Best Practices Use of Distance Learning Among Language Teachers

By

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify the extent of distance learning best practices among middle school Arabic language teachers and supervisors in Iraq. To achieve the study goal, the researchers used a descriptive analytical approach, with a survey tool that was designed by the authors that consisted of 49 items. The survey was divided into four domains: production of e-learning resources, Internet use, managing the e-learning implementations process, and the distance-learning evaluation process. The study sample consisted of 140 female and male teachers and five educational supervisors. The validity and reliability of the research tool was verified. The reasons why the teachers/supervisors used distance learning technology were shown in the result of this study. The results showed that the degree of use of distance learning best practice methods was very low. Among the four domains of the survey, distance learning management domain came first with a 2.12 mean value followed by the production of teaching resources domain with a 2.05 mean value. The third domain was Internet use, with a 2.04 mean value, followed by the e-learning evaluation domain process with a mean of 2.01. On the other hand, from the supervisors' point of view, the results of the study showed that the managing of the distance learning implementations process came first, with 2.11 mean value. The evaluation process was last, with a 2.04 mean value. Based on the results of this study, the researchers recommended conducting an educational training program for teachers in the field of education technology to ensure that best practice strategies are implemented in the classroom.

Keywords: language teaching, e-learning best practice, educational technology, computerized instructional program.

1. Introduction

Distance learning is considered one of the most effective contemporary teaching tools. Moreover, it is economical and can adapt quickly these were the reasons why the teachers/supervisors used e-learning technology? to the educational requirements of the times. In addition, it has many useful pedagogical tools, such as audio or audio-visual applications, videos, e-mail, websites, and video conferencing. It makes the learning process more consistent and effective (Al-shehry, 2002). Given the usefulness of e-learning, it has become a necessity rather than a luxury. To keep up with global developments in education, teachers must improve their computer skills to effectively maximize the benefits of e-learning in their classrooms (Al-Muhamady, 2012). A conference held in 1998 by the Egyptian Society for Technology in Education stressed the importance of employing technological innovations in education. It recommended building networks of educational information specialists in the field of education to encourage researchers and teachers to access the latest scientific research and curricula, and to integrate this knowledge into their instructional practices (Al-Gareeb, 2009).

Scientific and technological development has led to changes in the roles of teachers, which are no longer limited to simply transferring knowledge to students, explaining learning concepts, and correcting homework. Moreover, they are no longer the sole source of knowledge accessible to students. Teachers are now responsible for planning, designing, executing, and assisting in the educational process (Bani-Domi, 2012). The teacher has now assumed the roles of supervisor, consultant, and collaborator in the educational process. In addition, teachers must now plan, design, and implement lessons while integrating different e-learning tools in the process (Saadeh & Al-Sartawi, 2006). The teacher training process for

language teachers has been receiving increasing attention in the field of educational research; therefore, teacher education programs must include in their curricula instruction on the use of modern educational technology tools. The best practice in the teacher preparation process that can be achieved by focusing on conducting research and various studies on different areas, such as measuring language teachers' abilities to use e-learning best practice methods, measuring their attitudes towards it, measuring the extent of their technology skills, and identifying areas requiring further training (Al-Mahamdy, 2012). Teachers must have educational technology skills to be effective users of e-learning tools. Furthermore, they must do their best to communicate effectively with students in both on-line and in-class educational settings (Azmi, 2006).

With the emergence of the term "e-commerce and e-security" in the late 1990s came the rapid development of multimedia, virtual reality, and satellite communications technologies. This opened the door for the e-learning revolution, which depended on the use of electronic media to deliver and receive information. However, certain skills are required for effective interaction between students and teachers, students and schools, and schools and teachers (Halafawi, 2006; Abdul Hameed, 2010). E-learning aims to create an interactive learning environment through new electronic technology tools and diversity of information resources, as well as strengthen the relationship between home, school, and the external environment. In addition, it aims to reformulate the roles of the teaching and learning process to match the educational technology standard (Altodary, 2004). E-learning is designed to expand the learning environment and provide better learning opportunities for students with different learning needs and skills. In addition, it provides students with more learning opportunities outside of class time and improves their self-learning skills (Halafawi, 2006). The criteria that should be met to improve the e-learning process include providing a variety of modern, e-learning educational materials and ensuring cooperative interaction among all stakeholders in the educational process. Furthermore, teachers need to believe in the need for e-learning in education. E-learning should focus on the possibility of development and cooperation from all parties to benefit from the experiences of others (Altodra, 2004).

