

Diffusion of Innovations in ELT Saudi Contexts: From Theory to Practice

Hamad Aldosari

Associate Professor, English Dept, College of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

The objective of this study is to examine the challenges inherited in the process of creating an amenable ELT context in EFL classrooms in Saudi colleges. The article takes into account the challenges and the consequent changes taking place at present in ELT and addresses the issue of how to ameliorate future endeavours reforms in Saudi universities. The problem is that creating an innovation of ELT context is insufficient to bring about a change in class. The researcher employed an interpretive tradition in describing the problem of the study and prescribing new treatments to root it up. Analysis shows that, by and large, Saudi students need a more systemic training on the developed use of technology for ELT. It also shows that faculty are in need to intensive training courses. Further, and above all, it is deduced that teachers' and students' motivations and attitudes towards language learning in modern e-learning environments are more important than the traditional style of teaching and physical facilities of hardware and software. The study concluded that the most important factor recognised to bring about favourable innovations into the ELT classroom is to create a cultural change that can help diffuse and disseminate by leaps and bounds technological innovations currently in progress.

Key words: ELT, EFL, diffusion, innovation, technology, computer, CALL.

Introduction

English is the most commonly taught foreign language around the world today. In fact, English teaching is a major educational endeavour in every state. Estimates of the number of learners and users of English as a second language vary considerably from one state to another due to universal scopes of undertaking and determining what qualifies one to be accounted as a "learner of English." After quoting figures ranging from 400 million to two billion, Crystal assessed the population of English learners and speakers to be one billion which is a "conservative" total (Cristal 7).

In the field of foreign language teaching generally and English language teaching in particular, attempts to reform and change curriculum and pedagogical practices are common. Richards argued that methodological innovators seem to desire instant implementation on a 'world-wide basis' (Richards 8). Therefore, language-teaching reformers continue to be discouraging while they lack awareness of diffusion in innovative factors and processes.

Carrying out a new pedagogical innovation involves much more than coming up with a new idea even if it is considered an improvement. Such a position runs counter to the widely held belief that improvements naturally catch on and spread. Traditional faith in the inevitability of progress is epitomized by the famous saying: "Build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a path to your door" (c.f. Berman, Von Hippel, Khan, Tuomi, Christensen and Heyne et al.).

Nevertheless, the experience of many reformers and the evidence gathered by researchers in the diffusion of innovations demonstrate that although change in a desired direction is possible, such a change rarely happens by itself (c.f. Morris, Von Hippel, Rogers, and Christensen. Chalkidou et al.). For instance, Davila, Epstein and Shelton conducted studies in which they showed that innovation is seldom sufficient on its own and that merely communicating the news of the innovation to the appropriate audience is not enough to bring about change. Consistent with this, Miles mentioned that educational innovations are almost never installed by their own merits.

Characteristics of the local system, of the innovating person or group, and of other relevant groups, in fact, outweigh the impact of innovation. If successful diffusion and utilization of an innovation are expected, both a careful analysis of a situation, which takes into account the potential barriers to change, and an appropriate implementation strategy are called for, particularly, in case of directed contact change. Such analyses and strategies constitute the domain of diffusion in innovations field.

Educational change must be built on conscious objectives and goals.

This sort of conscious purpose is so much a part of modern life that we generally do not question its validity. According to Kobayashi formal education shortens this process of seeking specific objectives, including the ultimate goal of employment in the minds of most people. Modern systems of education such as communist, socialist and capitalist are deliberately made to undertake specific purposes.

Curricula and courses of studies are worked out to achieve certain deliberate ends while teachers are encouraged to determine specific objectives in their approaches to children and then to carry them out using appropriate effective techniques. Much of educational research is devoted to search for more efficient methodologies, learning technologies and programmes. Education is imbued with conscious purpose as a mode of thinking, acting, and feeling.

Estabrooks, et al argued that the primary element in bringing about change is through diffusion of innovation. Basically, diffusion of Innovations is a theory that seeks to explain how, why and at what rate new ideas are spread through cultures. It is a process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system. Individuals progress through five stages: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. If the innovation is adopted, it spreads via various communication channels.

