

Benefits and Barriers of Ict in China's Efl Teaching and Learning

Honglei Fan^{1,a}, Min Yang^{2,b*}

1, 2 English Language Institute, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an Shaanxi 710128, China

E-mail: a. fanhonglei@xisu.edu.cn; b. yangmin1979@163.com

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT. *The paper first of all explores the benefits of ICT in EFL teaching and learning in China from two perspectives. The barriers which government, school, teachers, and students confront are also discussed in detail. The last part, the authors conclude the whole discussion and point out the theoretical and practical implications of this study for EFL teaching and learning.*

KEYWORDS: *Ict; Benefits and barriers; Efl teaching*

1. Introduction

The rapid development and popularization of digital technology have already changed daily life in many ways. Language teaching and learning, inevitably, is also facing a revolution of adopting Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Along with the extensive employment of ICT in teaching and learning, some controversial issues have been raised. A significant number of researchers believe that there is a positive relationship between the use of ICT and students' achievement (Clarke, 2008; Holmes & Gardner, 2006). On the other side, some researchers put forward their concerns about the negative impact of ICT, such as problems with technology may lead to pedagogical failure (Snyder, 2001: 43). However, both sides agree that effective education is the priority, and technology remains in the service of that priority.

Even though there has been considerable interest in the use of ICT in modern language teaching, Chambers (2001:11) still describes the research studies on the relationship between ICT and language teaching as being 'at a very early stage of development'. This paper will identify benefits and outline barriers of ICT about English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning in China.

As stated above, there is one point worth extra attention that is all of these discussions are conducted with a specific reference to EFL teaching and learning in China. At the very beginning, the reason for this context selection will be elaborated on. The discussion of this paper is mainly split into two sections: benefits and barriers. The first section will explore the benefits of ICT in EFL teaching and learning from two perspectives: learning environment and learning approach. In the second section, the barriers which government, school, teachers, and students confront will be discussed in detail. The last part of this paper will conclude the whole discussion and point out the theoretical and practical implications of this study for EFL teaching and learning.

2. Benefits of Ict

On one of the front pages of 'Curriculum Leadership' (an electronic journal for leaders in education), it reviewed 17 recent studies of the impacts of ICT on student attainment, motivation, and learning in Europe and the international level (2008). The overwhelming majority of empirical studies indicated a positive relationship between ICT adoption and students' achievement. Some studies further manifested that the use of ICT brought benefits to students in terms of the development of characteristics such as motivation, independent learning, and critical thinking. This section will focus on two potential impacts of the use of ICT on EFL teaching and learning. They are learning environment and learning process.

2.1 Current Status of Efl Teaching and Learning in China

In recent years, China has experienced an unprecedented enthusiasm for learning English, manifested by the considerably growing number of English studies in private language schools and the flourishing market of

English learning books, software (Liu, 2007: 170). Additionally, China's national exam system contributes to the popularity of English learning. High school graduates have to pass the English exam at National University/College Entrance Exam in order to get into the expected university. Furthermore, the college students in China have to pass College English Test Band 4 (CET4) to ensure they can find a decent job after graduation. The significance of learning English for students has been widely acknowledged in China. However, EFL teaching and learning in China is still facing a number of problems which urgently needed to be solved.

Based on a survey administered in 2007, Wang and Coleman (2009:116) summarized the salient features of EFL teaching and learning in China: teacher-led, classroom-dependent, textbook-based, exam-oriented, reading, and writing-focused.

This summary appears to be one of the most comprehensive and straightforward analyses of the status quo of EFL classes in China. At the same time, this can be considered as the exposure of the problems existed in EFL teaching and learning in China.

Besides the problems stated above, the geographical scale of the country and large population has led to unbalanced education resources distribution and a comparatively large size class which both add difficulties to effective EFL teaching and learning in China.

In such a situation, ICT seems to be a potential and feasible way to solve the above problems, so this is the reason for selecting China's EFL teaching and learning as a specific discussion context.

2.2 Learning Environment

"If you wish to learn French, you go to France" is Papert's proposal (1994, as cited in Pachler, 1999: 10). Although this sounds extreme, it pointed out the significance of the learning environment to language learners. The nature of the EFL class determines that it is impossible to offer an exact natural language learning environment in which students input and output English in daily life. Fortunately, the employment of ICT in EFL classes can compensate for this weakness to some extent, because it can constitute not only an extensive and flexible environment but also a virtual and authentic environment for EFL learners.