E-learning as a teaching method has many useful characteristics, such as the ability to teach many students without time or place restrictions, the availability of thousands of educational websites available for students, and increased opportunities for students to exchange dialogue and debate. In addition, e-learning facilitates both self-learning and collaborative learning processes, which help students to build more self-confidence (Abdel-Hameed, 2010). E-learning encourages teachers to go beyond the role of knowledge transmitter to that of mediator to help students in the learning process. These benefits are experienced by all the parties involved in the e-learning process. It helps learners to acquire practical experience in various aspects of the curriculum and proficiency in communication. Furthermore, it helps to improve students' writing skills using Internet resources and various communication technologies tools (Ghamdi, 2003). There are many educational software tools that are being used to teach the Arabic language, such as programs designed to help students write stories and improve reading and comprehension skills. In addition, there are many educational software programs that can be used for drills and practice, self-learning, and simulation (Neyadi, 2009). The advent of the Internet and taking advantage of its resources created a fundamental shift in the role of the Arabic language teacher, as well as their preparation and training programs. In this context, Arabic language education faces many challenges, such as the development of languages through the Internet, the role of the communications media in education, and the weakness of the linguistic performance of learners. In the face of these challenges, there is a need to reconsider Arabic language teaching and learning strategies using technology as a teaching aid in a way that is consistent with national teaching standards (Zahrani, 2007). The National Technology Standards focus on technology terms, technology learning tools design, evaluation methods, best practices, ethical issues, curriculum design, and best practices. Technology best practice standards are being used by teachers as a teaching guide (Hayes, 2004).

2. Literature Review

Kennedy's (2002) study examined the technological competency skills of elementary school teachers in the United Kingdom using a sample of 94 teachers. The results of the study showed that male teachers used technology applications in their classrooms more than female teachers. Moreover, the results showed that male teachers with (1-4) years of teaching experience had more technological competency skills than other male teachers.

Abdul-Jabil's (2003) study examined elementary Arabic language teachers' use of educational technology in Palestine. Moreover, the study also examined the use of educational technology in actual teaching settings and the obstacles facing its implementation. Based on the results of a survey distributed to 150 teachers, it was found that there were some difficulties concerning the use of technology applications as teaching tools attributable to the lack of teaching experience, as well as a lack of necessary display screens in classrooms, a lack of technology specialists in schools, a lack of support or incentives for teachers who used technology as teaching aids, and a dependence on blackboards as the main educational tool.

Hour's (2004) study aimed to identify the most important educational and technical skills needed by high school teachers in South Korea to be effective teachers. The study consisted of 200 Korean high school teachers. The study found that 80% of the teachers surveyed had the necessary cognitive skills to use technology applications in their teaching. Furthermore, the results showed that the teachers used educational technology to motivate students as their primary reason for using educational technology in their teaching, followed by planning and recording as the secondary reason.

Al-Mashaqbeh's (2011) study investigated teachers' perspectives on the use of computer applications and their ICDL skills as teaching tools. The participants were 212 teachers from different teaching school levels. The results showed that most teachers used only three or four technological tools in their teaching: 1) Microsoft Word for typing teaching plans and syllabi, 2) PowerPoint to prepare presentations to simplify new project requirements and ideas, 3) Microsoft Excel to type and classify students' grades, and 4) browsers to search for references and information related to their lesson topics.

