The Role of Smart Boards in Enhancing Students' Oral Presentations: The Case of Al-Majma'ah Community College, King Saud University

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ABSTRACT: This study is an attempt to assess the role of smart technology in enhancing the students' presentational skills at Al-Majma'ah Community College of King Saud University in 2006. The academic pressure associated with oral presentations was assumed to consolidate the students' competence and performance in English. This procedure was particularly required since the students were concluding their transitional four-term English programme; thus, were about to embark on a tougher English programme at the College of Arts in Riyadh where they would graduate with a B.A in English upon the completion of the third and fourth levels. By the end of the scheduled presentations, the majority of the students voiced their dissatisfaction with their own performance mainly because of their improper use of the smart board. Their appeal for additional sessions was approved and a second round of presentations started with better employment of the smart board. The second round turned out to be more productive in terms of time, coverage, communication and computer skills.

1. Introduction

In early 2005 the administration of Al-Majma'ah Community College of King Saud University (approx. 140 kms north of Riyadh, KSA)   established two laboratories where   smart boards were installed for English and computer classes. Soon all the other Departments realized that these same places could also be highly inspiring sources of motivation for their students. The College response was immediate: the first term of the next academic year 2005/06 witnessed the installation of smart boards in a whole floor comprising 12 lecture rooms. All teachers acknowledged that the use of these wonders positively affected the educational environment. For example, students stopped complaining about the extension of classes into their class breaks. Also, precious time that was once wasted on silencing the class was fully used in covering the relevant course items. Most importantly, many English students readily agreed to prepare and give 20-minute oral presentations at their third term of college education, using a smart board– a fact which was conceived to be a significant breakthrough in English education in the province.

The College interest in the use of smart boards emanated from a general tendency in King Saud University and the Saudi higher education at large to introduce instructional technology into the Saudi educational system. In early 2005 King Saud University held a workshop on: "[T]he Application of Modern Technology to Education" where Dr. Y. A. Al-Oreifi and Dr. A. F. Al-Mutrif (both computer specialists) spoke extensively about the relevance of technology to education. The presentation centred upon, *interalia,* the use of a variety of teaching aids such as the computer, internet, smart classes, virtual laboratories and e-library. Save for the use

of smart classes, all the other technologies were already in use in King Saud University at the time of the workshop. Soon Al-Majma'ah Community College took the lead in the installation of smart boards as shown above.

Most discussants at the workshop showed their fears about the replacement of teachers by instructional technology but they were assured that the presence of well-trained staff was central to the success of these media. Yet, it is likely that some teachers' failure to cope with educational technology would jeopardize their academic career in the near future.

2. Language and Technology

This paper is subsumed under language and technology. More specifically, it centres upon the role that computer plays in language education. Moore (1999) traces the history of language and technology to the first time language was recorded by the use of pictograms and ideograms. Such an early relationship between language and technology was conceived to endanger language as a product of human mind. Alatis (1983) reports that in "Plato's *Phaedrus* Socrates feared that writing would destroy memory and wisdom by enabling people to compile quantities of lifeless information". Of course, were it not for 'writing', Plato's and Socrates' philosophy and the whole intellectual heritage would not have found their way to the modern world.

Until recently, many teachers were skeptical about the role of technology (computers) in language education. This skepticism seems to be given impetus by one of two factors. First, many teachers were afraid that the use of computer in language education might make them redudant. Fortunately, there are arguments to the contrary; viz. computers could help teachers enhance their teaching styles. According to Alatis, the use of computers "… provide[s] an occasion for rejoicing rather than cause for panic" (p. 10). He further quotes Donald L. Blitzer, the inventor of Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operation (PLATO), that the "… application of computers will make the demand for teachers greater, not lesser" (ibid). Of course, for such demand to be meaningful, teachers need to access working computer literacy and stay tune to the latest coursewares.

