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EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Perspectives on Internet-Assisted Language Teaching

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Abstract

Although the rapid increase of Internet availability has generated great interest in Internet-assisted language teaching (IALT) among English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers, little is known at present about EFL teachers' use of the Internet. This article addresses this issue and reports the results of a study that examined Korean secondary school EFL teachers' perceptions and perspectives on the use of the Internet for teaching purposes. A total of 101 teachers participated in a survey and responded to the questions of how they think about IALT, how they use the Internet, and what types of resources they use on the Internet. The findings of the study suggest that there are three key factors affecting the use of the Internet in the classroom: teachers' personal interest in Internet use; teachers' abilities to integrate Internet resources into classroom activities; and computer facilities and technical support in schools. In-service teacher training courses for IALT are strongly recommended to further develop and implement IALT.

Introduction

Along with the impact of information and communication technology (ICT) on society, the Internet is widely used in many sectors. Since the early 1990s, the Korean Ministry of Education has supported and provided primary and

secondary schools with multimedia computers, software programs and Internet connections to encourage the use of computers and the Internet for education in Korea. As a result, the Internet has become a useful tool for Korean teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) in schools as they can find and use a variety of resources and materials on the Internet. For this reason, Korean EFL teachers seem to have general interests in the use of the Internet for their teaching purposes. Many teachers, nevertheless, do not seem to make effective use of the Internet for their teaching. In spite of widespread Internet connections in Korean secondary schools, little computer-assisted language learning (CALL) research, particularly on the use of the Internet for teaching EFL to Korean secondary school students, has been conducted so far. The study reported in this article attempts to respond to the need for more CALL research in the Korean context through an investigation of Korean secondary school EFL teachers' perceptions and perspectives on the use of the Internet.

The Internet and Language Teaching

The Internet is constantly growing in popularity and availability. Many people use the Internet daily, sometimes without even being aware of the fact that they use the Internet on a daily basis. As noted by Warschauer, Shetzer and Meloni (2000), the Internet has been reshaping many aspects of society such as on-line education, advertising, marketing and sales. A number of language teachers have become interested in using the Internet since recent developments in ICT support diversity in learning methods and multimedia materials that can be useful for language learners. The vast amount of information linked by hypertext on the Web seems highly valuable for learners with a self-directed learning style. Each learner is allowed and encouraged "to manage the learning process independently and to explore linked pieces of information non-sequentially on the basis of their personal preferences and needs" (Son, 1998, p. 121). Language teachers, accordingly, can make their classes individualised and personalised, resulting in self-empowerment and autonomy in learning (Warschauer, Turbee & Roberts, 1996).

The Internet is a powerful tool for finding information from educational organizations, governmental organizations, business companies and individuals across the world (Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000). The Internet is also an important medium that provides the potential for purposeful and powerful use of on-line communication in language and writing classes (Warschauer, 2000). On the Internet, English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) teachers can reinforce students to use the target language in an authentic setting (Daugherty & Funke, 1998; Moore, 1996; Mosquera, 2001). The Internet can also be a useful tool for collaboration among ESL/EFL learners locally, nationally or globally. It can be used to acquire information

from a large number of language resources for a variety of purposes (Daugherty & Funke, 1998; Gonglewski, Meloni & Brant, 2001; Moore, 1996; Pennington, 1996; Ryder & Graves, 1997; Singhal, 1997; Smith, 1997; Warschauer, 2000).

Teachers can not only access the Internet for finding resources for their classes but also supply their own materials, knowledge and ideas for other teachers via the Internet (Warschauer, Shetzer & Meloni, 2000). For example, they can create homepages for the purpose of their lessons and put their materials on-line (Meagher, 1995). Muehleisen (1997) recommends ESL/EFL teachers to utilize the Internet in their classes for motivating students to use the English language outside the classroom and to make the language a part of their daily lives. Kern and Warschauer (2000) indicate that language learners with access to the Internet can potentially communicate with native speakers of English all over the world. They can communicate either on a one-to-one or a many-to-many basis any time they need from school, home or work. Therefore, it is not surprising that many ESL/EFL teachers have embraced Internet-assisted language teaching (IALT) and have developed new ways of using the Internet with their students.

