt, the virtual world has become a reality in the 21st century, described as the era of technology and the Internet that has changed the world into a global tent connected to each other by a web.

At the end of 2019, the COVID-19 virus, or Coronavirus, changed almost all facets of life. This fatal virus affected both private and public sectors, and led to the shutting down of public and private business and service sectors. Education, as other sectors, was affected by this virus, with schools, universities, and all other educational organisations all over the world, without exception, being shut down, and students, instructors, and administrators having to stay at home. Accordingly, this sudden action led to a search for a quick remedy to solve the challenges educational systems had already encountered and to find ways and strategies to keep the educational process going.

Literature Review

This section discusses the literature relevant to the topic of the study.

Online virtual teaching

As stated by Omar and Altaieb (2015), we "are living in the 21st century, the era of technology and globalization" (p.739), where the world has shifted into a global village connected by a world wide web (www) through technology. It is therefore essential that people not only know about technology and the Internet, but are also aware of how to use them in order to be part of this globalised world. The Internet enables people in all parts of the world to have "contact with other people in any other part of the world within seconds or moments" (Omar, 2019, p.512).

As education is concerned with learning and teaching, this sector has been immensely affected by current events, with rapid changes in technology and the Internet. This has affected developing countries, that have traditional ways of teaching and learning, perhaps more than the rest of the world. With the COVID-19 pandemic, most education systems in developing countries were forced to use online education, or at least hybrid education that mixes traditional education with online virtual education. This shift to online or hybrid education changed the world of education in developing countries into a virtual world.

In fact, a virtual world helps both teachers and students in the field of education. This virtual world, as described by Chittaro and Ranon (2007), offers the "possibility to recreate the real world as it is or to create completely new worlds, providing experiences that can help people in understanding concepts as well as learning to perform specific tasks, where the task can be repeated as often as required and in a safe environment" (p.3). Schroeder (2008) believes that the virtual world is essential for teachers and students as it provides them with opportunities to interact with one another when needed.

Online virtual teaching, however, is not a new strategy that has appeared because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been used in most developed countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, for many years. Based on Kelton (2007), virtual online teaching has been used in "several projects over the years in which the user can create his or her avatar, i.e. the graphical representation of the user that exists in a virtual three-dimensional environment" (p.2).

The virtual online world first emerged in the 1970s as a connector to adventure games. It started first with games played on computers or other technological devices that had keyboards: it required the users to give commands through the keyboards to the technological device. Later, these games were used for teaching and learning foreign languages and foreign cultures. In this regard, Krajka (2007) explains that Active Worlds is an example of a virtual online world, where it can be viewed as "the extension of chat and MOO [Multi-User Domain Object-Oriented]

into a non-purely-text-based environment, but one with lifelike pictures, objects, the world and special characters (avatars), which are to be chosen to impersonate the user" (p.125).

Online virtual teaching, however, changed the view of traditional methods of teaching that depend mainly on lecturing in formal settings in classrooms to other methods that integrate online interaction. Accordingly, the concept of literacy changed from just knowing about reading and writing in a native language into "the ability to communicate with people in the community" (Omar, 2018, p.183).

The role of media literacy in teaching

We are living in a world that is dominated by numbers, and we are living in this world in digital societies. As discussed by Bauman (cited in Fernández-Ulloa, 2013), these societies are characterised as being a liquid information culture, in which numbers have a great effect on our lives. Such a society has three "areas to teach, and inside each on them we may include several dimensions: knowledge (media industry, technology, language, processes of production, access to information), understanding (ideology and values) and expression (communication, creation, citizen participation)" (p.411). Similarly, Noytim (2006) clarifies that:

> Electronic media have shrunk the world so that contact and communication have become reachable, rapid and convenient. Significant areas of business, education, governance, media, recreation and entertainment have now changed to e-contexts: e-commerce, e-business, e-education, e-governance, and e-newspapers. Thus in economically-developed countries, literacy practices are shifting from print-based to screen-based medium (p.68).