2.2.1 Extensive and Flexible Learning Environment

As mentioned above, due to the geographical scale and unbalanced regional development of China, educational resources are distributed unevenly. In this case, Chinese students' achievements in English learning have a strong connection with the schools' location' (Liu, 2007:166). It is difficult for the Chinese Education Ministry to solve this problem in a short time, but ICT provides a possibility for teachers and learners to realize distance learning by various forms of technology. As Holmes and Gardner (2006:72) claimed that ICT can "remove location limitations".

Besides removing location limitations, another pedagogic contribution of ICT is to give both teachers and students considerable freedom to choose study place, pace and time (Clarke, 2008: 11). From this perspective, teaching and learning can happen anywhere at any time. Moreover, the different needs of individual students can be met by an online tutor and computer-assisted self-learning. The differentiation of students, indeed, is a long-existing problem in China, due to the large size class. In general, the traditional classroom-dependent learning environment will be changed to an extensive and flexible learning environment by the use of ICT.

2.2.2 Virtual and Authentic Learning Environments

ICT is helpful to establish a virtual and authentic learning environment for language learners. Even though Gillespie (2006:27) argued that there are currently few studies can prove the positive impacts of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) on students, the 'extra support' of VLE is admitted. VLE provides a platform for learners to obtain more information and do more communication with peers. With the benefits of the Internet, virtual environment 'approximates to the real world' (Holmes & Gardner, 2006: 105). Regarding language, about 84% of homepages are in English (Vogel, 2006: 143). For this reason, the Internet offers EFL learners wide access to enormous authentic learning materials which seldom show up in textbooks but essential for daily communication in the real world. Davies (as cited in Chambers, 2001:10) named this 'naturalistic language learning environment'.

Furthermore, through video websites, such as YouTube, EFL learners are exposed to the culture of the target language. They become familiar with the value, logical thinking habit and even typical body language of the target language. All of these cultural factors together play an important role in cross-cultural communication.

Overall, the emergence of ICT in EFL classes makes it possible for Chinese students to learn English in a virtual and authentic learning environment.

2.3 Learning Approach

Learning style refers to a ‘consistent way of functioning’ and which ‘reflects underlying causes of behavior’ (Ellis, as cited in Pachler, 1999:11). The individual differences of students generate the diversity of the learning styles. Based on this fact, it is challenging for teachers to consider each student’s learning process in whole-class teaching. ICT can solve this problem not only by supporting different learning approaches but also by evoking new learning approaches, such as self-directed learning, blended learning, and integrated learning.

2.3.1 Self-Directed Learning

It is acknowledged that ICT has changed the roles of teacher and student dramatically. On one hand, students change from recipients to participants (Forsyth, 1998:32). On the other hand, there is a wide variety of words is used to describe the new role of the teacher including ‘guide, facilitator, adviser, enabler, and organizer’ (Littlemore, 2001: 49). In one word, ICT assists students’ learning in many ways, students become less dependent on teachers.

The students who can take charge of one’s learning considered as autonomous learners. Thus, the learning process in which an autonomous learner involved is defined as ‘self-directed learning’ (Littlemore, 2001: 43). The significance of self-directed language learning is highlighted, especially in higher education.

In China, the vast majority of English teachers are non-native speakers. Therefore, they have dual roles in teaching practice: teachers and learners. In this sense, self-directed learning is particularly important in EFL classes in China.

The introduction of ICT into the EFL class motivates many students more likely to conduct self-directed learning (Gillespie, 2006:110). As discussed, students can personalize their learning place, time and pace with ICT. Besides, ICT can assist language learners in the entire learning process by providing information, drill, and practice as well as automatic feedback. For these reasons, there is a high possibility that ICT will promote self-directed learning in EFL classes and encourage students to manipulate their learning.

2.3.2 Blended Learning

Generally, blended learning refers to ‘mix of e-learning pedagogies and traditional pedagogies’ (Holmes & Gardner, 2006:110). In the context of language teaching and learning, Neumeier (2005: 164) defined blended learning as “a combination of face-to-face and computer-assisted learning in a single teaching and learning environment.”