Peterson (2000) points out that an Internet-based learning environment can offer an instructional tool. Ryder and Graves (1997) also assert that the Internet is a dynamic medium, which provides teachers and students with immediate access to tools and resources. Similarly, Daugherty and Funke (1998) describe that the Internet can provide a wealth of information to students that are not readily available in textbooks or lectures. Students can access information and resources simply by having a computer with an Internet connection. The information is usually presented in meaningful contexts to explore widely or specifically. In addition, the use of the Internet can be interactive and collaborative in nature. Through e-mail, conferencing tools and newsgroups, a virtual community of learners can exchange knowledge, ideas and perspectives on certain issues or topics. As a result, the Internet can increase EFL learners' motivation to learn the English language (Rico & Vinagre, 2000).

The advancement of the Internet has created new ways of learning and teaching ESL/EFL. For instance, the Internet can be considered as an ideal learning and teaching tool because it offers authentic learning resources available without having to travel to English-speaking countries (Gonglewski, Meloni, & Brant, 2001; Singhal, 1997; Smith, 1997). Crystal (1997) notes that an estimated 85% of electronically stored information in the world is in English, so it is important for English language teachers to look at the social, economic, cultural and linguistic consequences of the global spread of the English language influenced by the development of the Internet. Warschauer (1996) also suggests that teachers should think about the implication of the use of the Internet for their classes because the Internet has become so

widespread in schools with increasing use by both teachers and students. In addition, Shetzer and Warschauer (2000) put forward that teachers need to learn how to use Internet tools with support and encouragement from their teaching situations. In other words, teachers need to gain knowledge and develop skills to use the Internet effectively in order to maximise on-line teaching.

The Study

The subjects in the study were 101 Korean secondary school EFL teachers (52 males and 49 females). The age range of the respondents was from 23 to 60 years with a mean age of 38. Their teaching experience ranged from less than 5 years to more than 25 years with a mean of 13 years. The study used a questionnaire to document Korean secondary school EFL teachers' perceptions and perspectives on the use of the Internet for English language teaching purposes. The questionnaire (Appendix) consisted of three sections: a demographic section to get respondents' background information; a multiple-choice section to find their perceptions and perspectives on the use of the Internet using a modified Likert scale; and an open-ended question section to elicit their general opinions or comments on the use of the Internet for teaching purposes in the classroom. It was distributed on-line and off-line to 150 Korean secondary school EFL teachers in Kyungki and Chungnam provinces in Korea. A total of 101 completed questionnaires had been returned within two-month time and the data collected from the questionnaire were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively.

Results

The results of the questionnaire indicate that a majority of the EFL teachers actually used the Internet for their teaching purposes. The teachers used the Internet more for the preparation of teaching materials than directly with students in the classroom. More than half of the teachers (51 out of 101) used the Internet with their students in the classroom for teaching purposes. Of the 51 teachers who used the Internet with their students in the classroom, 45 teachers used the Internet more than once a month. Most teachers (88 out of 101) also used Internet resources to prepare their teaching materials. Of the 88 teachers who used the Internet for preparation of their teaching materials, 61 teachers used the Internet more than five hours a week.

As shown in Figure 1, the 51 Internet users tended to use more than one Internet activity in their classrooms. Among the types of Internet activities, Web surfing activities were employed most often in their classrooms.