Nomass (2013) reviewed best practices for using modern technology in teaching English as a second language, and educational tools such as websites, educational software, software for presentation design, electronic dictionaries, chatting and e-mail, CD-players, and educational videos. The study results revealed that most students believed that computers could improve their English vocabulary and increase their interaction.

Loverro (2006) studied pre-service teachers' learning needs to help them integrate technology into the curriculum using best practice strategies. The researcher designed a survey instrument to gather information about teachers' technology skills based on the National Educational Technology Standards (NETS) for teachers. The survey instrument focused on three areas: teacher computer skills, new teachers' training, and applying teachers' skills in the classroom. In addition, the study results showed that there was a need for teacher planning strategies that focused on technology standards. It also recommended that teacher training programs should focus on creating a meaningful connection between the traditional classroom teaching method and best practice strategies based on increasing teachers' and administrators' awareness of NETS.

The Importance of the Current Study

Technology applications can reduce teachers' time and effort for planning and preparing class materials. In addition, it can increase the efficiency of education and encourage self-learning. On the other hand, teachers have difficulties keeping up with and taking advantage of technology as a teaching tool because they often do not have a sufficient time and school support to do so. The importance of the current study is thus based on the following points:

1. The results of this study may help educators to understand the extent of use of educational technology based on best practice methods in Arabic language classes.
2. The results of this study may help Arabic language teacher education programs in a way that supports the use o e-learning best practices in language teaching.
3. The results of this study may help teachers to identify efficient ways of using e-learning tools in their teaching.
4. The results of this study may encourage researchers in the field of educational technology to conduct further related studies on e-learning best practices.

Research Questions

The aim of the current study was to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. To what extent are Arabic language teachers in Iraq implementing e-learning best practice methods in their classrooms, based on the responses of teachers and supervisors?

RQ2. Is there a statistically significant difference in the degree of educational technology use by male and female teachers in Iraq?

Study Limitations

The study was limited to focus on the degree that Arabic language teacher and school supervisors have been using educational technology best practice strategies in their teaching. The limits of the study are as follows:

1. Objective limitation: the study tool was a questionnaire that focused on the educational technology best practice strategy.
2. Time limitation: second school semester of the (2014-2015) academic year.
3. Place limitation: The Ministry of Education in the area of Ramadi in Anbar province in Iraq.
4. Participant limitation: Arabic language teachers and supervisors who work in the ministry of Education in the area of Ramadi.

3. Method

Participants
The population of the present study consisted of Arabic language teachers employed in the Directorate of Breeding Gray schools in Anbar province, Iraq in the 2014-2015 academic year; the total number of teachers was 480, with 282 male teachers and 198 female teachers. It also included five Arabic language supervisors. The researchers used the random sampling method to select the sample. The study sample consisted of 82 male teachers and 58 female teachers. The school supervisor sample consisted of the whole population, which included a total of five supervisors.

Instruments
A list of educational technology best practice skills that should be performed by language teachers was designed in the form of a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 49 items, divided into four areas to answer the research questions. The four areas included 1) the production of e-learning resources, 2) the use of Internet applications, 3) e-learning management, and 4) evaluation of e-learning. The response to those items was designed in accordance with the Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1=strongly agree to 5=strongly disagree.

Validity of the Instrument
To insure the validity of the research instrument, it was sent to eight higher education faculty members who were specialists in the areas of curriculum and instruction, Arabic language, and educational technology. The faculty members were asked to review the instrument items and make any recommendations that could improve the research instrument. The comments were sent back to the

researchers to ensure the validity of the instrument and to improve it based on the recommendations of the faculty members.

To ensure the reliability of the research instrument (survey) and to check the consistency between paragraphs, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used. The results ranged from (0.74-0.79), which was considered a high value for the purposes of the present study.

4. Results and Discussion

The main goal of this study was to identify the extent of use of e-learning best practice criteria by middle school Arabic language teachers in Iraq, based on the responses of teachers and supervisors to the survey instrument.