This article rests on the notion that creates an innovation in the field of English language teaching (ELT) is not enough to bring about a change at all levels of pedagogy, academic achievement and learning outcomes of English language learners.

The Problem of the Study

There are certain inherent challenges that need to be explored in the diffusion of innovation in the process of creating an amenable ELT in EFL classrooms in Saudi colleges. The dilemma of technology adoption is not that of acceptance, but it is one of effectively using this technology as a reaction of the motivation and attitudes of both teachers and students. In some cases, technology adoption may be seen as an educational decorum that bears little significance into the reality of education.

Questions and Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to figure out the inherent challenges found in the process of creating an amenable ELT context in EFL classrooms in Saudi colleges. The article is meant to recognise challenges and identify the changes taking place at the present in ELT and to ameliorate future endea-

vours at ELT reforms in Saudi universities. It proposes to find answers to the following questions:

- 1 - What type of inherent challenges is in the process of learning in ELT classroom in Saudi colleges?
- 2 - How does effective pedagogy bring about a change in ELT classroom?
- 3 - What type of factors can bring about a change to the ELT classroom?

Methodology

This is a theoretical, analytical study. The research methodology here applied follows an interpretive, descriptive tradition through an exhaustive review of pertinent literature and collating results from prior studies in the analysis of the problem. Unlike experimental studies, no control groups or experimental treatments may be being manipulated in this study.

Diffusion Innovations

Theoretically, diffusion of innovations is grounded in multi-disciplinary streams of knowledge. Rogers recognised six main axioms that impacted diffusion research: anthropology, early sociology, rural sociology, education, industrial, and medical sociology. The diffusion of innovation theory has been largely influenced by the work of rural sociologists. He identified four key elements in diffusion research which influence of the spread of a new idea: the innovation, communication channels, time and a social system as shown in table (1):

Table 1: Elements of diffusion of innovation

Element	Definition
Innovation	Innovation is "an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption".
Communication channels	A communication channel is "the means by which messages get from one individual to another".
Time	"The innovation-decision period is the length of time required to pass through the innovation-decision process". "Rate of adoption is the relative speed with which an innovation is adopted by members of a social system".
Social system	"A social system is defined as a set of interrelated units that are engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal".

Diffusion of an innovation occurs through a five-step process. This process is a type of decision-making. It occurs through a series of communicative channels over a period of time among the members of a similar social system. Ryan and Gross first indicated the identification of adoption as a process (15). Rogers categorized the five stages as: awareness, interest, evaluation, trial and adoption (Rogers 79). An individual might reject an innovation at any time during or after the adoption process. In later editions of the Diffusion of Innovations Rogers changed the terminology of the five stages to: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. However, the descriptions of the categories have remained similar throughout the editions. These five stages have been described as in table (2):

Table 2: Rogers' five phase model of diffusion of innovations

Stage	Definition
Knowledge	In this stage, the individual is first exposed to an innovation but lacks information about the innovation. During this stage of the process the individual has not been inspired to find more information about the innovation.
Persuasion	In this stage, the individual is interested in the innovation and actively seeks information/detail about the innovation.
Decision	In this stage, the individual takes the concept of the innovation and weighs the advantages/disadvantages of using the innovation and decides whether to adopt or reject the innovation. Due to the individualistic nature of this stage Rogers notes that it is the most difficult stage to acquire empirical evidence (Rogers 83).
Implementation	In this stage, the individual employs the innovation to a varying degree depending on the situation. During this stage the individual determines the usefulness of the innovation and may search for further information about it.

Confirmation

Although the name of this stage may be misleading, in this stage, the individual finalizes his/her decision to continue using the innovation and may use the innovation to its fullest potential.