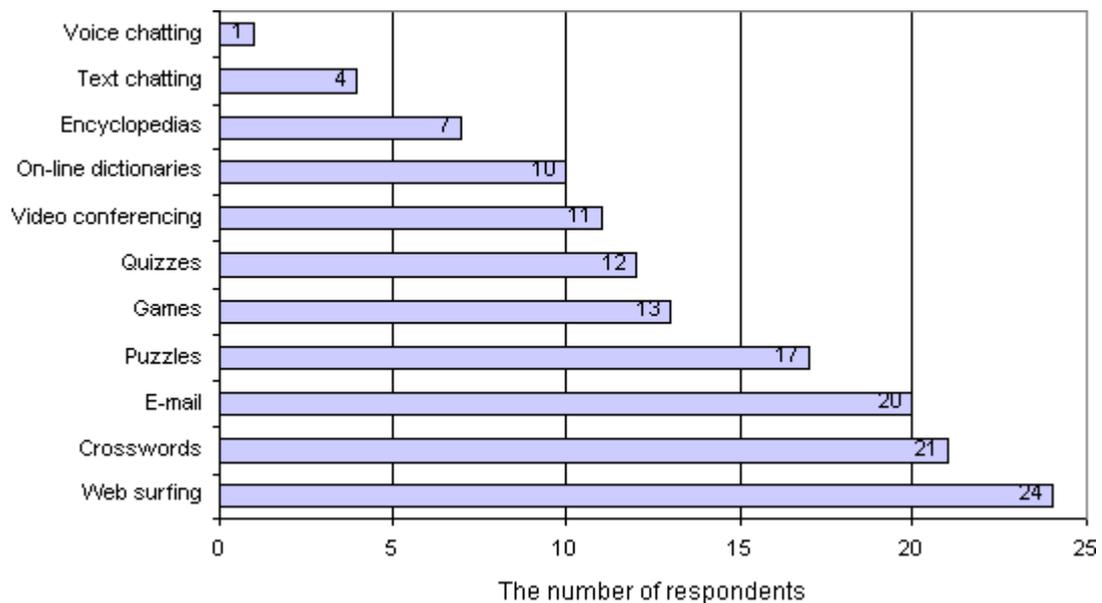


Figure 1: Types of Internet activities used in the classroom (N=51)

The other 50 teachers, who did not use the Internet in the classroom, also wished to use more than one Internet activity in the classroom if they had Internet-assisted classes. They wished to use crosswords, games and Web surfing activities with their students in the classroom. They also wanted to seek out and use a wider variety of Internet resources if allowed. Both the Internet users and non-users showed common interest in using Web surfing and crosswords activities more frequently than other activities.

The 50 non-users gave the reasons for not using the Internet in the classroom in the following order: limited computer facilities; limited time; teachers' limited computer skills; teachers' limited interest; students' limited English ability; students' limited interest; teachers' limited English ability; and/or students' limited computer skills (See Figure 2).

