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TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS IN NORTHERN KWAZULU-NATAL, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The development of technology has led to significant changes in society, and there is a need for teaching methods to keep pace with societal changes to prepare learners to live and work in the 21st century. Traditional teaching practices using chalkboards and textbooks need to be replaced with digital tools to make English learning more interesting and engaging for learners. This paper reports preliminary findings from an ongoing study that seeks to establish English teachers' perceptions of the use of technology in English instruction. Using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the study explores teachers' perceptions towards the use of technology in English classrooms in selected high schools in the King Cetshwayo district, KwaZulu-Natal. This study employed a qualitative case study design to collect descriptive data from English teachers' spoken and written words. Purposeful sampling was used as it allowed me to handpick the teachers to be included in the study. I selected six teachers from three schools that had received computer donations from local mining companies. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013) was used to analyse the data. Before commencing the study, I sought ethical clearance from the University Research Ethics Committee. The findings indicated that the language teaching journey had not progressed much in some schools, even when the necessary infrastructure already existed. The data revealed a need to train teachers and change their attitudes towards the use of technology in English classrooms. In addition to internal factors, external factors such as crime and theft also impeded the integration of technology into English classrooms.

Keywords: English teachers, perceptions, technology, English classrooms

INTRODUCTION

The development of technology has led to significant changes in society, and there is a need for teaching methods that keep pace with these changes to prepare learners to live and work in the 21st century. Information and Communication Technology refers to technologies that provide access to information through communication. It includes the internet, wireless networks, computers, cell phones, smart boards, projectors, scanners, interactive white boards, broadcasting, etc. Schul (2015) noted that the integration of technology had brought significant changes to teaching and learning. Researchers argue that integrating ICT into education provides several benefits, such as learner engagement, peer-to-peer learning, the promotion of shared knowledge,

exposure to a variety of materials, and increased interest in the lessons learners are being taught (Padayachee, 2017, 2020; Goh & Sigala, 2020). Richards (2022) stated that modern English teachers were expected not only to know how to teach grammar and vocabulary, but also how to use media, the internet, and technology to make lessons more engaging. Similarly, Anas (2019) suggested that teaching with technology depended on three key elements: the tools available, the teacher's skills, and the student's skills. In short, technology in ELT is not just about using gadgets; it is about using them effectively. In line with these views, the South African Department of Basic Education's draft White Paper on e-Education publicised the following goal for e-Education policy (Department of Basic Education, 2004:17):

By 2013, every manager, educator and student in South Africa's general and higher education and training boards will be ICT-capable, meaning that they will be able to confidently and creatively use ICT to help them develop the skills and knowledge they need as lifelong learners, to achieve their own goals and be fully engaged members of society.

Sadly, there have been challenges with realising this goal. The then Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, acknowledged that challenges such as poor performance and a lack of resources prevented the successful implementation of the integration of technology into teaching and learning in South Africa. Similarly, Juma et al. (2017) argued that South African schools still faced challenges in integrating teaching in public schools. Furthermore, Juma et al. (2017) stated that South African class sizes were large and that resourcing each classroom would remain a challenge. Teaching and learning are still conducted in a conventional manner (chalk-and-talk) in most South African public schools.

I became interested in the topic because English is a global language that needs to be taught well, and because research indicates that there are many benefits to English language teaching and learning when technology is used. These benefits include motivating students to learn and be interested in their lessons and encouraging interactive learning. Hubbard (2018) stated that technology-based language-learning platforms enabled students to improve their grammar comprehension through literature exercises and immediate feedback, especially in vocabulary development.

Wang (2020) posited that many audio and video resources are available thanks to technological advances that support listening and comprehension. Stockwell (2017) stated that a variety of reading materials provided by technology could help students enhance their reading abilities. There are also many tools to help learners improve their writing and editing abilities (Reigeluth, 2018). English is a vital subject in South African schools, as it is the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) from Grade 1 to Grade 12, or from Grade 4 to 12, in schools where African languages are used as the LoLT in the foundation phase. I also became interested in the topic because traditional chalkboard-and-textbook teaching practices needed to be replaced with digital tools to make English learning more engaging and enjoyable for learners. Duff (2015) argued that teachers in the 21st century must be able to integrate technology into their English classrooms. Technology must be incorporated into English lessons because learners use

technology in their everyday lives. Susikaran (2013:1) stated that “the chalk-and-talk method was not good enough on its own to teach English effectively.” The paper reported preliminary findings from an ongoing study aimed at establishing English teachers' perceptions of the use of technology in English teaching. The research was conducted at King Cetshwayo district schools in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, where local mining companies had donated computers and interactive whiteboards. English is taught as a first additional language in two of these schools and as a home language in two others. I decided to explore English teachers' attitudes towards the use of technology in their classrooms because attitudes play a significant role in whether teachers will use technology (Anthony, 2012). If teachers have a positive attitude towards technology, they will likely use it in their classrooms.

Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following questions:

- How do English teachers in the King Cetshwayo District perceive the use of technology in English classes?
- What are the benefits of using technology in EFAL classrooms?
- To what extent do teachers use technology in their English classrooms?
- What are the challenges faced by English teachers in their integration of technology into their lessons?

Theoretical Framework

The study used the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) as a theoretical framework. The theory, proposed by Davis (1986), concerns how users perceive the usefulness and ease of technology. Dawns (1986) is a model that predicts the likelihood of a new technology being adopted by a group of individuals, given the variety of available technologies. There are three main factors used to explain the user's motivation to use technology: perceived ease of use (PEOU), perceived usefulness (PU), and attitude towards use (ATU), or attitude towards adopting technology, to explain the attitude of usage and behavioural intention to use. These three factors clarified how teachers perceived technology (based on experience) and whether the PEOU was recognised as ‘useful’, which led to continued technology use in classrooms. Kim et al. (2016) argued that this model advocates an attitude-belief-intention-behaviour paradigm for predicting technology acceptance among users. This theory was used to understand English teachers' perceptions of technology use in their classrooms.

THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Extra Workload for Teachers

Learning to use new platforms, preparing digital materials, and solving technical problems take time. Without proper support, teachers may feel overwhelmed (Shah and Khan, 2021). Kormos and Julio (2020:19) stated that “educational technologies play an essential part in the learning

process and provide teachers with the ability to develop multiple 21st century skills for their students.” Chai and Kong (2017) maintained that the use of technology in the classroom would lead to more critical thinking, better problem-solving and communication skills. The authors stated: “Educational technologies can provide tools to deal with the challenges schools are facing relating to instruction, such as outdated content, damaged resources, lack of opportunities for writing and communication and accessibility” (Kormos & Julio, 2020:19). Pundit (2013) conducted a study on the impact of using technology in English classrooms. His study found that learners who attended classes that used technology tended to have higher vocabulary levels. Gilakjani (2013) noted that the use of technology in language classes could change existing language teaching methods. Gilakjani (2014) posited that, by using digital technology, learners could control their own learning process and access a great deal of information beyond their teachers' control. He went on to emphasise the need for teachers to have a complete understanding of educational technologies. Scully et al. (2021) argued that technology was part of learners' lives and that it made no sense for teachers not to use it in their teaching.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative case study design. Yin (2014) stated that a case study required examining a person, a group, an institution, or a phenomenon within its natural setting. Case studies provide comprehensive investigations of phenomena. I used a case study method to collect descriptive data from English teachers' spoken and written words. Bertram and Christensen (2020) posited that a qualitative approach aims to make sense of, interpret or describe a phenomenon in terms of the meanings people attribute to it. Kumar (2018) described a qualitative study as an inquiry in which researchers collect data face-to-face by interacting with selected participants in their environments. I chose a qualitative research approach to gain insight into the attitudes of English teachers in selected schools.

Purposeful sampling was used as it allowed me to handpick the teachers to be included in the study. I selected six teachers from three schools that had received computer donations from the local mining companies. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2017) was used to analyse the data. Maree (2016) stated that “qualitative data analysis is usually based on an interpretive philosophy that is aimed at examining meaningful and symbolic content of qualitative data.” Before the commencement of the study, I ensured that all the steps for conducting a study ethically, as outlined by Brooks, Riele and Maguire (2014), were followed:

- a) I sought the ethical clearance certificate from the University Research Ethics Committee to allow the study to take place. I also applied to the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Basic Education to get permission to visit the schools that participated in the study.
- b) The participants were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could choose at any stage of the study not to participate any further.

- c) The participants were also informed that their privacy would be guaranteed. For instance, neither the schools' names nor the participants' names were used. Pseudonyms in the form of letters of the alphabet were used to protect participants' identities.
- d) Lastly, the participants were treated with respect and were assured that the information collected would be used only for this study.

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DISCUSSION

Using Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis, the following themes emerged from the data:

Positive Attitudes

I assumed that age would play a significant role in shaping English teachers' attitudes. Teachers over 45 would have negative attitudes towards the use of technology. It turned out that some older teachers had positive attitudes towards technology, while some younger teachers had negative attitudes towards its use.

Teacher A, who was 55 years old, expressed a positive attitude towards the use of technology. "Our learners use technology at home. We also need to use technology in the classroom to engage learners. We are teaching 21st-century learners. It helped us do some teaching during COVID-19 when learners could not come to school" Teacher C, who was 48 years old, also expressed a positive attitude when she said, "The use of technology creates a more interactive environment. Learners are excited and more engaged when technology is used. Using technology increases the interest of the learners in the topics we teach them." This is in line with Adams' (2023) assertion that, "Technology provides immersive and interactive learning experiences, allowing students to practice their language skills in meaningful contexts. Teacher F, who was 26 years old, said, "The use of technology enables me to access materials that are readily available,

and teachers get more involved in a class where technology is used.” Teacher D mentioned that using technology enabled her to find relevant information on the topics she taught, which helped her complete the curriculum on time. She said, “I can find a lot of relevant information on the topics I teach, and, in that way, I can cover the curriculum in time.” Technology can indeed provide learners with a broader range of resources and foster collaboration (Prensky, 2001).

