

# A MODEL COURSE FOR USING TECHNOLOGY IN DEVELOPING PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' PROFICIENCY AND COMPETENCE

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## Abstract

This paper discusses how a variety of educational technologies can be used to develop pre-service English language teachers' linguistic proficiency and teaching competence. The discussion is based on a 16-week academic course entitled "Technology for Teaching English". The course included 81 Palestinian participants who are 3rd-year university students specialised in teaching English as a foreign language at the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG). These students were divided into 3 groups where training was delivered in a computer lab and in a discussion room. The course aimed at empowering the participants to develop a wide variety of computer and internet skills and to use these skills in enhancing their language learning and teaching skills. The results of such course included empowering the participants to develop their language proficiency and their teaching competence and the skills necessary for continuing professional self-development at language learning and teaching levels. Acquiring these skills developed positive attitude towards the importance of using technologies in advancing pre-service English language teachers' proficiency and competence.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

There is general consensus in education on the ethical mission of teachers who "represent the most critical element and the biggest investment in the educational enterprise. Thus, their preparedness and professional development is not only desirable but also necessary for the success of learners, schools and education systems. They deserve the best in policies, measures and technologies." (Haddad 2000)

Since teachers are keys to the success of educational reforms, they need not only to be knowledgeable of their field and methodology but also be equipped with the skills of continuing their professional development to bring real sustainable changes in the process of teaching and learning. To ensure this professional growth, teachers' preparation programs should promote their skills in using technology as an enhancement tool that deepens their specialised knowledge, improve their teaching and learning skills and promote their responsibility and self-reliance for learning and teaching. In short, teachers should be trained to view themselves as reflective ongoing learners. In a concise and comprehensive list, Carlson (2002) states that:

Teacher professional development in the use of technology should embody and model the forms of pedagogy that teachers can use themselves in their classrooms. For example, these training programs should

- Empower teachers to develop their knowledge and skills actively and experientially, in a variety of learning environments, both individual and collaborative.
- Include a variety of learning strategies, including direct instruction, deduction, discussion, drill and practice, induction and sharing.
- Aim at higher-order thinking skills.
- Provide an authentic learning environment so that teachers engage in concrete tasks within realistic scenarios.
- Emphasize ways that technology can facilitate and enhance teachers' professional lives.
- Encourage teachers to be mentors, tutors and guides of the students' learning process (rather than simple presenters of knowledge and information).

- Develop teachers' skills in learning how to learn (define learning objectives, plan and evaluate learning strategies, monitor progress and adjust as needed).
- Promote cooperative and collaborative learning.
- Be sensitive to the culture and diversity of teachers as learners, using a multifaceted approach so as to respond to different learning styles, opportunities, environments and starting points.
- Enable learning independent of time and place (anytime, anywhere learning).

It is believed that the current experimental study offers an instructive model for English language department's role in incorporating technology into enhancing the language proficiency and teaching competence of prospective English language teachers.

The course, "Technology for Teaching English", exposed the participants to a variety of educational technologies, mainly computer and internet skills, intended to develop both their language proficiency as English language majors as well as their teaching competence as would-be English language school teachers.

In order to provide a better understanding of the course, this qualitative study documents and provides an overview of the components of the this experimental course in terms of objectives, intended outcomes, participants, contents, training methodology, assessment, and results related to participants' attitudes and experiences with their training in the use of learning technologies. Each of these items will be discussed below.

## **2 COURSE COMPONENTS**

### **2.1 Course objectives**

- To increase participants' awareness of the importance of using technologies in learning and teaching English.
- To enable participants to use internet in enhancing their language learning and teaching skills, leading to ongoing professional self-development.

### **2.2 Course Intended outcomes**

- Developing positive attitude towards the importance of using technology as a sustainable strategic tool for learning and teaching English.
- Demonstrating an ability to use various technologies in teaching and learning English language.
- Demonstrating strong understanding and use of the recent technologies in self-development of professional language skills and teaching competences.

### **2.3 Participants**

All the participants are Palestinian female students studying at the Faculty of Education at the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG). The 81 female participants were specialised in English language and attended this course as part of their four-year school teacher preparation program. They were third level students whose average age is 21years.

Although all the participants were computer and internet literate, they varied sharply in the degree of mastering the skills of these technological tools as some had advanced computer skills while others had basic ones.

