

Training teachers to use the Web in ELT

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Abstract

This study aimed to provide support for secondary school teachers learning how to make effective use of Web-based CALL (WBC). With this in mind, the researcher created a CD designed to help train teachers in useful aspects of WBC. Using questionnaires and interviews, the CD was trialled with teachers from government secondary schools throughout Thailand. This study looks at the results of this trial. The key findings are that teachers had positive attitudes towards WBC and that some of the pages on the CD were visited far more frequently than others. These findings were used to generate guidelines for designing CDs to support training in the future.

Background

“Educational computing is now established and computers will continue to find their ways into schools in ever-increasing numbers” (Maddux et al., 2001: 5). That is, computers are playing a significant role in education nowadays. In Thailand, having taught English both in Bangkok and upcountry, I have noticed that computers are rapidly finding their way into secondary schools. Indeed, the government strongly supports the idea of equipping schools with computers (Watson Todd, 2001a). It also demands that teachers be capable of using the Internet to serve the National Education Act of 1999. This act seeks to make learners independent through the use of technology in education and conforms to a government policy of fostering child-centeredness (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999). The act has thus signaled that traditional classroom learning and teaching in Thai secondary schools are now facing changes and that, to answer the forceful call of globalization in the twenty-first century, networked computing will be a tool to open classrooms to the world.

For English Language Teaching (ELT), Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), especially Web-based CALL (WBC), seems to be prominent because teachers and students can use the Web for language learning as a potential source of knowledge and as an effective tool for international communication. Consequently, if teachers and students know how to make use of the Web, there are alternatives to enhance their learning of English beyond the classroom.

Why train teachers?

Computers can assist language learning in numerous ways, e.g. provide drills and practice, simulation of learning environments, online information and communication. Learners learn and practice language skills repeatedly and maximize experiences of success as well as gaining knowledge in a more motivating environment. A number of studies have revealed that WBC can increase learner motivation and improve learner attitudes (Banditvilai, 2000; Gabriel, 2003; Liu & Reed, 1995; Samuel, 2001; Savenye et al., 1996; Skinner & Austin, 1999). WBC can

also help to lighten the teachers' workload, enriching language pedagogy, and fulfill professional development (Mallikamas, 1999; Tuck, 2001; Warschauer & Kern, 2000; Watson Todd, 1999, 2001b, 2003). In addition, via ELT websites, e.g. <http://www.tesol.org>, teachers can reach experts and native speakers worldwide on their computer terminals.

Teachers' attitudes towards WBC

In this study, using questionnaires, teachers reported positive attitudes towards WBC, though a few teachers expressed concerns about limitations in implementing it. Such concerns involved poor and inadequate school facilities, slow access to the Internet, affordability for students, the presence of unscreened information on the Web, and teachers' low computer literacy. The teachers' positive attitudes were as follows:

- They believed that WBC could benefit students' learning and teacher development. Teachers who used the CD (described below) saw that the Web provided information and communication globally that students and teachers could use in language learning and teaching. Moreover, for teacher development, teachers could use the Web to develop their skills and knowledge in English Language Teaching (ELT) by joining forums on ELT websites, seeking help from experts and native speakers, and improving their English proficiency.
- Implementing WBC would help teachers meet the school and government requirements. The National Education Act of 1999 requires technology in education and demands teaching that helps students learn to serve their individual needs, interests, pace and potential. With the government technology-enhanced policy, teachers were encouraged to use the Web in ELT.
- Teachers realized the call of globalization in the computer age. Like mobile phones, computers are everywhere nowadays. The Internet and the Web are driving the world. Computers have already come into homes, schools, and offices. Teachers will soon need computers in their work and daily lives.

In spite of teachers' positive attitudes and a potential promise of the Web for Thai teachers to integrate WBC into English Language Teaching (ELT), there is evidence that it is crucial to familiarize teachers with computers and the Internet (Maneekhao, 2001). That is, to use WBC effectively, teachers need training.

How to train teachers?

