Teachers and Technology: Comparing University and School Languages Educators' Perceptions of Technology and Their Own IT Literacy

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Abstract. Educators at all levels of education are increasingly required to adopt information technology (IT) and integrate it into their teaching practice. Some researchers have found that this goal is "neither value neutral or universally understood" (Jamieson-Proctor, Burnett, Finger, & Watson, 2006, p. 511). In this paper, I discuss an ongoing study of the perceptions of three groups of language educators relating to the use of IT in their teaching practice and of their own IT literacy collected via responses to a short questionnaire. The three cohorts are distinct: the first is a cross-section of school teachers of diverse languages and experience; the second is a group of school teachers of different languages but who have identified as "leaders" (previously discussed in Absalom, 2011). These two school-based groups are compared with language teachers in higher education. The analysis of questionnaire responses will explore perceptions of information and communication technology (ICT) in relation to factors such as gender, age, teaching context and disciplinary identity. The paper will explore the implications of the study, including those relating to professional learning needs.

Keywords: university language programs, teacher perceptions, ICT integration, language education.

1. Introduction

Like other educational institutions, universities are enthusiastically embracing technology in all spheres of their activity: from learning and teaching, to research design and information management, to staff and student systems and cornering market share. While there is clearly a desire for such integration or mainstreaming of ICT at the policy level, there remains a clear disconnect between policy and practice. With talk of Web 3.0 ever more frequent (Agarwal, 2009), many language educators

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seem to be late adopters of Web 2.0 technologies, some even wrestling with Web 1.0 systems (Teo, 2009). Sang, Valcke, van Braak, Tondeur, and Zhu (2011) and Park and Son (2009) describe the explicit relationship between teachers' perception of ICT and their adoption of it in teaching and learning contexts. This paper builds on previous research exploring the perceptions of two groups of language educators (Absalom, 2011). In that preliminary study, I found that the older the teacher, the stronger the perception that students outstripped her ICT knowledge and/or competency (Absalom, 2011, p. 623). While 75% of respondents in the previous study indicated that they used computers a lot in their everyday life, this did not translate to high levels of integration in teaching and learning (Absalom, 2011, p. 622). In this paper, I will revisit the data from the previous study as well as adding new data from Australian university language educators to explore the relationships between perceptions of ICT and ICT competency and use in life and teaching practice. I will also explore the barriers to integration of ICT in language programs at university level.

2. Method

2.1. Data collection

The current study uses an online survey instrument to interrogate university language educators' perceptions and uses of ICT and technology. The survey was developed using SurveyMonkey and, after appropriate human ethics clearance, an invitation email was sent to language academics in language programs around Australia as shown in Table 1. It was decided to concentrate on academic staff in modern foreign language programs. The invitation also encouraged academic staff to invite their sessionally employed colleagues to respond to the survey. At the time of writing, 46 respondents had completed the online survey.

Table 1.

State/Territory	Number of institutions	Number of academics	Languages
New South Wales	Six	130	Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Russian, Spanish
Victoria	Six	144	Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Greek, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, Ukranian
Tasmania	One	29	Chinese, French, German, Indonesian, Japanese
Western Australia	Four	30	Chinese, French, German, Greek, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese
South Australia	Three	37	Chinese, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Spanish
Queensland	Seven	108	Chinese, French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Spanish
Australian Capital Territory	Three	41	Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hindi/Urdu, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Spanish, Thai, Vietnamese
Northern Territory	One	5	Chinese, Greek, Indonesian

2.2. The data

The survey instrument asks a series of demographic questions relating to age, work situation, length of employment in a university, etc. It then interrogates respondents' use of ICT and technology in work and life situations as well as exploring the types of technologies utilised and any barriers to integration in teaching and learning. Finally, respondents are asked to rate their agreement with 31 statements that answer the question "What do you think of computers and ICT?".

3. Discussion

An initial analysis of the data reveals that around 85% of respondents are over 36 years of age and a full 50% of respondents over 50 years of age. In terms of gender, 41% were male and 59% female, with the majority of responses from Victoria so far (37%), followed by NSW (24%). Respondents were mostly in continuing positions (82%) with 18% of respondents in casual or sessional employment. Given the age demographic, it is perhaps not surprising that 26% of respondents have been working in universities for over 20 years, with well over half (63%) having had careers of more than 10 years. In terms of level of appointment, most respondents (65%) are in lecturer or senior lecturer positions.

All respondents use computers and ICT in their teaching: 72% a lot, 18% a little. Notably, when asked about computer and ICT use in non-teaching related work activities those declaring "a lot" increased to 96%. This type of use, termed 'supportive use of ICT' by Sang et al. (2011), is a useful predictor of "classroom use of ICT" (Sang et al., 2011, pp. 167-168). Similarly, high levels of ICT and technology use are indicated in everyday life, with 91% indicating this occurs a lot. 85% of respondents rate their ICT competency as "fairly good" with 11% indicating they have novice level capacity and 4% stating they are 'experts'. Ironically, the expert users indicated that they only use ICT and computers a little in their teaching and learning context. The importance of using computers and ICT in teaching was rated as high by 83% of respondents and as low by the remainder.

Respondents describe a range of uses of technology in their teaching and learning with a large prevalance of Web 1.0 style presentational approaches such as deployment of course content using learning management systems like BlackBoard or Moodle, creation of PowerPoint versions of lecture notes balanced with instances of the integration of Web 2.0 approaches using tools such as wikis. Respondents detail the use of multimedia objects (video, audio, etc.) and online assessments as other important uses of technology.

In terms of barriers to the integration of technology into teaching and learning of languages, the most recurrent factor indicated was time. This has been found to be one of the key limiting factors in other studies (e.g., Park & Son, 2009, p. 97). Other challenges include institutional barriers; ever changing applications, interfaces, etc.;

slow bandwidth; outdated software or learning management systems; and lack of training.

4. Conclusions

At the time of writing, a full analysis of the data from the current project, as well as a reanalysis of the data from the previous study, is still to occur. Given the preliminary findings discussed above, however, we can tentatively trace a relationship between teachers' general use of ICT and computers and a willingness to integrate this into their teaching practice. While university teachers seem to represent a reasonably well-equipped cohort of ICT users, factors limiting the application of technology to teaching and learning of languages continue to be those that have been identified for many years: institutional support (in the form of training and up to date hardware and software) and time. This has implications for how academia is conceived and for professional learning for academics who are increasingly asked by their employers to embrace technology.

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