### **2.4 Course Contents**

To achieve the course intended outcomes, no specific textbook was used but a well-prepared training material made available to all participants on the researcher's homepage and on the course Facebook page.

- Unit (1) Basic Principles of Teaching English & Using Technology
- Unit (2): Commonly-used technological tools

- Unit (3) Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL)
- Unit (4) Advanced searching skills for professional purposes
- Unit (5) Internet resources for teachers' and advanced learners' self-development
- Unit (6) Internet Applications in TEFL (Facebook, blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, Vodcasts and Webquests)

## **2.5 Course training methodology**

To maximise the practical technological and professional skills to be gained the 81 participants were trained in two patterns: in computer labs and discussion-based classrooms. In labs, they were divided into 3 groups: an average of 27 participants in each lab. In classroom, they were divided into 2 groups: an average of 40 participants in each class. In each case, every group was given 2-hour training session a week: 2 hours in the lab and 2 hours in classroom. In the labs they were familiarised with using different computer and internet skills related to learning and teaching English effectively. The discussion classes addressed the pedagogical implications of these technological tools in teaching the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), the four language aspects (functional grammar, vocabulary, spelling and pronunciation) and language and culture.

To efficiently and effectively develop the participants' English language teachers' proficiency and competence, these procedures were used:

- Self-learning and learner centered approach
- Collaborative and peer learning
- Collective and group work discussion
- Discussion and reflection
- Flexibility, independence and creativity

## **2.6 Course assessment**

The participants were given 6 practical assignments covering the 6 units of the course listed above. These assignments are given 60% of the total points. Online participation in communication with colleagues and the teacher assistant on the course Facebook and blogs was given 20% and the final exam, held in a lab to ensure that all students can make use of the skills learned, was given only 20%.

These assignments were comprehensive in terms of revising all the skills dealt with in the course. For example, Assignment (4), taken from Unit 4, entitled "Advanced searching skills for professional purposes", offers the participants an opportunity to practise using three advanced searching skills: searching and downloading e-books, journal article and video songs related to either learning or teaching English in Palestine.

### Assignment (4)

Read carefully all these questions and answer them.

- **Google & E-books:** Use Google advanced searching skills you have learned in this course to
  1. Find, download and save 2 recent books (2002+) related to English language teaching.
  2. Write the following information about the 2 books in a **table**: Author(s), title, publisher, publication date, publication place.
  3. Save the table and the books on a CD and submit it in class.
- **Journals and papers:** Use Google advanced searching skills to
  1. **find** 2 e-journals related to teaching English language other than the ones you are familiarized with and **list** them below in a **web hyperlinked** form and next to each write a **brief description** of each one of them.
  2. Search 2 e-journals and **find** 2 articles related to **only one** of these 5 topics:
    1. Using computer in teaching English
    2. using videos in teaching English
    3. using PPP in teaching English
    4. using email in teaching English
    5. using internet in teaching English
  3. Write the sources of these 2 articles in a table containing: author(s), article title, journal title (**Hyperlinked**), year of publication, Vol., and issue no.
  4. Write a summary of the points you learned from these 2 articles in a bulleted form (Your reflection).
  5. Save the 2 articles and the table on a CD and submit it in class.
- **Google & songs**
  1. Find 2 songs related to some of the lessons in *English for Palestine* 1-12.
  2. In a table write the following information about each song:
    1. Title
    2. Objective
    3. The level it suits (1-12)
    4. The unit it is related to
    5. The link to the song

## 2.7 Course training materials

Taking all the course components stated above, this article concentrates on exploring how the training material and methodology used led the participants to achieve the objectives of the course effectively. Three major quality features distinguish this material.

1. Using a variety of questions to be answered in pairs or groups to provide students with opportunity to think independently and collectively, to share their ideas and build creativity and self-confidence. For instance, Unit (1) "Basic Principles of Teaching English & Using Technology" included 12 questions that require students to think pair and share their ideas. These questions primarily focus on making students more aware of the advantages and disadvantages of using technology in learning and teaching English. Below is an example of such questions:

### Sample question

In pairs, discuss which 4 of the following reasons (advantages) for using ICTs/CALL are the most important ones. Why? Try to add 2 more advantages.