There are various modes of teacher training, such as seminars and workshops, short and long-term courses, and self-study. Each mode has advantages and disadvantages to be considered to select the most suitable one to use in training Thai ELT teachers in Web use. In order to make training successful, we need to consider the characteristics of effective training that should match the conditions of training and actual use (Roberts, 1998). Time constraints make it very hard for groups of teachers to work together simultaneously and yet teachers need to be trained how to use WBC in their teaching, the only practical solution is self-study materials that have many characteristics of WBC.

Web-based training versus CD-ROMs

To train teachers to use the Web, the self-study materials should have many characteristics of WBC; thus, Web-based training and CDs (in the form of CD-ROMs) should provide key Web features. However, taking into account the expense

involved in investment in computers and access to the Internet and especially the poor quality of the networks available at many schools, we need to consider putting self-study materials on CD instead of the Web because CDs can replicate many Web features and can store WebPages. CDs can also provide text, audio, video, and animations and they are a standard storage device for multimedia that can be stored and used directly on the Internet (Hanson-Smith, 2001). CDs are cost effective to purchase and keep; they are also easy to use and take anywhere (Riley, 1997).

The CD design principle

In designing such a CD, we need to consider the characteristics of good CALL software, which is related to the principles of CALL: providing interaction, options, flexibility, high legibility, readability, consistency, and authenticity (Kessler & Plakans, 2001; Otto, 1988; Schreck & Schreck, 1991; Spratt, 2002).

Procedures

Three questionnaires were used. The first investigated school facilities, the teachers' computer backgrounds, and their attitudes and needs towards WBC; it was completed by eighty-four teachers, from whom the sixteen teachers used as subjects in this research were selected. The second questionnaire surveyed the subjects' need for training and was completed by the sixteen subjects, all of whom were given the CD for trial for approximately two and a half months. The third questionnaire, completed by twelve of these sixteen teachers, reported the hours they spent on the CD, the place and the time they used it, the person they used it with, and their favourite content. Finally, three of these teachers were randomly selected to be interviewed.

The CD content

The first questionnaire found that, while some teachers knew nothing about the Internet and just knew how to open and close the CD, others knew a lot about the Internet (e.g. how to set *Net Watch*). Three groups of teachers were identified in terms of level of familiarity with the Web, those who were:

- not confident in using the Web;
- slightly confident in using the Web;
- confident in using the Web.

Reflecting these three groups and based on the findings of the second questionnaire (on teachers' perceived needs for content of training), the CD was divided into three levels of WBC difficulty, as follows:

- Section 1: How to access the Internet and recommended websites; Simple and advanced searching; E-mail; Bulletin board; Key pals; Chat; Safe Net; and Netiquette;
- Section 2: Types of websites; Selecting websites; Tips for using the Web for language classroom;
- Section 3: Web content for language learning: news, jobs, travel and holidays, music, games, weather forecasts, advertisements; Web communication for language learning: e-mail, newsgroups, e-cards, bulletin boards for online discussion; WebQuests; Online classroom with *NiceNet*; Concordancing; Writing interactive tests with *Hot Potatoes*, *Microsoft Word*; Activities to use the Web in the classroom.

After that, the CD was designed and there were three main programs used in designing the CD: *Microsoft FrontPage*, *SnagIt*, and *HotPotatoes*.

Teachers' use of the CD

The ways the various teachers used the CD were quite similar; normally, they used the CD at school when they were not working, and they used the CD with colleagues. Most teachers used the CD only once, for two hours, from which it can be assumed that they studied under time constraints. Most teachers seemed to have little exposure to computers and the Web. Teachers reported that the most useful content on the CD was in Section 1, which was for those who had little familiarity with the Web. Teachers selected Section 1, *games* and *search*. The difficulties the teachers experienced using the CD were based on their familiarity (or lack thereof) with computers and the Web. Nonetheless, these difficulties are unlikely to impede the teachers' use of WBC in the future because they said that, in spite of obstacles and limitations concerning computer literacy and accessibility, they hoped to implement WBC in ELT.