Since the introduction of ICT in a language class, blended learning became inevitable. Indeed, ICT has led to a revolution in pedagogy, but this does not mean to devalue the traditional pedagogies. Oppositely, to achieve the desired goal, face-to-face and computer-assisted learning are supposed to coexist and cooperate with each other properly.

As was stated, ICT weakens teachers’ manipulation and strengthens students’ independence. However, the value of face-to-face teaching and learning can not be ignored. For instance, ICT provides a way for a teacher to communicate with students via computer after class, but face-to-face emotional interactions and positive class climate are irreplaceable. For this reason, an efficient and effective combination of the two modes of learning is important (Neumeier, 2005: 164).

3. Integrated Learning

Clarke (2008) divided learning styles mainly into three categories: visual learning, auditory learning, and kinesthetic learning. These three categories are simplified in terms of seeing, hearing and doing. Coincidentally, the four fundamental competencies highlighted in English learning are reading, listening, speaking, and writing. After comparison, it seems that English teaching and learning particularly require for integrated learning.

To demonstrate effectively, a case on the use of videoconferencing at Monkseaton (a village in the northeast of England) will be briefly reviewed. In 1996, Monkseaton Community High School encouraged students to videoconference with the same level students from partner schools in Lille (a city in northern France) and Hamburg (a city in the northwest of Germany). After five months of videoconferencing, six out of thirteen pupils

in their nine year showed a marked improvement in their oral communication skills in terms of 'accent, intonation, accuracy and fluency' (Butler & Kelly, 1999:100).

In this case, pupils who involved in the videoconference tests not only enriched their vocabulary but also enhanced their listening skills and speaking skills. Thanks to various forms of ICT, visual learning, auditory learning, and kinesthetic learning can work together. Based on this demonstration, the four fundamental competencies of EFL learners gain a chance to develop the integration.

4. Barriers

The emphasis of this section will shift from identifying benefits of ICT in education to barriers which will be inevitable in the expansion of ICT in EFL class in China. The status quo of China's EFL education has already been discussed at the beginning. However, the necessities of ICT in that specific context are worthy of further discussion. This section will focus on outlining barriers of ICT adoption in China's EFL education.

4.1 Necessity of Ict Adoption in China

After comparing the status quo of EFL class in China with the impacts of ICT in education, it is easy to find out the adoption of ICT is particularly helpful in solving the existed problems of EFL education in China.

From a learning environment perspective, ICT is capable to change classroom-dependent, textbook-based language learning into extensive, flexible, virtual and authentic learning. This significant transition means more to EFL education in China. Some sharp social problems in China lead to negative influences in education, such as large-sized class and an unbalanced distribution of education resources. Even if ICT can not solve these problems thoroughly, it can improve this situation to some extent by providing possibilities of independent learning or distance teaching.

Regarding the learning approach, EFL learners in China strand in the teacher-led situation (Liang and Coleman, 2009:116). It is relatively hard to change this situation because it has a profound cultural background. 'Hierarchy is highlighted in Confucian culture' (Peng, 2007: 252). Based on this culture, students should respect teachers' authority and absolute obedience to them. This reflected in an old saying "*yi ri wei shi, zhong shen wei fu*", he who teaches me for one day is my father for life. Bearing this culture in mind since young, it is difficult for students to become independent, and critical in learning. However, the adoption of ICT in education is a chance for traditional moral disciplines to change. As stated, considerable research studies administrated that ICT plays a positive role in transferring learning styles from dependent learning to self-directed, integrated and unintentional learning. Thus, EFL learning in China can be more active and effective through the use of ICT. Through this change, students' independent and critical thinking can be fostered gradually.

Along with the development of technology, it becomes possible for EFL learners to communicate with native speakers via the Internet. Little (2001:35) found out communications by computer cause less pressure for participants. Therefore, this comparative 'face-saving' way of communication encourages China's EFL learners to open mouth to communicate.

4.2 Barriers of Ict Adoption in China

Based on the previous section, it is clear that necessities call for ICT adoption in China. However, several barriers are still in the way. Government, schools, teachers, and students are all taken into account to overcome barriers.

National education policy works as a compass for education practitioners. From British successful experience in the past twenty years, it is not hard to conclude that national education policy is necessary for promoting the usage of ICT for educational purposes.