1. Strengthen affective factors: motivation, interest and attitude.
2. Promote cognitive skills: discovery learning, problem-solving,
3. provide authentic materials for study,
4. provide individualization & student self-pacing
5. develop independence from a single source of information,
6. Lead to a more learner-centered classroom
7. Encourage collaborative work
8. Reinforce active learning and better student attention
9. Offer diversified teaching methods
10. Offer visual stimulation
- 11.
- 12.

2. Below is a sample dual task that illustrates another major quality feature of the training material, i.e. dual tasks: lab tasks to be done in computer labs and learning/teaching tasks to be done in discussion classes. This means both tasks are practical: one is related to knowing how to use recent technologies and the second one is related to using this knowledge in learning and teaching English as well as for continuing professional development. The material included many dual tasks that covered every skill included in each unit.

### Sample dual task

#### Online dictionaries

#### Lab Task (2)

Here are 4 free online specialized dictionaries out of the many dictionaries offered on the internet. Familiarise yourself with each of them (purpose, features, and how to use them).

2.1 Pronunciation Dictionary: <http://www.howjsay.com>

2.1.1 Try to find the pronunciation of these words: *cassette*, *tortoise*,

2.1.2 Try to put these 2 words together (separated by a semi-colon) and check what happens: *lever*; *liver*

2.2 Synonyms, antonyms & definition: <http://www.synonym.com>

2.3 Rhyme: <http://www.rhymezone.com/>

#### Teaching Task (2)

The 4 examples of online dictionaries above can be useful for advanced English learners and for English teachers. Having looked at them one by one, think and try to list 2 pedagogical benefits of each one of them: one benefit for you as a university student specialised in English and another benefit for you as would-be English teacher.

1. Pronunciation Dictionary: <http://www.howjsay.com>

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2. Synonyms, antonyms & definition: <http://www.synonym.com>

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3. Rhyme: <http://www.rhymezone.com/>

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3. A third common quality is the fact that all questions, tasks and assignments in all units were local context-based where the participants were asked to perform the tasks in relation to the textbooks used in the Palestinian schools, *English for Palestine- Grade 1-12*. Here is a sample Palestinian context-based task taken from Unit 2 “Commonly-used technological tools”.

### Sample context-based Task

- 1) Think of 3 more ideas that you can use videos to teach *English for Palestine* (for any grade).
- 2) In Pairs, try to list 3 more criteria for choosing a video.
  - Length of the extract (2-3 minute video)
  -

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 6 practical assignments and the dual-tasks led to several positive results that can be outlined in line with the six units listed above.

### Unit (1) Basic Principles of Teaching English & Using Technology

Using question-answer strategy in the training material and elaboration in class and exemplification labs increased students' awareness and strengthened their beliefs in many benefits of using technologies in learning and teaching English. Here are some beliefs and benefits emphasized:

- Strengthening affective factors: motivation, interest and attitude
- Promoting higher and lower order thinking skills: discovery learning, problem-solving, creative learning, etc.
- Creating friendly social environment through collaborative work
- Enhancing language skills and proficiency through providing authentic materials, individualization & student self-pacing, audio-visual stimulation

Moreover, the participants developed a realistic understanding of the technical and financial challenges that face Palestinian learners and teachers in using technology in learning and teaching English. One of these serious challenges that all universities, schools and students studying at homes have been facing for more than 5 years is the frequent disconnections of power in Gaza due to the Israeli siege imposed on Gaza.

Awareness of such challenge results in being psychologically and professionally well-prepared for expected and unexpected difficulties.

### Unit (2): Commonly-used technological tools

This 9-question unit deepened students' understanding of why and how to use CD and video players in learning and teaching English in Gaza. This result is achieved not only through explanation and discussion but also through requesting all students to search and select a video (according to pre-specified selection criteria) related to specific unit or lesson in *English for Palestine* as shown in the Assignment 2 below. All students submitted this 10-point assignment. The outcome of this solid understanding is

- Collecting approximately 80 videos and songs related to teaching different lessons in *English for Palestine – Grade 1-12*.

### Assignment (2)

A) Search the net and find one **short video** that you can use in class to teach any lesson from *English for Palestine* 1-12 and do the following

1. State the specific objective (s) of the video in relation to the specific unit or lesson in *English for Palestine*.
2. List 3 features that make this video useful.
3. Write 2 pre-pre-viewing, while-viewing and post-viewing questions related to the objectives of the lesson (consult TB)
4. Include the link to the video.
5. Be ready to give a short presentation about the assignment whenever you are requested to do so.