How teachers learned with the self-study CD

There were factors that made these volunteer teachers suitable for this study. For instance, they were willing to use the CD, which was free of charge; they were working in schools that were suitable for implementing WBC (their schools had several computers with Internet connections available and the teachers had some skills with computers, etc.). However, these factors did not drive them to use the CD as much as might have been anticipated. The way teachers used the CD can be discussed as follows:

- **Openness of feelings:** Openness is essential to the success of self-study (Barnes, 1998). From teachers' low usage of the CD in this study, we can see that there was a mismatch between the attitudes revealed in the questionnaire data and their actual performance. The mismatch might come from teachers in that they did not report their attitudes openly. Thus, teachers' openness of feelings might derive from the perspectives of teachers' cultural background and their relationship with the researcher.
- **Time constraints:** "Schoolteachers in Thailand have to work very hard. They not only teach over 15 hours a week (to over 100 students), but also do administrative work and manage student activities" (Maneekhao, 2001). The subjects in this study were Thai ELT teachers who had a heavy workload in secondary schools, which meant they had to do both teaching and administrative work to fulfill the school requirements. In addition, currently in Thailand, early retirement projects are resulting in teacher shortages, and those remaining face an increasing workload. As a result, heavy workloads made it difficult for these teachers to find time for self-study.
- **Priority:** There might be three factors for teachers not prioritizing using the CD: time constraints; voluntary study; and institutional value. As a result of teachers' heavy workload and the increasing demands on their time, teachers needed to prioritize their jobs to fulfill the school requirements. For that reason, teachers might not have prioritized the CD and might have postponed using it until the final questionnaire was distributed to them and then they spent only sufficient time on the CD to provide answers to the questionnaire. Another factor for teachers not prioritizing using the CD might be because this study was voluntary; thus, teachers

would use the CD in accordance with their preferences. The last factor might concern institutional value. Cole & Knowles (1998) found that, although self-study is a powerful vehicle for teacher education for professional development in teaching, teachers doubted whether self-study had a high exchange value in the eyes of institutional evaluations and assessments. Therefore, they might not have prioritized using the CD and thus used it very little.

- ***Self-discipline***: Harmer (1983) states that discipline refers to a code of conduct, and learning can be more effective with discipline. Therefore, in using the CD for self-study, teachers needed to have self-discipline to perform the study effectively in spite of their time constraints and heavy workload. However, given that the study was voluntary and teachers had freedom of choice despite the time constraints, teachers might not have been self-disciplined or managed their self-study time effectively.
- ***Self-confidence***: Loughran & Northfield (1998) found that self-confidence is a most intriguing aspect of self-study because it can increase the ability to work autonomously. In this study, self-study concerns teachers' autonomy in learning, which is important for a professionally rewarding learning experience. Most teachers used the CD with colleagues, so it is possible that teachers were not autonomous learners and lacked self-confidence in using the CD individually. Moreover, they may have used the CD very little since studying the CD with colleagues at school was difficult because of their heavy workload and time constraints.
- ***Seeing the CD was not helpful***: Teachers have considerable personal baggage (Trappes-Lomax & McGrath, 1999). Teachers who had skills and existing knowledge in computers and the Web might regard the CD as unhelpful for their teaching and professional development. Teachers were given the CD and a manual explaining how to use the CD. As already noted, the CD contains three parts to suit teachers' different familiarity with the Web. If teachers did not read the CD manual, or did not read its introduction page, they may have used the sections that did not match their level of computer familiarity and thus might have deemed the CD to be of no use to them.
- ***Judging the CD from its cover***: The CD did not have a commercial look. Its cover and packaging were made in-house, in black ink on white paper. Seeing that the CD was not attractively packaged, teachers might have judged it to be unprofessional. This, combined with the fact that it was free, may have led teachers to underestimate its value and content.

Guidelines for producing teacher-training material on CD

Teachers chose to use the topics from the perspectives of design and use; and we saw that they did not visit pages due to unfamiliar terms and placement on pages. Consequently, the suggested guidelines for producing teacher-training material on CD might include:

- ***Organizing lists of links***

Given that the organization of links affects teachers' use of the CD and teachers chose to click on the topics that were on the upper part of the page, we should consider organizing lists of links in alternative ways:

- Prioritize the topics that sound useful and familiar to teachers by putting things they want to know on the top, or in the most salient region on the page;
- Place the topics differently from a vertical system of organization;
- Give fewer choices and add more steps in the hierarchy of links.