In fact, media in literacy has become obligatory in this era because of the pandemic that made it dangerous for teachers and students to go to universities or schools. This dangerous situation forced Ministries of Education to impose online virtual teaching and learning and, because of this, literacy shifted to media literacy where technology is used in teaching and learning. This unexpected situation forced us to "expand the educational scenario from a formal education to an informal and even fortuitous one … We must take into account the different ways of processing information by digital natives (students) and digital immigrants (teachers)" (Fernández-Ulloa, 2013, p.411).

Potter (2008) defines media literacy as "a set of perspectives that we actively use to expose ourselves to the media to interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter" (p.19). According to Frau-Meigs (2006), media literacy "aims to develop both critical understanding and active participation. It enables young people to interpret and make informed judgments as consumers of media; but it also enables them to become producers of media in their own right" (p.20). This indicates that media literacy enhances students' understanding of literacy through literacy, where the world in which we live shifts to be a world in a classroom context. The students become aware of what is going on in the real world and can decode the language of digital societies through being an integral part of them (Goodson and Norton-Meier, 2003).

The Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute (cited in Omar, 2018, p.183) defines media literacy as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms". The definition focuses on four main components of media literacy as:

1. *Access*: Access works effectively through an active and social process, not a one-off act of facility.
2. *Analysis*: People's involvement in print and audio-visual channels is based on a range of analytic competencies.
3. *Evaluation*: To work well, access and analysis require evaluation of the use of media devices and the language used for transmitting and conveying messages.
4. *Creation*: People reach a full understanding of the conventions and qualities of the message submitted if they have a good background about the content of the message (Omar, 2018, p.183).

Hobbs (2008) suggests three frameworks for introducing media literacy in education as: (1) authors and audiences (AA), (2) messages and meanings (MM), and (3) representation and reality (RR). Buckingham (cited in Omar, 2018, p.187) suggests four theoretical frameworks for engaging media literacy in education as: (1) production, indicating the texts made by individuals or working groups for themselves or others, (2) language, indicating the medium used for transmitting the message, (3) representation, indicating the representation or imaginary of the reality, and (4) audience, indicating the targeted demographic audiences that use, interpret, and respond to media.

Shifting to a digital society has dramatically shifted perspectives towards literacy. In this regard, Thoman and Jolls (2004) argue that the concept of 'literacy' was used to indicate:

"the skill to interpret 'squiggles' on a piece of paper as letters which, when put together, formed words that conveyed meaning. Today, information about the world around us comes to us not only by words on a piece of paper but more and more through the powerful images and sounds of our multi-media culture" (p.1).

Hinchey (2003) believes that media literacy is not only concerned with transmission of information, it also paves the way for students to use language in various communicative situations and be a critical user of language in the surrounding world. They can, for instance, learn from websites, movies, DVDs, video games, television, and the like. Wan (2006) therefore recommends using media in teaching; he calls this "teaching with media", where media literacy indicates the skills and knowledge necessary for using and interpreting media. Wan also calls for integrating media literacy into the curriculum and treating media texts as treasured sources used in teaching.

Beach (2007) also encourages the use of media literacy in teaching to achieve the following goals:

- building on students' active use of the media;
- moving digital literacies from the bedroom to the classroom;
- helping students learn to communicate in multimodal ways;
- helping students engage with and evaluate texts; and
- helping students understand how media constructs reality.

Conclusions

The discussion above shows that media literacy in teaching has become core post-COVID-19. In today's classrooms, it has become essential that instructors as well as students use online resources and online educational programs. Media literacy helps students encode and decode the messages transmitted by their teachers. It motivates them to be critical thinkers and integral parts of the process of learning. In addition, media literacy helps teachers use the language of the 21st century and be part of the digital universe.

Methodology

To complete this paper, the researcher used a qualitative research method based on interviewing a sample of instructors in English departments at Libyan public universities as primary resources, and a literature review as a secondary resource.

Problem of the Study

As a developing country, teaching and learning in Libya is based on traditional methods at the university level, where lecturing is the most dominant technique used by instructors. The classroom is teacher-centred, where the instructor is the one who demonstrates both the processes of learning and teaching (ask, answer, and talk) in the classroom, and the students sit passively as a sponge that absorbs whatever is fed to them by their instructor. In addition, the classroom lacks any kind of technology and is, at best, based mainly on a whiteboard and markers.