### Unit (3) Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

This unit enabled participants to use several computer and word functions to enhance learning and teaching English in Palestine. Some of these functions include using the computer with LCD as a CD and video player, coloring texts, drawing tables (hidden), track changes and preparing Power Point presentations, hyperlink. Some of the technical and pedagogical results gained in this unit are embodied in doing the 10-point assignment below. The outcome of this practice is

- Preparing and collecting approximately 80 PPPs related to achieving specific lessons objectives in *English for Palestine – Grade 1-12*.

#### Assignment (3)

To apply what you have learned in this unit, you should design **PPP** in teaching English to primary or secondary school English language learners in Palestine. To do so, you should follow these steps:

1. Choose a lesson from *English for Palestine 1-12* and try to find its specific objectives (consult TB)
2. Prepare several PP slides to facilitate learning and achieving the objectives you specified earlier.
3. You can use brief notes, pictures or tables, etc.
4. Be ready to give a short presentation in class whenever you are requested to do so.

### Unit (4) Advanced searching skills for professional purposes

Unit 4 enabled participants to use advanced searching skills that would make them lifelong language learners and teacher. These skills involve using Google advanced search skills and Google scholar to find: PDF articles, videos and images related to language learning and teaching. Here is a list of the outcomes of practicing these searching skills as requested in Assignment 4 below.

- Collecting approximately 150 recent books related to learning and teaching English.
- Collecting a list of approximately 20 titles of e-journals related to language learning and teaching, with a brief description of each.
- Collecting approximately 150 PDF articles on using computer, videos, PPP, email and internet in learning and teaching English.
- Collecting approximately 150 songs related to different lessons in *English for Palestine 1-12*.

#### Assignment (4)

Read carefully all these questions and answer them.

- **Google & E-books:** Use Google advanced searching skills you have learned in this course to
  1. Find, download and save 2 recent books (2002+) related to English language teaching.
  2. write the following information about the 2 books in a **table**: Author(s), title, publisher, publication date, publication place.
  3. Save the table and the books on a CD and submit it in class.
- **Journals and papers:** Use Google advanced searching skills to
  1. **find** 2 e-journals related to teaching English language other than the ones you are familiarized with and **list** them below in a **web hyperlinked** form and next to each write a **brief description** of each one of them.
  2. Search 2 e-journals and **find** 2 articles related to **only one** of these 5 topics:
    - Using computer in teaching English
    - using videos in teaching English
    - using PPP in teaching English
    - using email in teaching English
    - using internet in teaching English
  3. Write the sources of these 2 articles in a table containing: author(s), article title, journal title (**Hyperlinked**), year of publication, Vol., and issue no.
  4. Write a summary of the points you learned from these 2 articles in a bulleted form (Your reflection).
  5. Save the 2 articles and the table on a CD and submit it in class.
- **Google & songs**
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  2. In a table write the following information about each song:
    - Title
    - Objective
    - The level it suits (1-12)
    - The unit it is related to
    - The link to the song

#### Unit (5) Internet resources for teachers' and advanced learners' self-development

Unit 5 focussed on developing learners' language proficiency and on enhancing the participant pre-service teachers' teaching competence through using several internet resources such as

1. Online journals
2. Mailing & discussion lists
3. Online dictionaries
4. Websites for English language learners
5. Professional English language organizations
6. Websites for English language teachers
7. ELT Publishers

In the discussion classes, the students were asked to work in pairs or groups, think and try to **list 2 pedagogical benefits**: as university students specialised in English and as would-be English teachers. The outcome of this unit is the knowledge and skills of making use of

- several free online journals and download articles related to the process of language learning and teaching such as: CALL-EJ & Language Learning and Technology Journal
- several free online specialised dictionaries related to pronunciation ([www.howjsay.com](http://www.howjsay.com); [www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com)), synonyms, antonyms & definitions (<http://www.synonym.com>) and rhyme (<http://www.rhymezone.com/>);
- subscribing to professional organizations such as IATEFL and TESOL;
- subscribing to international ELT publisher;

- subscribing to mailing lists such as TESL-L mailing list and The LLTI (Language Learning and Technology International);
- many websites that enhance learners' language proficiency & teachers' competence.