Need for diffusion of Innovation in Foreign Language Teaching

Foreign language teaching is an educational specialty with some distinctive characteristics. Its objective is to build communicative skills which require a rapid and accurate use of a complex set of cognitive and motor skills in a natural way. All these complexities must be managed by language users in an almost subconscious way. To truly communicate, they must pay more attention to the message than to the medium. Over the last decade, Esteve argued that teaching has undergone considerable changes (198); it is not a surprise that teachers are constantly and increasingly challenged to cope with complex teaching activities and to adapt themselves to changed classroom circumstances in the new millennium.

For this reason, foreign language teaching employs methods quite different from those used to teach most other school subjects. In addition, successful language learning depends heavily on a number of social and psychological factors such as group identity which are not of concern in most content areas.

In at least one respect, however, foreign language teaching is no different from other branches of education. Attempts to get teachers to change from traditional methods and materials and employ new approaches are common. In fact, foreign language teachers may experience more than the usual share of such attempts. In this regard, Dostert et al. stated :

It is an important and widely recognized characteristic of our culture to be subject to sudden shifts of interest and emphasis. This is certainly true in the realm of education generally. It is particularly true today in our field of foreign language teaching (Dostert et al. 220).

Naturally, whenever there are new ideas, there are corresponding efforts to promote them. Although innovators commonly promote change in ELT practices around the globe, they often do so in virtual ignorance of the context into which they introduce a change, process of change and the factors it involves. Generally speaking, the promoters of new ideas for teaching English as a foreign language seem to rely on the supposed merit of the innovation itself and seldom employ an adequate implementation strategy. While the avowed purpose of many modern-day methodologists is to accelerate change; they scarcely base their efforts on an understanding of the change process.

Rather, in foreign-language-teaching circles, the efforts of material developers and the controversies among methodologists as well as the supporting

research of linguists and psychologists have typically been aimed at answering the question, What is better? The tendency has been to focus attention on the product and assume that a simple delivery of the curriculum approach is sufficient. The operating assumption seems to have been if we can just develop a better science of linguistics or get a better understanding of how people learn languages, the ideal teaching methods and materials will naturally follow and be adopted and used by classroom teachers. In other words, if we can just build a better mousetrap, the world will find a path to our door.

While linguistics, psychology and the other concerns relative to coming up with a better product are undoubtedly important—even necessary—they are far from sufficient if a language-teaching innovation is to spread and become widely used. A sound programme is only the beginning and, as Tajima noted, its success is often dependent on external conditions rather than on the program itself (152). Likewise, Kelly, in his historical overview of language teaching, pointed out that “every age... has its rebels whose teaching techniques, though scientifically justifiable, failed to gain acceptance because they did not fit the atmosphere of the time” (Kelly 408). He pities “the innovator who takes his stand on scientific proof and is unaware of the social forces which isolate him” (Kelly 408).

Rationale for the Diffusion of Innovation in the ELT Domain

The idea that the successful spread of a method depends heavily on how its promoters deal with a variety of social, cultural and political factors is rarely considered in ELT circles. In a pioneering article on this subject, Richards pointed out that “the reasons for the rise and fall of methods are often independent of either the theories behind those methods or their effectiveness in practice” (7). He went on to explain that an accurate understanding of the rise and fall of methods depends on an awareness of the nature and power of various social, political and economic forces. Nevertheless, in the ELT profession, there is such a lack of awareness regarding the implementation factors that he labelled them as the secret life of methods. More knowledge about the factors that influence the process of creating change in ELT practices across socio-cultural boundaries is unquestionably needed.

Hill & Hannafin argued that the worldwide scope of English language teaching commonly results in the extension of efforts to promote change in ELT practices across national boundaries. As teachers and ideas travel from one setting to another, methods developed in one country (such as the United States) are often promoted in foreign lands (such as Saudi Arabia). A case in point is the dramatic impact of computer technology, which has not only

changed the nature of communication and information but also resources available in teaching/learning environments. The relevance of the utilisation and implementation of educational technologies has been the concern of many studies in recent years (c.f. Dooley, Dyrli & Kinnaman, Martins, Steil & Todesco, Sherry et al., Van Den et al., Wilson et al., Fageeh).