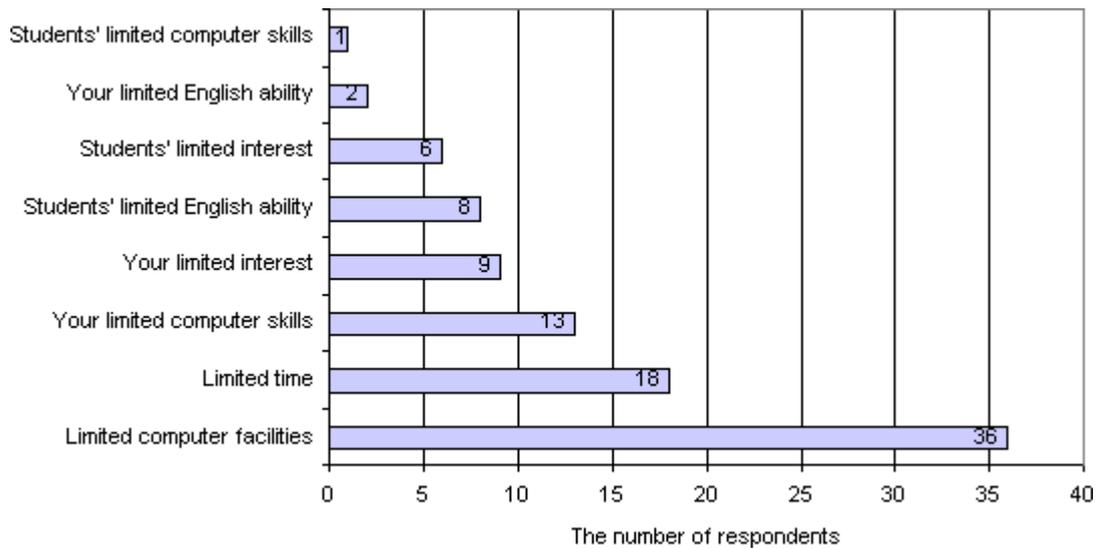


Figure 2: Reasons for preventing Internet use in the classroom (N=50)

Most teachers (88 out of 101) used Internet resources to prepare their teaching materials because Internet resources were: varied (49); easy to obtain (42); up-to-date (23); free of charge (17); authentic (16); and easy to understand (15). On the other hand, the 13 non-users reported that: Internet resources were difficult to use with textbooks (6); finding Internet resources were time-consuming (5); they did not have interest in using them (5); and Internet resources were difficult to understand, difficult to obtain or not available (1 respectively).

Less than half of the teachers (46 out of 101) indicated that they had participated in in-service training courses to learn how to use the Internet for teaching purposes. Of the 46 teachers, 36 teachers (78.3%) reported that they were satisfied with the training courses. The 55 non-participants in in-service training courses reported that they had: lack of time (27); no courses available (13); no interest (8); and a distance to training courses (7). In terms of professional development, almost 95 % of the non-participants (52 out of 55) showed their willingness to participate in in-service training courses in the future.

The results of the teachers' responses to Section Two of the questionnaire are given in Table 1. Most teachers generally agreed that the Internet provides them with a rich learning environment (86.1%) and Internet tools can be used for teaching purposes (91.1%). To the question of replacing textbooks with Internet resources, on the other hand, the teachers gave somewhat mixed responses: 67 teachers agreed and 34 teachers disagreed.

With the easiness to find ESL/EFL materials on the Web, similarly, 70 teachers showed their agreement while 31 teachers showed their disagreement. However, the teachers gave strong positive responses to the usefulness of ESL/EFL Websites. Most of them also indicated that students could be motivated by the use of the Internet and could improve their language skills through the use of the Internet. In addition, they tended to agree with the possibility of students' self-directed learning in the use of the Internet and the improvement of students' communication skills by e-mailing or chatting with native speakers of English.

In some cases, the teachers' disagreement was also found. Approximately 36% of the teachers disagreed that students would be more attentive in Internet-assisted English language teaching classes and teachers are responsible for the success of Internet-assisted English language teaching. More noticeably, about 53.5% of the teachers did not feel competent to use Internet-based materials in the classroom and about 43.5% of the teachers indicated that they did not know how to integrate Internet resources into existing classroom curricula. Following these responses, a large number of the teachers (84.1%) agreed with the need for Internet literacy training and most teachers (89.2%) indicated that they would like to use Internet-based materials and activities in their classrooms as much as possible.

Table 1
Teachers' Responses to the Questionnaire Items (N=101)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
1. The Internet provides non-native speakers of English with a rich learning environment.	0	14 (13.9%)	58 (57.4%)	29 (28.7%)	3.15
2. Internet tools can be used for teaching purposes.	2 (2.0%)	7 (6.9%)	64 (63.4%)	28 (27.7%)	3.17
3. Internet resources can replace textbooks.	4 (4.0%)	30 (29.7%)	55 (54.5%)	12 (11.9%)	2.74
4. It is easy to find ESL/EFL materials on the Web.	1 (1.0%)	30 (29.7%)	58 (57.4%)	12 (11.9%)	2.80
5. ESL/EFL Websites are useful for teaching English.	1 (1.0%)	12 (11.9%)	72 (71.3%)	16 (15.8%)	3.02
6. Students can be motivated by the use of the Internet in the classroom.	2 (2.0%)	16 (15.8%)	70 (69.3%)	13 (12.9%)	2.93
7. Students can improve their English skills through the use of the Internet.	1 (1.0%)	18 (17.8%)	69 (68.3%)	13 (12.9%)	2.93
8. Students can learn how to use Internet resources for learning English for	3 (3.0%)	23 (22.8%)	63 (62.4%)	12 (11.9%)	2.83

