Teaching Turkish in low tech contexts: opportunities and challenges

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Abstract. Language learning has witnessed a series of changes with regards to the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Recently, the digital divide has been a topic of discussion in language learning studies. Digital divide is the inequality that exists between information-poor and information-rich communities. Within the field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), scant literature exists regarding the use of technology in poor ICT contexts. Yet, many people learn and teach language in such contexts. Egbert and Yang (2004) define low-tech context as possessing limited general access to technology, limited or no Internet access, no software, old and mandated software, and few computers and other technologies. Following action research design, we implemented a small-scale intervention using game-based quizzes in order to address the challenges encountered in teaching Turkish in a limited-tech context. Data collected included questionnaires, focus groups and participant observation in the classroom. The findings of the study informed the opportunities and challenges of teaching and learning Turkish in a technology-limited classroom.

Keywords: student response system, low-tech context, game-based quiz, Turkish language.

1. Introduction

Language learning has witnessed a series of changes with regards to the use of ICT. At the end of the twentieth century, CALL is characterised by high speed internet connections, advances in digital technology and smaller sizes of computer hardware, laptops, multimedia mobile phones, tablets and improved learning environments such as web 2.0, etc. (Borau, Ullrich, Feng, & Shen, 2009; Parmaxi,

Zaphiris, Papadima-Sophocleous, & Ioannou, 2013). While some people have the opportunity of using the above wide range of technology in language learning, others find it difficult to access and use them. Hence, there is a demarcation between those that have access to technology and those that do not. This demarcation is referred to as a digital divide. Recently, the digital divide has been a topic of discussion in language learning studies and is defined as the divide between those who can effectively use new information and communication tools, such as the Internet, and those who cannot (Knobel, Stone, & Warschauer, 2002). Following Egbert and Yang's (2004) characteristics of low tech context as possessing limited general access to technology, limited or no Internet access, no software, old and mandated software, and few computers and other technologies, we classified the Turkish class in a public school in the Republic of Cyprus as a low tech context. It is against this background that this research sets out to investigate whether there are benefits and setbacks associated with learning Turkish in such a context. In an attempt to infuse technology in a low-tech context, we employed 'Kahoot!', a free game-based learning platform that makes it fun to learn using a collection of questions on specific topics, as an appropriate option. In the following sections, we describe the methodology employed, followed by major results and major conclusions drawn from this research.

2. Methodology

2.1. The setting

The study took place in a public school in the district of Larnaca, in the Republic of Cyprus. The group consisted of nine students from eight to 54 years old aiming to learn Turkish at A1 level. A questionnaire for measuring students' digital literacy and attitude towards educational technology lead to the conclusions that none of the students had used technology for educational purposes before, although they recognised its benefits. The classroom was equipped with old and new computers, slow wired Ethernet internet connection and a projector. The classroom had no Wi-Fi connection.

2.2. Research design and data collection

The study was based on action research and data was gathered with the mixed method of participatory observation, semi-structured focus group, and discussion, in the frequency of two weekly 90 minute lessons, for a total of 13 weeks.

The instructor employed Kahoot! as a means to foster students' engagement and motivation in the language classroom. Kahoot! was selected as it was an easy solution for creating fun and interactive activities for students, with a website that was easy to use and navigate. Moreover, Kahoot! allowed for the existing technologies available in the class to be used - projector and desktop computers with slow internet connection. In this study, the instructor created quizzes in Kahoot! related to the topics of each lesson. The aim was for Kahoot! to facilitate learning, and assess students' grammar and reading skills within a friendly and comfortable environment. As there was no Wi-Fi access, students were participating in the quiz via the desktop computers. The quiz was played during the last twenty minutes of each lesson. The questions were based on the material taught during the lesson, allowing for students to playfully assess their reading and grammar skills in Turkish. A question had four possible answers, and after every question students and instructor discussed the responses since they were able to see their mistakes and correct answers. Due to low internet connectivity and insufficiency of computers, students would work in groups for replying to a Kahoot! quiz.

3.   Results and discussion

The analysis of the focus group and participant observation revealed several challenges addressed in the low-tech environment. Students' diverse personal motivations and abilities due to the age difference was an initial challenge in this study. Younger students would learn Turkish upon their parents' choice. On the other hand, students around the age of 20, chose the Turkish language as they thought it would enhance their professional development and the age bracket of 40+ would learn Turkish as a hobby. Moreover, it was observed that younger students needed more time to understand grammatical rules, compared to adult learners. Building on this challenge, and especially on students' diverse skills, interests, motivations, goals, and abilities, the instructor of this course employed a game-based quiz for providing an interactive and playful means for encouraging students to work together using the available technology in the classroom. Technology appeared to bring younger and older learners together towards a common venture; to correctly answer a Kahoot! quiz. Younger students would contribute to the use of technology and adult learners would contribute to questions related to grammatical rules. Adults who stated at first that the use of educational technology was new for them and could not realise if there would be any improvement in their language skills, were finally convinced and inspired by the younger ones who were excited and not afraid of the unknown. As stated in the focus group, the colourful environment of Kahoot! helped the visual learners remember important features of the Turkish grammar.

During the game, and after every round of questions, students were discussing their answers and gave feedback. Students noted that the feedback given after every question would help them understand and have a clear view of the new features taught during the lesson. All students agreed on the added value of technology in making their learning more interesting. They also enjoyed the fact that Kahoot! was played at the end of the lesson and it was a clever way of both assessment and learning. Simultaneously, the metacognitive ability was increased while students were trying to explore the use of technology and also find the correct answer using their language skills. Overall, students expressed enthusiasm and excitement while interacting with the game, and despite the difficulties encountered (e.g. low-internet connectivity) they successfully managed to engage with the activity.

The lack of specialised manpower was counted as an additional challenging factor, since a non-specialized on educational technology teacher integrated technology in a low-tech context. From the instructor's side, the use of technology entailed a series of concerns connected to its practical application and pedagogical grounding, regardless of audience's age and motivation. The role of the teacher was crucial in forming the activity in such a way that would convince students that technology could be an effective means of language learning. In order to do so, the instructor of this course dedicated time for managing the technology and linking it with students' interests. Kahoot! also allowed the teacher to informally assess students' performance and intervene for providing additional explanation were needed.

4. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to evaluate challenges and opportunities in teaching Turkish in a low-context environment. This study concluded that, despite the challenges, low-techs contexts can give more opportunities than a no technology context. Evaluating the challenges and taking advantage of the opportunities by using any available technological tools, can still transform a traditional language classroom to a modern one. Challenges addressed include lack of specialised manpower, insufficient time for practice, mixed age group and diverse personal reasons for attending the course. In addressing the aforementioned challenges, the use of game-based quizzes was conceived as a playful way for bringing students closer and creating a group environment. Upon its use, several opportunities arose for enhancing students' concentration, allowing for mastery of the limited technology, an increased metacognitive ability, and adequate interaction in the classroom. This study demonstrates that despite the challenges, teachers in low-

tech are encouraged to be more resourceful and be involved in in-service training in order to inform their practice with research findings.

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