In university education, so many institutions find themselves in urgent need of adopting computer technology and e-learning facilities to improve the quality of education they offer on their physical or virtual campuses. Nonetheless, when these institutions become initially involved in the task of implementing technology in their related programmes, they realise that the process of implementing technology involves more than simply purchasing computers and the necessary software. Introducing technology and gaining efficacious applications and outcomes thereof is a culture of change.

A change, brought by technology, is usually perceived diversely by the teaching members of and the learners in a particular educational institution. The success of implementing technology depends on how it is perceived by the group of educators who are directly influenced by the introduction of the technology concerned (c.f. Fageeh, and Mekheimer). The key element in the change process is the teachers and the students. As Fulkerth pointed out the most important component in a change process is not the innovation itself but the beliefs and practices of the people who are affected by it. Teachers and learners should be seen not only as objects of change but also as changing agents who can transform their interpretation of practices through the use of technology (c.f. Bruce). Dooley noted that in a teaching/learning environment, it is vital to consider the issue of embedding the ubiquitous use of educational technology and seek for possible ways of dealing with the tensions between teachers, pedagogy, technology, and institutional management.

Hagner and Schneebeck offered four classifications that can be useful in understanding teachers and their adoption of emerging technologies in contrast with Rogers' classifications. Reimer, et al pointed out that although these classifications are simple and some teachers possess characteristics of multiple groups, most teachers demonstrate predominant characteristics of one of the four groups. According to Hagner and Schneebeck, the first characteristic of teaching members consists of the entrepreneurs. These teaching members are at the forefront of adopting new technology and take risks to use it in the classroom, not just for the sake of using it, but to follow through with their commitment to quality teaching and learning. They are not seeking rewards for their ventures but can become discouraged when their work is not recognised. The second characteristic of teaching members consists of the risk averse. Sharing a commitment to the quality of teaching

and learning with the first wave, their actions are not as profound because of a lack of technical expertise and fear of losing their current success in teaching with the move to using technology. Since this group of teachers are hesitant to become engaged in the transformation process, they need significant instructional support. The third characteristic of teaching members consists of the reward seekers. They are in institutions where promotion structures reward and praise the integration of technology into the classroom. The last group of teaching members consists of the 'reluctant'. These teaching members are computer illiterate and believe in the superiority of traditional models of teaching and learning.

Hagner and Schneebeck argued that before an institution can begin the transformation process it is important to be able to determine what kind of faculty groups the institution has, as 'the choice of engagement strategy depends on this important element of institutional readiness information' (6). The diversity regarding how the people perceive the adoption of the innovation should be recognised and necessary steps must be taken to address felt needs, since, as Rogers also noted, 'when felt needs are met, a faster rate of adoption usually occurs' (228).

Diffusion of Innovations in EFL: the Case of King Khalid University

Zaid made very clear that E-learning, which has been introduced at King Khalid University a few years ago, utilised Blackboard technology as a learning management system. It was evident that the use of computers and technology in the conveyance of teaching and learning is very limited. In a matter of three semesters, the introduction of technology to teaching and learning in King Khalid took place at the same time as when intensive training started for faculty and administrative staff. The diffusion of technology used at King Khalid University has been one of a ripple effect. Of late, e-learning systems have gained wide currency in university educational institutions due to sparsely cited "gains in efficiency when using the technology over changes in teaching and learning activities" (Lonn et al. 642).

Fageeh conducted a study in which he explored the EFL students' readiness to accept e-learning as a medium of instruction. He also assessed and evaluated the students' perceptions with regard to some of the different aspects of e-learning such as motivation for learning, online communication self-efficacy, language skills integration and perceived facilitators and inhibitors of computer-assisted language learning. Reporting on the perceptions of faculty and students, Fageeh has identified the following as important factors that have led to the diffusion of technology acceptance and use in King Khalid

