Chapter 44

The Influence of the Cultural and Linguistic Orientations of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) Students on Their Responses to Literatures on the Internet

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ABSTRACT

Responding to the call for research to investigate the technological, linguistic and socio-cultural aspects pertaining to the use of the internet in the EFL classroom, this chapter seeks to report on the research that shows how Omani students studying at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) view their interaction with the internet while responding to it as a means of communication and as a source of authentic materials and literatures written in English. The chapter provides insights into the socio-cultural views of these students towards the web: its relevance to their lives, personal and academic needs, cultural values, attributes and traditions. It also provides a review of literature that elucidates the challenges facing those who intend to use the internet in instruction and education and focuses on three main divides: the digital, the linguistic and the content.

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INTRODUCTION

Literacy can be viewed as a set of skills to communicate effectively, which is determined by social, economic, cultural, political and technological factors. These factors are all related and they work in conjunction with each other. Historically, however, technological advances have been a major determiner of what these literacy skills should be. For the most part, it is technological advances that have created and recreated the different notions of literacy, be it literacy in the mother tongue or literacy in a second or a foreign language.

At present and because of the massive technological advances that our world has been witnessing, we find ourselves living in an information age, and in a globalized world. National borders have extended beyond the realms of countries, and trade and financial markets have become more integrated via modern electronic communications. The internet and email have made the fast interchange of an inordinate amount of information possible for those who seek it. Contemporary research has shown that English, as the international lingua franca, is the language most present in the internet and most used as the formal means of communication among people of different languages. This has further underscored the importance of this language as a means of communication around the world and so it has recreated a new vision of literacy among many educational circles. Being able to communicate in English has become in a sense a window to the world.

Due to its many advantages, educational institutions have turned to the internet to facilitate learning processes for their students. Among the obvious advantages of the internet are the following: it is convenient and accessible; it is a repository of knowledge and culture (De Long, 1997); it provides excellent opportunities for communication and interchange of cultural experiences (Bennett, 1993); it also creates opportunities for engaging learners in activities that require cognitive and communicative functions and thus “scaffold” and nurture them (Vygotsky, 1986). In addition, the internet is a very powerful information resource that provides users with more opportunities to explore the “collective experience” of mankind (Kagan, 1981) and to get a better understanding of individual, local and global empirical processes (Lotman, 1992).

THE USE OF THE INTERNET IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

In the field of English language instruction, the scope of positive effects of the internet is very wide. Krauss (2000) claims, that the internet has made language learning practices more effective as it contains a wealth of literatures of different genres (articles, stories, etc.) on an enormously broad array of topics. The availability of such valuable resources has permitted increased meaningful practices in and outside the language classroom (Krauss, 2000). Internet features has provided English language learners with innovative mediating tools that empowered and motivated them to overcoming psychological and socio-cultural barriers. The internet has also provided them with a venue to integrate language skills and to interact in them (Demchenko, 1997).

Due to its massive potential to provide endless and meaningful opportunities for the enhancement of integrated language learning, many EFL and ESL teachers enthusiastically embraced the internet. They started to use it as a source of materials and information (March, 1995) that could help their students to enhance their linguistic and communicative skills (Ter-Minasova, 2000). Teachers also expected to exploit the internet with its “variety of human connection” (March, 1995) to provide their students with unique opportunities to learn outside the familiar context and to get a deeper understanding of other cultures and social groups (Tuzlukova, Eltayeb, 2008).