### Unit (6) Internet Applications in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language)

Unit 6 represented the heart of the course as it enabled the participants to create and use recent internet tools to advance their language learning competence and their abilities to teach professionally. These tools include Email, Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, Vodcasts, Webquests and Facebook. The major outcomes of this unit are training on:

- creating and managing these 7 tools through mastering their key features;
- how to use each tool in enhancing the process of learning and teaching English language skills as shown in Table (1) below. After learning how to create and manage these tools, the participants (in pairs and groups) were encouraged to discuss how each tool can be used to enhance the process of language learning and teaching and then complete a table for each tool as shown below.

**Table (1) Think and try to complete this table**

<b>Blog: Learning &amp; teaching English</b>			
Language skills	Learner level	Objective	Illustration/example
writing	Stage 2: grades 5-10	To develop the skill of describing an object	Uploading 6 pictures with simple model descriptions to 2 of them and asking students describe 2 of the remaining 4
Reading	Stage 3: grades 11-12	To develop extensive reading of a short story	Download 3 short stories expressing certain values followed by questions and ask students to read one and answer the questions
Vocabulary	Stage 1: grades 1-4	To master meaning & pronunciation of body parts	Downloading videos & songs about body parts, followed by pictures and questions.
Listening	Stage 3: grades 11-12	To practice listening for the gist	Downloading a video about a topic related to one unit in English for Palestine, followed by questions.

Completing such table motivated the students to connect many features of each tool to teaching some of the 10 language skills and aspects: reading writing, listening speaking, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, literature and culture. The outcome of this unit is 7 completed tables that match some of the tools features to these 10 language skills and aspects as shown above.

Acquiring and practicing all the computer and internet related skills discussed above proved their positive impact on the participants' attitude towards the importance of using technology as a sustainable strategic tool for learning and teaching English. This positive attitude was demonstrated through 2 tools:

- University regular online questionnaire that 70% of the participant students completed as part a regular electronic assessment of many academic courses offered every semester. The university students evaluated the course in terms achievement of objectives, syllabus and teaching material, teacher's performance, assessment and teaching methods, etc. The result of this questionnaire the current course was high (88%) compared to other courses taken by the same students.
- Comments and feedback given by students orally in and after class and in writing on page of the Facebook created for this course and entitled "Technology for Teaching English".

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

The course outcomes presented above emphasize these conclusions that make the current course a model that explains how teacher preparation programs, especially the course educational technology, can make use of technology to enhance pre-service English language teachers' proficiency and

competence. These conclusions can function as guidelines to be followed in developing similar courses.

- The course tasks and assignments developed **collaborative learning** as the participants exchanged knowledge and skills in class, labs, via emails and Facebook. For instance, doing the lab tasks required the students who had advanced computer skills to assist those who had lower computer skills. Similarly, doing the learning/teaching tasks required the students to work in pairs or groups as always happened in class.
- The course promoted **active learning**, as the training material was task-based and left space to students to think, pair and share their answers to the whole class.
- The course is **learner-centered** as students were motivated by doing several challenging tasks, assignments, questions that promote **self-reliance** and **taking responsibility** for their own learning.
- The course trained the participants to **think and be creative** in offering different answers that may vary in their appropriacy as using these many technological tools in language learning and teaching is not a white and black issue but depends on creativity and appropriacy.
- The many questions and tasks included in the course offered many opportunities to practice **problem solving activities** that would develop the participant would-be teacher's **higher order thinking skills (HOTS)** which would be reflected positively on generations and generations of young learners.
- The course emphasized the importance of **collective work** when all the above-mentioned e-books, videos, songs and journal articles collected by individual students were compiled on a CD by the researcher and was given to all students. This CD represents a mini-library specialised in English that every student feels she contributed in building it.
- Practicing several search skills to produce such CD and practicing all the computer and internet skills reinforced **self-confidence** and generated a strong belief in the importance of **continuing professional self-development** for "teachers who want to become better prepared to meet the challenges of their future classrooms" (Erben, Ban & Castaneda 2009:6).
- The course familiarised students with top-rated websites and various resources available on the internet that can be used as **renewable resources** that continually improve pre-service English language teachers' proficiency and competence.
- The course offers a useful model that concentrated on the importance of 'Palestinisation' of the training material, i.e. **customisation, contextualisation and localisation** to suit the reality concerned.
- The close cooperation and coordination between the researcher, as the course instructor, and the teacher assistant, Mrs Tahani Fohrah, played a key role in the success of this course a model of **co-teaching and co-training**.

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