themselves.					
9. Students can improve communication skills by e-mailing or chatting with native speakers of English on-line.	1 (1.0%)	12 (11.9%)	70 (69.3%)	18 (17.8%)	3.04
10. Students will be more attentive in Internet-assisted English language teaching classes.	5 (5.0%)	32 (31.7%)	60 (59.4%)	4 (4.0%)	2.62
11. I am responsible for the success of Internet-assisted English language teaching.	1 (1.0%)	36 (35.6%)	59 (58.4%)	5 (5.0%)	2.67
12. I am competent to use Internet-based materials in the classroom.	2 (2.0%)	52 (51.5%)	41 (40.6%)	6 (5.9%)	2.50
13. I know how to integrate Internet resources into existing classroom curricula.	7 (6.9%)	37 (36.6%)	52 (51.5%)	5 (5.0%)	2.54
14. I need training to improve my Internet literacy skills.	3 (3.0%)	13 (12.9%)	66 (65.3%)	19 (18.8%)	3.00
15. I would like to use Internet-based materials and activities in my classroom as much as possible.	1 (1.0%)	10 (9.9%)	75 (74.3%)	15 (14.9%)	3.03

Through the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, the teachers indicated difficulties in using the Internet in the classroom as follows: managing the Internet in the classroom because many students like to play games or Korean chatting sites that are irrelevant to their lessons; not only slow Internet connection or disconnection but also technical problems during the class; finding appropriate teaching materials and integrating Internet resources into their classroom curricula; taking much time to prepare and arrange facilities to use the Internet; and finding students' plagiarism. They are also concerned that: their incompetence in both Internet literacy skills and technical skills; inappropriate English language vocabulary and expressions on the Internet; lack of morality and socializing of students; students' finance for saving materials instead of writing on their notebooks; and managing the traditional regular class after IALT sessions.

Nonetheless, the teachers made positive comments on the future of IALT in Korea. Their responses included: the Internet can be an effective EFL teaching tool; Internet use has become global for both teachers and students; the Internet provides valuable resources for EFL instruction; the Internet provides various resources for English language teaching and learning because EFL resources on the Internet have been developed in many ways; the Internet can make EFL students creative; many teachers try to teach their students practical English by using Internet resources; and

students may want to study English with Internet resources for themselves after class. In addition, there were largely six suggestions to make the future of IALT successful mentioned by the teachers: (1) teachers should motivate students to cooperate and collaborate in the IALT class continuously; (2) teachers should find appropriate Internet resources and integrate them into their classroom teaching properly; (3) schools should provide sufficient computer facilities for both teachers and students to access and use the Internet; (4) teachers should be trained to be competent in using the Internet in the classroom; (5) Internet resources should be developed in line with school textbooks; and (6) teachers should correlate the IALT class with the traditional class.

Discussion

Overall, Korean secondary school EFL teachers' attitudes toward the use of the Internet for teaching purposes were positive. Of the 101 teachers, 51 teachers used the Internet for students in the actual classroom while 88 teachers used it to prepare teaching materials. Most non-Internet users wished to use the Internet if allowed and most non-participants in in-service training courses showed willingness to take training courses if available. A total of 92 teachers believed that Internet resources could be used for teaching purposes. The teachers generally agreed that the use of the Internet could be an effective way of teaching EFL because the Internet provides students with a rich learning environment where they can find authentic resources for learning the English language. The teachers considered the Internet as a useful EFL teaching tool and pointed out that there are a great number of Websites containing various types of learning materials. They also thought that students could improve communication skills on the Internet. At the same time, they expressed the view that they should learn ways of using the Internet for their students who are quite familiar with the Internet.