University, especially in the English language learning department where the sample reported their perceptions: 1. Rapid changes in hardware and software technology, 2. Assumption that the computer demands a special curriculum and a special teacher to teach it, 3. Scepticism concerning the effectiveness of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), 4. Lack of appropriate software, 5. Lack of instructors' experience and skills in educational technology, 6. Lack of hardware, 7. Teachers' or students' resistance to change, 8. Lack of time, 9. Problems of scheduling sufficient computer time for different teachers' classes and 10. Lack of training for teachers to use CALL (Fageeh 30). The study indicates that amongst these influential factors, openness to new ideas, innovations, extrinsic rewards and advantages, sharing ideas with others, ubiquity of learning resources in the online context... etc. are amongst these influential factors (Fageeh 35). In other words, this constellation of factors in fact creates special challenges for the diffusion of technological innovation to reform the teaching of English in King Khalid University. The willingness to work with and around these factors is incredibly critical to the diffusion of technology in the ELT domain in King Khalid University.

Aldosari & Mekheimer, Fageeh and Mekheimer maintained, in relation to acceptance and further utilisation of technology in King Khalid University, that when there is an agenda of bringing an innovation into an existing educational curriculum, caution must be exercised and administrators and boards should hold some change management strategies in readiness of accepting and utilising technology for learning and teaching

Conclusions

The inherent challenges recognised in prior research on learning in ELT classroom in Saudi higher education institutions relate not to the adoption of technology, but to the acceptance of this technology both by teachers and students. The country is spending millions of dollars every year on the IT infrastructure, but a consistent attitude towards technology acceptance is less than it may be identified as a trend in the educational system. In addition, faculty members do not succumb to intensive training courses made available by these institutions. It was evident that the use of the traditional styles of teaching in classrooms poses challenges to the process of active, interactive learning in the EFL classroom. The most crucial step to be taken is the pedagogical effect; teachers' and students' profiles should be involved in the dissemination process, recognising their perceptions and attitudes as a first step in finally confirming technological innovation. The research done in the College of Languages and Translation assertively indicate that teachers' and

students' motivation and attitudes towards language learning in these modern e-learning environments are more important than the physical facilities of hardware and software. The factor that can bring about a change to the EFL classroom is the presence of a culture of change that can help diffuse and disseminate technological innovations by leaps and bounds. Given the import of these factors, and the existence of other multiple challenges that may hinder the diffusion of innovations with regard to technology adoption and acceptance in the EFL classroom, it is worth considering the following facilitative conditions:

- Innovation may not be overly ambitious but should have support from sufficient relevant supportive innovations.
- Innovations must have appropriate time frames and should therefore seek to facilitate early, small-scale success which generates momentum and positive sentiments in faculty and students.
- Teachers should be inspired to accept innovations at an early stage, and feel belonging and ownership that is of more than a token nature; as such, they may act as brokers or agents of change.
- Effective institutional-based professional development and support must be built into innovation projects.
- Innovations should be contextually and culturally appropriate, and does not promote values which are incongruent with those of implementers.
- Problem-solving strategies should be built into innovation projects and there ought to be change-management strategies to tackle challenges arising.

By way of conclusion, one may suggest some avenues of further research and ways forward for innovation in the pedagogy of languages in Saudi Arabia. There is a need for more longitudinal studies of innovation, and particularly useful would be studies of the sustainability of innovations or how they are modified over time. Retrospective analyses could also be valuable, such as studies which review how an innovation moves through stages of adoption, implementation, and then abandonment, renewal, or institutionalization. Finally, more contributions on the management of innovations in language education from world experiences would be particularly apposite to the Saudi foreign language teaching settings.

There is also a need for other studies that tackle reform in technology-based ELT practices. From such a perspective, it will be possible to see which approach works best most often and under which sets of circumstances, not just what did or did not work (and which alternatives might have worked) in a

particular case. For instance, students' and faculty staffs' needs, motivation patterns and attitudinal trends need to be examined.

This is because most effective approaches are sensitive to the individuals involved, students' and teachers' specific circumstances and the university administration itself. In this case, strategies to promote the innovation included teacher education which itself incorporates experiential task-based principles and coaching based in classroom-based action research. The latter is especially valuable in view of its emphasis on supporting classroom implementation of relevant innovations in the fields of language education.

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