Brooks-Young (2007) argued that technology could enable teachers to assess students’ learning in various ways. She pointed out that technology could allow teachers to give learners a deeper, fuller understanding of the topics. Whiteside (2011) said that technology could be a valuable resource not only for students but also for teachers. Similarly, Bhat (2021) claimed that technology enabled teachers to obtain essential teaching materials. Students often find learning English more enjoyable when lessons include videos, music, games, or online quizzes. Masruddin (2018) discovered that using multimedia tools could make students more interested and active in class. Technology makes learning more interactive and less repetitive. Another positive point raised by the teachers was that using technology gives learners access to authentic English materials. Using the internet, learners can now access real-world English from movies, podcasts, news, and social media. This exposure helps them understand how English is used naturally, beyond textbooks (TEFLIN Journal, 2020).

Negative Attitudes

Some teachers expressed negative attitudes towards the use of technology. Teacher B [49] said: “Technology is addictive. Learners will spend more time online searching for information unrelated to their subjects.” Teacher E [32] complained that she could not use technology in her classroom because there was insufficient time to finish the syllabus. This shows that negative attitudes sometimes lead teachers to believe that using technology will waste their teaching time. Morelock (2016) explained that one barrier to the use of technology is teachers’ perceptions of their self-efficacy in using and implementing technology. As the TAM theory suggests, teachers’ perceptions sometimes affect their willingness to use technology in their classrooms. Unlike teachers with positive attitudes towards the use of technology in the classroom, those with negative attitudes felt that using technology in the English classroom created an extra workload for teachers. Learning to use new platforms, preparing digital materials, and solving technical problems takes time. Without proper support, teachers may feel overwhelmed (Shah and Khan, 2021). Inadequate training is a significant challenge because technology integration will not occur if teachers are not well-trained to use it in their classrooms.

Leadership

Most teachers felt that school leadership should take a leading role in encouraging teachers to use technology in their classrooms. Teacher D said, “Our SMT should lead us in showing the benefits of using technology in teaching.” This aligns with what Wang & Hartsell (2013:4) said, “Successful technology integration requires an effective technology leader.” A technology leader is an individual who advocates for the adoption of technology as an instructional tool and an

expert who provides proper training and support to help teachers succeed with technology integration. Teacher A said, “Our school leadership should lead the way in organising training and workshops on the use of technology in classrooms.” Teacher C said, “It is not very useful for our school management to accept computer donations if the teachers and learners do not use the computers.” This indicates that School Management Teams should actively promote and support technology integration.

Lack of Professional Development

Researchers identified inadequate technology training as one of the challenges facing teachers (Mitchell et al., 2016; Ertmer, 1999). Teacher A said, “I believe that most teachers would like to integrate technology into their lessons, but they lack the necessary skills.” Similarly, Teacher D said, “The lack of computer skills is a big problem for some teachers. Teachers need training so that they can be comfortable with technology.” Even the teachers who had expressed negative attitudes towards technology felt that training was needed. Teacher F said, “I would like to receive some training so that I can see if there are lessons I could do better with the help of technology.”

The findings indicate that the language teaching journey has not advanced much in some schools, even when the infrastructure is in place. The data revealed a need to train teachers and change their attitudes towards the use of technology in English classrooms. This was in line with what ChanLin et al. (2006), as quoted in Pepe (2016:40), said that there were three relevant factors, namely, “Teachers’ personal beliefs about teaching, their experiences with technology and their perceptions about using innovations, such as new and creative ideas and practices for integrating technology into the classroom.” There are also external factors, such as crime and theft, which impede the integration of technology in English classrooms. Emre (2019) noted internal barriers, including teachers’ confidence in using technology, their belief in its usefulness in education, and resistance to change. External barriers include access to technology, time, support, and professional development training. Van der Vlies (2020) stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers lacked familiarity with and access to technological devices, which impacted remote teaching and learning. This indicates that teacher training in using technology in class should be a significant priority.

CONCLUSION

Technology has transformed how English is taught and learned. It makes lessons more engaging, offers access to authentic materials, and supports flexible learning. However, it also brings challenges related to access, skills, and over-reliance. To succeed, teachers, schools, and policymakers must ensure that technology is used thoughtfully as a partner in learning, not as a replacement for human connection. Access to technological devices alone is not enough if sufficient training is not provided or if school leadership does not see the integration of technology as necessary. Businesses considering donating computer equipment to schools should first provide the required training. In conclusion, schools should prioritise technology training so

teachers can confidently integrate it into their classrooms. Donors should provide necessary training alongside equipment donations.

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