Most teachers in the study believe that the Internet can be an effective tool for finding authentic resources, sharing information, communicating with target language speakers and motivating students. However, they seem to have difficulties in using the Internet in the classroom. Contextual reasons for not using the Internet include limited computer facilities, limited class hours, inappropriate class size and limited technical support. Unexpected Internet disconnections can be also a problem. If the Internet is disconnected in the classroom without any notice, the class may be disorganized unless the classroom teacher has backup lesson plans. Teachers also need to pay extra attention to students when they have more than 40 students accessing the Internet in a classroom. Students may even visit irrelevant Websites during the class. It would be very difficult for a teacher to prevent this kind of behaviour unless either the class has a small

number of students or there is a teaching assistant. Finding or creating well-designed Internet resources or materials can be also time-consuming to teachers.

It seems, nevertheless, that Korean secondary school EFL teachers are aware of the advantages of using the Internet in the classroom, seeing the Internet as an invaluable source of useful information for teaching their teenage students. Social changes and student expectations arising from the rapid development of the Internet request teachers to make effective use of the Internet in schools. Regardless of the difficulties they have in their teaching situations, therefore, teachers need to find ways of working around the situations to provide better EFL instruction. The potential of the Internet can be enormous if they make efforts to find and use Internet resources with positive attitudes.

In IALT, teachers can use different types of teaching methods on the basis of their students' interest or needs. The use of the Internet supports the shift from the traditional teacher-centred classroom to the learner-centred classroom that is a current pedagogical preference in EFL teaching. Interaction with other people using computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools such as e-mail, discussion groups or chatting tools could be socially meaningful. Without being conscious of it, students may no longer consider learning the English language as a required subject in schools. Instead, they may consider the English language as a means of communicating with people from all over the world.

For the effective implementation of IALT, EFL teachers need to be competent enough to use Internet-based materials in the classroom. As suggested by the teachers' responses to the questions of their competency in the use of Internet-based materials and their knowledge of the integration of Internet resources into existing curricular, in-service training courses for IALT should be offered to teachers who need to learn how to use Internet resources, how to create or select Internet-based activities, how to plan Internet-assisted lessons and how to integrate Internet resources into actual classroom teaching. Through the training, which helps them understand pedagogical and technical aspects of IALT, teachers would be able to engage in their professional development and, as a result, their interest and willingness to use Internet-based materials and activities in the classroom could be well responded and constructively put into practice.

Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that teachers have positive views on the use of the Internet for teaching EFL while they have difficulties in finding appropriate teaching materials and in integrating Internet resources into their

curriculum. The difficulties seem to be caused by the huge amount of information available on the Internet and limited time to seek useful information. Another difficulty reported by the teachers is the organisation and management of IALT classes. When teachers use the Internet in the classroom, they need carefully selected Internet resources. They also need to address issues of controlling students' access to lesson-related Websites, managing class time and solving technical problems. To reduce the difficulties, teachers are required to develop Internet literacy and integration skills for themselves or through teacher training courses for IALT. If all EFL teachers undertake well-planned training courses to gain and improve their Internet skills, EFL instruction using Internet resources could be enhanced more actively, collaboratively and consistently across the school system. It is also suggested that schools should be provided with modern, functional computer facilities assisted by technical support. Although teachers report that their schools have computers with Internet connections, they point out that these connections do not seem to be good for use in the classroom yet. That is, teachers need appropriate computer facilities with reliable Internet connections as well as technical support to implement and promote IALT, which can improve the teaching of EFL. What emerges upon reflection on the findings of the study is recognition of the relationship between the Internet and EFL teaching with possibilities of resolving operational issues such as matching teaching and training needs and combining Internet resources into established EFL teaching resources for the effective use of the Internet in EFL classrooms.

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Appendix

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