Second, some teachers ruled out the possibility of the application of instructional technology to language education. Bush and Terry (1996) report that a number of Department chairs in 1980 responded to the question about the introduction of computer-assisted instruction (henceforth CAI) by saying :

ﻟ   *"I hope not"*
ﻟ   *"Forget it"*
ﻟ   *"CAI is a waste of time, energy and money that should be used to buy library books"*
ﻟ   *"Don't do it. It is a very stupid idea. Language is a living thing. You must really be desperate to think of anything so dump"*
ﻟ   *"Somehow it does not fit into our concept of a liberal Arts College where human communication is paramount"*

There is nothing implicit in CAI that teachers could be totally replaced by technology in the classroom. In fact, CAI provides challenging situations that would make teachers improve their performance. In other words, since courseware is available for use by students at home, they will always be ahead of classroom activities.Thus, teachers' awareness of these resources redeem them in the eyes of their students.

Despite teachers' reservation about the relevance of technology to language

education as shown above, *Wikipedia Encyclopedia* informs that the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the introduction of a variety of CAI terms, showing that CAI soon became in vogue. These included *CALL* (Computer-Assisted Language Learning), *CALI* (Computer-Assisted Language Instruction), *TELL* (Technology-Enhanced Language Learning), and others.

Wikipedia Encyclopedia also reports that a number of world associations were established to develop and supervise the application of technology to language education. For instance, there is Asia-Pacific Association for CALL *(APACALL),* European Computer-Assisted Language Learning *(EUROCALL)*, Computer-Assisted Language Instruction Consortium *(CALICO),* and the International Association of Language Learning Technology *(IAALT)*; the last two are American-based associations.

I would like to conclude this section by taking on the application of smart technology to language education. The official website of the smart technology programme declares that it intends to "prepare students for increasingly technological world" and "improve pedagogy itself". Thus, the use of smart technology is expected to provide a variety of benefits that include "greater access to learning and teaching resources, improved students learning, enhanced literary skills, and promotion of active and collaborative learning".

3.1 Subjects

The subjects of this study were second level students who were enrolled in the Department of English upon the inauguration of Al-Majma'ah Community College in 2004. The English language programme is transitional in nature; viz. the students stay in the college for two years (four terms) before they eventually move to the Faculty of Arts in the University headquarters in Riyadh where they complete their third and fourth years in order to graduate with a B.A degree in English. During the transitional stage, the students study twenty English courses that centre basically on the four skills. They also study some grammar linguistics and literature. The course are almost evenly distributed among the four semesters.

Initially, about one hundred and thirty-two students were admitted to the English Department. They were placed in six groups (technically called sections). But seven students only were able to reach the fourth term successfully by the end of the academic year 2005/06. The rest of the students either withdrew or lagged behind to raise their GPA to 2.00 so that they could move forward with their studies.

So seven out of one hundred and thirty-two students managed to successfully reach their fourth College term and, thus, to participate in the oral presentations. They were acknowledged to be the most committed to their academic duties. They were always the ones to occupy the front seats. If there were no classes, they had to be in teachers' offices enquiring about some class matter or else visited the College library (and very few do!).

3.2 Materials and procedures

The students used web-based materials for the presentations. The materials were prescribed by the course **E370: Introduction to American Literature**. This course falls into two parts: selected American writers and a critical examination of Mark Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn". At the beginning of the second term of the academic year 2005/06 the students were informed that their continuous assessment that was consisting of two mid-term quizzes would be changed in this

course to twenty-minute presentations, and that each student was allowed to choose one American literary figure to talk about. The students were further notified that the first presentation would be at week eight of the term; viz. approximately two months from the commence of the course. We had a problem of who would give the first presentation. Apparently, the students were doubtful about their ability to use a smart board in their presentations. I assured them that a minimum computer literacy would help do the job, and that they could always enquire about the operation of the smart board in presenting materials during the teacher's first seven weeks. Thus, assigning week eight to one of the students turned out to be non-negotiable at first. But the pledge to reward the initiator with extra five marks produced two competitors.