This teaching and learning technique encountered various challenges at the end of 2019, mainly because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This fatal virus led to the shutting down of almost all facets of life, including universities, meaning that study ceased for over than 10 months. The Libyan Ministry of Education finally made the decision to move to online classes with few face-to-face classes; this is called hybrid education or mixed education. This solution was, in fact, unsuccessful and ineffective for various reasons.

The researcher saw that there was a problem regarding online virtual teaching that needed further investigation, and tried to find remedies and present recommendations *ad hoc*. The researcher's hypothesis is supported by Alharam (cited in Omar, 2020), who conducted a study regarding the use of technology in teaching English in Libya, concluding that "teacher's and student's literacy in technology and teacher's resistance to change their traditional method of teaching are the greatest challenges that EL teachers encounter in using online technology for promoting their adult learners autonomy" (p.181).

Importance of the Study

Teaching in Libya in general and specifically at university level still depends on traditional techniques, using old methods of teaching with old strategies and techniques. It is an unavoidable fact that the world has become a digital society due to the Internet revolution that has changed the world into a 24/7 world of technology. In this regard, Neal (2011) said, "Whether it is widely implemented or not in educational contexts, hypermedia pervades our lives and that of our students" (p.93).

Based on such facts, it has become necessary for Libya to become involved in this globalised world, and that teaching methods and processes of learning are changed to be compatible with the new era. The main importance of this study, therefore, is to look at the effective role of media literacy in teaching English classes in departments of English at Libyan public universities. In addition, this study might provide potential remedies for the challenges encountered while implementing media literacy in education.

Objectives of the Study

As an instructor in the Department of English at a Libyan public university for almost 15 years, the researcher is fully aware of the methods of teaching and the techniques and strategies used in teaching at university level. Libyan instructors have been using traditional strategies and techniques for teaching English, based mainly on face-to-face lecturing with an almost complete domination of asking, answering, and talking in the classroom. The main objectives of this study are given below:

- highlighting the importance of media literacy in teaching;
- motivating instructors to move to online virtual teaching through using media;
- involving instructors and students in the 21st century through being involved in Internet websites;
- making use of the opportunity practices and resources educational online websites provide.

Research Questions

To fulfil the objectives of this study, the researcher posed the following main question:

- to what extent are media applicable in teaching English classes in Departments of English at Libyan public universities?

This led to the following sub-questions:

- what media are used in online virtual teaching in teaching English classes in Departments of English at Libyan public universities?
- what potential challenges do instructors face in using online virtual teaching?
- what are the potential remedies for such challenges?
- how can the Libyan Ministry of Education apply online virtual teaching?

Study Participants

This study's primary resources include interviewing a sample of instructors who taught online classes in Departments of English at Libyan public universities. They included twenty participants from nine Libyan public universities: University of Benghazi, University of Tripoli, Sebha University, University of Ejdapia, Sabratha University, Azzaytuna University, Bani Walid University, Misurata University, and Omar Al-Mukhtar University. The researcher could not include the other Libyan public universities because they either do not have English majors or the participants did not respond. The study participants were selected randomly and were willing to conduct the interviews for the sake of this study. Pseudo names, of course, were used with the study participants for the sake of privacy and confidentiality.
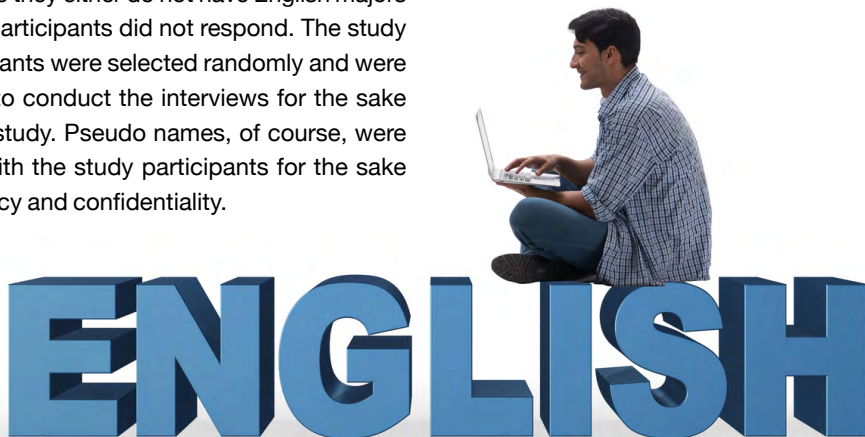
Data Collection