For instance, there are two standards of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) directly relate to ICT standard 2.5 - Those awarded Qualified Teacher Status must demonstrate that they know how to use ICT effectively, both to teach their subject and to support their wider professional role. These standards ensure that teachers are qualified to teach with adequate ICT skills.

From the above policies, there is no difficulty in comprehending the rapid development of ICT in British education. For this reason, China's Education Ministry is supposed to enact a set of policies to promote the development of ICT in education.

Policies served as a compass. In order to put them into practice eventually, the driving force is necessary. In this case, investment in education serves as the driving force. The UK education budget spent on ICT has grown substantially. The figure in 2005 is £700 million (Gillespie, 2006: 30). In one word, the introduction of ICT in education requires a huge investment.

In China's education context, shortage of policies and investment in ICT is a fundamental barrier. Although experiences in developing ICT from the UK are useful, the differences in the context should be counted. Concerning the geographical size of China, it is demanding for the government to meet the needs of nation-wide investment in ICT. Encouraging enterprises to sponsor education might be a feasible way.

5. Conclusion

This paper attempts to identify the benefits of and barriers to ICT in China's EFL teaching and learning. The benefits of ICT in EFL teaching and learning are divided into two categories: learning environment and learning approach. Based on the analysis of benefits, the significant implications of ICT are discussed in the context of EFL teaching and learning in China.

Regarding the learning environment, ICT is not only able to provide a flexible and extensive learning environment, but also a virtual one which can generate a relatively natural learning environment for EFL learners. Additionally, a change in learning style is another perspective that deserves discussion. Through the use of ICT, self-directed learning and blended-learning are highlighted. Lastly, but no less importantly, ICT is capable of enhancing learners' practical learning skills and cognitive abilities.

The current situation of EFL teaching and learning in China can be improved by the adoption of ICT. This claim is not controversial. However, there are several barriers which exist, such as lack of systematic policies, shortage of ICT skills, and lack of adjustment of assessment. Due to social reality and profound cultural influence, these barriers are not easy to overcome.

Overall, the implications of ICT on China's EFL teaching and learning are particularly significant. The adoption of ICT has the potential to solve a series of long-existing problems in China's EFL teaching and learning. For this reason, it is necessary to overcome barriers and obtain long-term benefits.

Acknowledgments

This paper was supported by the Research Funds of Xi'an International Studies University: Cross Language-and-Culture Research on the Speech Strategies of Business Discourses in English, Chinese, and Spanish (2017 Shaanxi Province Social Science Fund Project 2017K019); A Quantitative Analysis of English Business Vocabulary Based on the English Business Textbook Corpus (2018 Department of Education of Shaanxi Province Scientific Research Project 18JK0638).

References

- [1] Butler M, Kelley P (1999). Video Conferencing. In M. Leask, & N. Pachler (Eds.), *Learning to Teach Using ICT in the Secondary School*. London, UK: Routledge, pp. 95-108
- [2] Clarke A (2008). *E-learning Skills* (2nd ed.). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [3] Delosarcos B, Coleman J A, Hampel R (2009). Learners' Anxiety in Audio Graphic Conferences: A Discursive Psychology Approach to Emotion Talk. *ReCALL*, vol.21, no.1, pp. 3-17.
- [4] Gillespie H (2006). *Unlocking Learning and Teaching with ICT*. London: David Fulton.
- [5] Holmes B, Gardner J (2006). *E-learning*. London: SAGE Publications.
- [6] Independent Schools Queensland (2008). Fast, Frustrating and the Future: ICT, New Technologies and Education. *Curriculum Leadership*. *Frontpage*, vol.23, no.6, pp.15-16.
- [7] Neumeier P (2005). A Closer Look at Blended Learning-Parameters for Designing a Blended Learning Environment for Language Teaching and Learning. *ReCALL*, vol.17, no.2, pp. 163-178.
- [8] Peng J E (2007). Willingness to Communicate in the Chinese EFL Classroom: a Cultural Perspective. In J. Liu (Ed.). *English Language Teaching in China*. London: Continuum, pp. 250-269

- [9] Wang L, Coleman J A (2009). A Survey of Internet-Mediated Intercultural Foreign Language Education in China. *ReCALL*, vol.21, no.1, pp. 113-129.
- [10] Yumus M M (2007). Malaysian ESL Teachers' Use of ICT in Their Classroom: Expectations and Realities. *ReCALL*, vol.19, no.1, pp. 79-95.