3.3 Smart boards

Following the installation of the smart boards in a whole floor (consisting of twelve lecture rooms), the phrases "smart floor" and "smart room(s)" became most frequent expressions in the discourse of the College affiliates. For a smart board to function, it was connected to a pc at teacher's stand and a projector hanging from the ceiling. Generally speaking, a smart board facilitates teaching in a variety of ways. First, it is a time-saving teaching aid. Teachers could dispense with the keyboard and the mouse; for a teacher's fingers can perform all the functions associated with these pc components. For instance, a teacher can click on "file" so that s/he could save all that s/he has written on the board by clicking by the finger on "save as". Second, if the teacher has chosen to write on the "smart pad", the text is automatically saved as power point cells which could be available for use afterwards or sent to a printer so that students could have copies of the class (sometimes one session can produce twenty pages). Third, teachers do not need to carry boardmarkers as smart boards have four "smart pens": red, blue, black and green. Each pen can be removed and a teacher's finger could be employed to produce texts in the same colour. Fourth, texts could be erased either by a "smart eraser" or by the teacher's hand upon removing the "smart eraser" from the smart board base. Fifth, each smart room was connected to the internet. This helped teachers access online data to elaborate on the topics being discussed. Sixth, teachers reported that the use of smart board greatly helped reduce the noise caused by the students. The students were particularly intrigued by the classroom jobs that were performed by the hand in all the "smart colours".

3.3. Presentations

Presentations started on the 18th of March 2006 and lasted for two weeks. There were three presentations a week corresponding to the weekly course sessions; viz. weekly three fifty-minute sessions. Initially, each presentation was planned to last for twenty minutes, leaving the rest of time for class questions and comments – the students were required to read all the presentation topics beforehand. However, despite the rich materials that the candidates accessed from the internet as well as the ample time spent to prepare for the presentations (seven weeks), the longest presentation lasted approximately for thirteen minutes. Also, four students only constantly made comments and asked questions at the end of each presentation. The teacher's (subjective) assessment of the students' performance ranged between 20% and 60%.

The students were informed in a concluding session that they could have done better and used all the time allowed for presentations if they had properly used the smart board. For instance, no student opened the smart pad so as to write and explain

the basic concepts underlying their presentation topics. They seemed satisfied with showing their CD-based data on the smart board. Their (unsatisfactory) performance did not seem to have anything to do with the degree of their computer literacy. In fact, during the preparation time they proved to be more knowledgeable about some aspects of computer than the teacher. Second, presentations could have been enriched by additional materials from the internet links included in the students' topics. They were informed that all the smart rooms were connected to the internet to be used for educational purposes.

As a result, most of the students immediately expressed their interest in giving additionally presentations either on the same topics or new ones. Since the College was six weeks away from the end of the term, it was agreed that the make-up presentations would take place in weeks fourteen and fifteen.

For most presenters, the second round was more competitive and productive. Except for one candidate, all the others chose to give their presentations on the same topics. Presentations included data over and above what was given to the audience before the sessions. It was observed that the candidates did not insert disks in the smart room pc. Apparently, they saved their data therein during their rehearsal sessions. As expected, every presenter began by opening two windows: a window to show their data and the smart pad to write on.

The second round showed a more advanced computer literacy on the part of the candidates than the first round. It seems that what impeded such computer skills in the first round was the lack of confidence. Thus, the competitive nature of the sessions, which was further enhanced by the candidates' familiarity with the smart applications, seemed to have armed the presenters with enough confidence to face and talk to colleagues in a formal setting.

It is strongly arguable that some candidates' exceptional confidence was given impetus by the myriad of applications that they preoccupied themselves with. Some presenters were so relaxed that they used both their fingers and smart pens interchangeably in writing explanatory points pertaining to some aspects of their topics. Most of them went so far as to retrieve smart cells to respond to some comments or answer a class question. Moreover, the smart applications seemed to have enabled many candidates to exceed the time allowed for presentations. If they had not been informed of the time restrictions, the would have extended their presentations to the end of the whole session.