To collect the primary resources for this study, the researcher interviewed the study participants using multiple techniques according to the availability of the participants. The participants from the University of Benghazi were interviewed face-to-face, and participants from other universities were interviewed through media, using mainly Zoom and Facebook manager, or via phone calls.

All interviews were recorded for later data analysis. The participants' names and universities were mentioned in the recorded interview, but then anonymised in the data analysis for confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The data analysis of the interviews shows that the participants use various kinds of media depending on the university. The participants in the Department of English at the Faculty of Languages at the University of Benghazi used online Telegram in addition to inserting PowerPoint presentations as an aid for the students. In addition, instructors presented classes on Libya Channel and distributed CDs, flash drives, and copied papers; some also used Google Classroom, Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. In the two weeks before the final exam, all instructors that taught from the 2nd to 8th semester taught intensive classes: two classes with two hours each per week. Therefore, the faculty applied hybrid education.

The participants in the Department of English at the Faculty of Education at the University of Tripoli used mainly two media for teaching, Zoom and Google Classroom, in addition to some face-to-face classes. The same media were used by the Department of English at the Faculty of Languages at the same university in addition to recording classes on a program called OPS or PowerPoint to be submitted to the Department of Registration, which posted it on its Facebook page.

Because Sebha University has a good technological infrastructure, it used one medium, Google Classroom. The Department of English at this university linked all its teaching staff and students to Google Classroom through official university emails. However, there were some face-to-face classes due to technical obstacles, such as electricity, Internet, unfamiliarity with technology, etc.

Like Sebha University, Misurata University has officially subscribed to Google Classroom through linking all instructors and students by the university's email. The university benefits from all the online program's facilities; students can download their assignments or upload materials through Work Place and chat with their

Google Classroom

instructors live through Work Chat. In addition, the Faculty of Arts provides free Internet to all teaching staff and students, so they have no problem in accessing the Internet at the faculty's campus. As well as online teaching, there are optional face-to-face traditional classes for those who cannot attend online classes for any reason.

The other five universities, University of Ejdapia, Sabratha University, Azzaytuna University, Bani Walid University, and Omar Al-Mukhtar University, tried to use media literacy in teaching, but they failed and either ceased study (as with Azzaytuna University) or continued teaching traditionally (as with the University of Ejdapia, Sabratha University, Bani Walid University, and Omar Al-Mukhtar University). The participants from Bani Walid

University told me that an instructor tried to use Zoom in teaching, but he failed due to technical problems. Such universities shortened the time of the classes and reduced the period of the semester to almost half.

The data analysis shows that only six of the participants use online teaching as they see that it saves time and effort. For instance, Mohamed, from Misurata University, said, "In online teaching, we can interact with the students any time easily. We can answer their inquiries and respond to their comments immediately. Through Work Chat, I receive the call or message on my phone. It is good, I guess". The remaining 14 do not use online teaching in teaching foreign languages. In this regard, Safi said, "Teaching English requires interaction, so online teaching is not good". Ahlam said, "I don't think it goes.

Students don't understand face-to-face, so how can they understand online?" Nadia believes that "online teaching might work with other classes but not English". Other participants, like Sami, Noura, Sofian, Hind, and Nabil, do not trust that students would join the class online.

The data analysis shows that the most important advantage of teaching online during the pandemic was that it saved students' and instructors' lives; also, it meant that studies could continue. Some thought that teaching online during the pandemic lowered the quality of teaching and learning. Sadiq said, "I feel I didn't deliver all the curriculum as I was forced to shorten the course". Nuria said, "I am not satisfied to be honest. I didn't deliver all the material". Ahmad said, "I am sorry. I feel guilty. I didn't teach well". Saad said, "This is not study. The level is low. I am sorry".