RQ1
To answer the first research question, "To what extent are Arabic language teachers in Iraq implementing e-learning best practice methods in their classrooms, based on the responses of teachers and supervisors?," the means and standard deviations of the participants' responses to the survey were calculated, as shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations of Teachers' Responses to the Survey Items

Item order	Item #	Item	SD	M	Degree
1	3	E-learning management	0.27	2.12	Low
2	1	Production of e-learning resources	0.18	2.05	Low
3	2	Use of Internet applications	0.15	2.04	Low
4	4	E-learning assessment process	0.22	2.01	Low
		Total	0.16	2.06	

As shown in Table 1, the means of the respondents' answers ranged from 2.12 to 2.01. The first ranked area was "E-learning management," with a mean of 2.12, while the second-ranked area was "The production of e-learning resources," with a mean of 2.05. The third-ranked area was "Use of Internet applications," with a mean of 2.04, while the fourth-ranked area was "E-learning assessment process," with a mean of 2.01. The mean average of the entire survey instrument was 2.06. This result indicates that the estimated mean for the four areas showed a low estimation, which indicated that the use of e-learning best practice strategies by Arabic language teachers was very limited.

Table 2: *Means and Standard Deviations of Supervisors' Responses to the Survey Items*

Item order	Item #	Item	SD	Mean	Degree
1	3	E-learning management	0.25	2.11	Low
2	2	Use of Internet applications	0.21	2.07	Low
3	1	Production of e-learning resources	0.16	2.04	Low
4	4	E-learning assessment process	0.21	2.03	Low
		Total	0.19	2.06	Low

As shown in Table 2, the mean of the respondents' answers ranged from 12.11 to 2.03. The first-ranked area was "E-learning management," with a mean of 2.11, while the second-ranked area was "Use of Internet applications," with a mean of 2.07. The third-ranked area was "Production of e-learning

resources," with a mean of 2.04, while the fourth-ranked area was "E-learning assessment process," with a mean of 2.03. The mean average of the entire instrument was 2.06. These results indicate that the estimated means for the four areas were low, which indicates that the use of technology best practice strategies by Arabic language teachers was very limited.

RQ2

To answer the second research question, "Is there a statistically significant difference in the degree of educational technology use by male and female teachers in Iraq?" an independent samples *t*-test was applied according to the gender variable. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: *Results of the Independent Samples t-Test*

Gender	SD	M	T	Sig
Male	0.10	2.06	-2.03	0.33
Female	0.21	2.08		

As shown in Table 3, there were no statistically significant differences in the degree of Arabic language teachers' use of e-learning in teaching according to gender.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary

The results of the present study showed a low degree of use of educational technology best practice strategies among Arabic language teachers and supervisors. This outcome may be related to the fact that educational technology and computer science development in Iraq has been very limited. This has resulted in a lack of educational technology training programs that are needed for teachers to develop efficient best practice strategies. In addition, a lack of computer equipment effects negatively the improvement of computer skills among students, teachers, administrators, and school supervisors. Sharari's (2008) study also found that the use of educational technology among teachers as teaching and planning tools was very limited. Khalidi (2012) also found that the use of multimedia for teaching was very limited. Deborah and Lisa (2007) concluded that most teachers used computer applications only as a supplementary activities tool to support instruction.

The results of the present also showed that there was no statistically significant difference in educational technology use according to the gender variable. This can be attributed to the fact that male and female teachers have the same social environment and technology education difficulties, and they are both faced with the same challenges (e.g., a lack of computer equipment and professional development programs), which does not encourage them to apply educational technology best practice strategies in their teaching. This finding is consistent with that of Hou (2004), who concluded that gender variables had no effect on the extent of teachers' educational technology use.

Recommendations

Based on the current study's findings, the researchers recommend the following:
1. The Ministry of Education should conduct ongoing educational training programs for teachers and supervisors to improve their educational technology skills and best practice strategies in this area.
2. The Ministry of Education should provide more support to schools in the form of the necessary computer equipment and technical support.

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