Generally speaking, the candidates showed satisfactory knowledge of their presentation areas, fluency and computer literacy. Yet, some people might wish to argue that were it not for the candidates' interest to obtain higher marks, they would not have performed in the manner indicated above. In other words, the candidates' motivation was not primarily triggered by the use of smart boards but the fact that oral presentation was the only way to do their coursework. This argument can rejected on a number of grounds. First, the students were not required to use a smart board necessarily. In fact, the same smart room was furnished with a traditional white board for use by teachers who could not operate the smart board or taken refuge into in emergency cases. Second, it was mentioned elsewhere in this paper that the use of smart boards created a positive educational environment in the College. Viz. teachers reports indicated that the use of smart boards produced positive attitudes towards the classroom activities among the students. By contrast, teachers who did not use smart boards were not reported talking about any changes pertaining to the students' involvement in the class activities.

Third, the presenters' use of a variety of smart applications clearly indicates their positive attitude towards this kind of instructional technology. The long time spent in most of the presentations (20-30 minutes each) and the relatively satisfactory coverage of the topics lend strong support to the view that the use of smart boards did motivate the candidates to excel in their oral delivery. Fourth, the relevant literature has empirically confirmed that the use of instructional technology could have the effect of promoting learning. Thus, the remaining part of this section will report two studies to show that this is so.

To begin with, Tate (2002) conducted a study to measure the impact of "interactive whiteboard" in retention, attention, participation, interest, and success among college students. The study subjects were American college students who she put in into two groups: control group (with no electronic whiteboards) and experimental group (with electronic whiteboard). The study revealed that the subjects "in the technology-enhanced section self-reported more enthusiasm and interest in the course than did the students in the traditional sections, and perhaps as a result, the retention rate in the experimental section was much higher than in the control section". As for the second study, Bell (1998) set out to investigate teachers' perception of the use of "electronic whiteboard" as instrumental tool". Data was collected by survey which was posted on the internet so that teachers and trainers who used electronic whiteboards respond to it. Teachers and trainers' responses revealed that "students were more involved, attentive, and motivated when lessons were offered using the board rather than using other teaching methods". It is important to point out in this connection that "interest and attention" are two values that most Saudi students are generally believed to lack. At Al-Majma'ah Community College (the setting of this study), hardly a week would pass without a teacher's (official) complaint about some students' in-class behaviour. Fortunately, as shown above, many teachers reported their satisfaction with the students' behaviour in smart rooms.

4. Implications

The academic year 2004/05 at King Saud University witnessed a huge campaign to create a positive attitude among Professors toward the use of instructional technology. The campaign culminated in the workshop that was reported in (2) above. Even before the workshop was held, technology was already spreading in all the University campuses. The vast majority of academic staff were connected to the internet via the University proxy. This enabled them to access e-libraries and subscription to web-based journals. The students were given user names and pass words to avail themselves of their academic records. All the administrative and financial procedures of the University affiliates were run online, using the University intranet.

Ever since the smart technology was introduced into Al-Majma'ah Community College, the College administration has been urging the staff to employ it in their teaching activities. Interest in instructional technology seemed to be given impetus by the general belief that Saudi students were not sufficiently motivated to learn through traditional teaching aids. Thus, the use of smart technology could be one way to raise the level of motivation among them. Implicit in this educational tendency is that teachers who would like to join such a Saudi college must have a working computer literacy to function properly.

4. Conclusion

This paper has been intended to report on the use of smart technology in enhancing the students' oral presentation at Al-Majma'ah Community College of King Saud University (KSA). Since this subject-matter is subsumed under language and technology, a general survey of the relevance of technology to language education has been attempted. The paper has, then, given a detailed description of the report setting. Viz. it has attempted a description of the report subjects, smart technology installed in the College, materials and procedures, and the students' performance. In the light of the students' performance, the paper has argued that the students' presentations have largely been enhanced by the their use of smart boards. The paper has finally reported on the implications of the use of instructional technology for the Saudi educational setting.

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