The data analysis of the participants' interviews shows that all the participants encountered challenges in using media literacy in teaching English classes at Libyan public universities. All the participants saw power cuts and the repeated disconnection of the Internet and said they were the most challenging they had ever encountered. For instance, Yasmin said, "The power goes for 15 hours in my area and the Internet doesn't work most of the time". Ahmad said, "The power is the main obstacle. We don't have electricity for the whole day. And you know, when there is no electricity, there is no Internet. It is miserable". Noura commented that "I am not going to talk about electricity and Internet as we all know about this. Let me keep silent". Salem said with a big sigh, "Sometimes, I am

in the middle of the work and the power goes without warning. It is a disaster".

Other challenges shown by the data analysis are unfamiliarity with educational online programs. Some of the participants expressed their frustration over this point where they found themselves in a situation of using programs with which they are unfamiliar. For instance, Ahmad, who was assigned to train instructors to use Zoom, said, "I was astonished as some university instructors don't have university email. And you know you need university email to access to some education programs". Sofian said, "To be open with you, I have no idea about these programs. I only know these programs because of Coronavirus". Adam said, "I still don't know how to use Zoom and Telegram". Fatima said, "I am learning about Zoom and Google Meet now to be professional. I am taking courses right now. I hope I can use them well".

Three of the participants said that free educational online programs do not give enough time with students, which is a very challenging for them. In this regard, Salem said, "You know, Zoom gives you just 40 minutes, or less when it is free with fewer than 40 students. This is not enough for me to give a lecture". Nisreen said, "We need to participate in education programs officially to get more time". Noura said, "The length of the program is not enough. I always find myself out because of time limitations". Taher, from Sebha University, said, "We have an official Google Classroom Program, so we have no problem regarding this. The only problem is with electricity and the Internet".

Study Findings

Based on the data analysis of the participants' interviews, the researcher has obtained the following findings:

- Libya's public universities have no strict rules or principles regarding the use of media in teaching as each department, even within the same university, uses media that differ from other departments.
- Libya's public universities use free educational online programs that do not give enough time or space for both instructors and students.
- Most teaching staff and students at Libya's public schools are unaware of educational online programs.
- Electricity power cuts and the weakness of Internet signals represent the biggest challenges for both instructors and students.
- Lack of trust between instructors and their students regarding attendance, contributions, and doing assignments online is a big challenge.
- Social challenges represented by female students appearing on camera represent a big obstacle to teachers in their interaction with students and speaking with them face-to-face online through the camera.
- There are economic challenges as some instructors and students are unable to purchase laptops or computers to use in online classes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings obtained, the following recommendations are made:

- There should be complete agreement regarding the type of media to be used in teaching at all Libyan public universities.
- Libya's public universities should subscribe officially to various online educational programs and offer such programs to all instructors and students at university level.
- Libya's public universities should train teaching staff and students about the use of media in teaching and learning.
- Workshops and seminars regarding the importance of media in teaching and learning should be conducted periodically.
- Libya's public universities should provide libraries where the Internet is offered free to all teaching staff and students.
- Libya's public universities should provide network-based teaching environments in which instructors interact with each other and other instructors all over the world, regarding methods of teaching.

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Biography

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Appendix

Questions to the Participant

- What is your degree?
- What is your scientific grade?
- What university are you teaching at?
- What classes are you teaching?
- Which semester are you teaching?
- What kind of media are you using in teaching?
- What do you think of using online teaching?
- Based on teaching online courses during the Coronavirus pandemic, what are the pros of teaching online?
- Based on teaching online courses during the Coronavirus pandemic, what are the cons of teaching online?
- What other supplementary tools of teaching are you using in addition to online ones?
- What are the main challenges you have ever encountered while teaching online courses?
- What are the strategies you have used to encounter such challenges?
- What are your suggestions or recommendations for using or not using online teaching?
- Any other comments.