- ***Simplifying terms used in headings***

It seems that teachers would click on the topics that sound useful and familiar to them, such as *search, games, grammar, songs, activities* and *exercises*. Teachers were likely not to click on the topics that were unfamiliar to them even though the topics were what they had reported they wanted to know. Therefore, the CD needs terms that are simplified; for example, *WebQuests* could be replaced by the term *Project-work on the Net*.

- ***Providing a glossary page for ELT and Internet terms***

Teachers might need help to understand ELT and Internet terms so that they can choose to use the pages directly related to their needs and interests. The CD therefore should provide glossary pages with definitions in simplified English that help teachers to understand the terms. The definitions can be on separate pages or be within the same pages but in additional columns or on pop-up links.

- ***Providing an L1 manual***

There should be a detailed Thai manual describing the content in each section. This may help teachers who have time constraints to see what exactly they want to look for and go directly to the topics they want when they operate the CD.

- ***Providing Thai explanations***

Thai explanations may help teachers who have difficulties in comprehending pages where the entire explanation is in English. This concerns Thai ELT teachers' insufficient English language skills (Baiyaem, 1997 cited in Wiriyaichitra, 2002). Therefore, links to pages containing Thai explanations may be added where it seems likely that teachers may have problems comprehending the English.

- ***Using Auto-Run to start the CD***

Teachers with low computer proficiency may have difficulty in operating the CD. Seeing that teachers are not likely to contact the CD designer when they experience difficulties in using the CD, auto-run should be implemented to allow teachers to start using the CD without problems.

Recommendations for using the CD for self-study

- The Ministry of Education and schools need to value teacher development and encourage teachers to keep learning. Schools should provide a rich environment and sufficient time for them to do self-study, and those who are self-motivated to keep learning should be praised and should obtain credits and promotion as a reward from their schools. If the ministry and schools sincerely care about teachers' learning and teacher development and are able to make teachers believe that they value teachers' learning, barriers such as time constraints, priorities, and self-discipline for teachers doing self-study might be diminished.
- Schools should arrange study-groups, which could consist of teachers who are interested in WBC and want to do the self-study together. These study-groups could arrange time for self-study and have a key person to demonstrate to participants how to use the CD for self-study and how it can enhance their professional development. This would help teachers share expertise both in computer technology and pedagogy.
- Schools should help teachers to access the CD easily at their convenience by placing the CD in easy-to-use locations such as in the offices, libraries, self-access corners; alternatively, saving the CD content on computers in teachers' offices might encourage teachers to use the material for self-study.

- The CD should require teachers' engagement, commitment and responsibility in learning. Providing interactive tasks or problem-solving tasks may make teachers take more interest in monitoring their learning. There should be questionnaires or other follow-up assessments to see how the CD benefits teachers' learning and also help teachers see their progress.

Conclusion

We can say that Thai ELT teachers were enthusiastic to use WBC because of the impact of ministry directives, the computer age, and teachers' interest to improve their teaching. However, training teachers with a self-study CD needs more support from schools in order to diminish time constraints, increase accessibility to the Internet, and increase motivation for teachers to learn and become sufficiently confident to develop professionally. The ministry could exploit teachers' attitudes to meet their policy of improving the quality of education in Thailand by giving a larger proportion of top-down solutions and putting more concrete and consistent efforts to help teachers learn to use WBC effectively. Acquiring skills for dealing with basic computer configurations cannot happen overnight; rather, it can be done by allowing teachers to have extended exposure to computers. In addition, the ministry and schools should value teachers' learning, and promote and facilitate it by supporting effective facilities and providing appropriate training to suit the teachers' working schedule.

With more support from the Ministry of Education, hopefully there can be a shift in education reform whereby teachers become computer literate and willing to upgrade their skills. However, from teachers' low use of the CD developed for this study, it can be seen that a self-study CD may not be the most appropriate format to provide training and we might think of other modes of training such as workshops.

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