



The Role of ICT in the Teaching of Productive Skills in English during COVID-19: Teachers' Perceptions and Obstacles

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Abstract

In the current millennium, educational technology integration has become an obligation, particularly when the focus of teaching is purely fluency-based. EFL teachers believe that students cannot reach a good level of fluency unless they speak and write English with less difficulty and more spontaneity. For that purpose, instructors incessantly seek versatile ways and approaches to deepen and enrich the teaching of four language skills (mainly the productive ones). Online sources and internet outlets provide both students and instructors with various ranges of software applications and platforms to actively dive into different class activities. Through the agency of online applications and programs, EFL learners get to gradually embrace autonomous learning. In effect, students reach self-improvement in speaking and writing when they are continuously exposed to ICT assistance. Therefore, this paper aspires to pinpoint the aspects of productive skills of teaching via the implementation of ICT as a new trend in modern education. Needless to say, it ignites a deeper discussion on Moroccan teachers' attitudes toward the use of ICT in the EFL classroom. The quantitative analysis by means of a questionnaire designated to Moroccan EFL teachers revealed a considerable amount of positivity and predilection toward the employment of ICTs in the EFL instruction.

Keywords : EFL classroom, ICT, productive skills, teachers' perceptions, innovative learning, online linguistic interaction

1. Introduction

Proper communication is driven by an appropriate use of language i.e. communication (without language) nearly becomes difficult, if not elusive. Given the fact that English is a lingua franca, many EFL classes regard the mastery of productive skills (i.e. writing and speaking) a priority. In this context, a befitting way of teaching the aforementioned skills is highly required. Information and communication technology (ICT) is proved to play an integral role in the teaching of productive skills in English for the purpose of maintaining goals of quality, efficiency, and proficiency. With the implementation of ICT in teaching writing and speaking skills, students will be vastly prepared to be productive individuals in the society as a whole. In line with this argument, Skolverke (2011) contends that institutions should urge students to "[...] use books library resources and modern technology as tools in the search for knowledge, communication, creativity and learning" (p. 9). The integration of technology at educational institutions has proven not only to help students to seek knowledge, but also it is believed to be a strong driving force towards creativity.

Classroom courses no longer remain a one-way communication environment in which teacher is the center and students are the periphery as there is a global wide-spread transformation in students' attitudes and orientations. Most of them find the use of various technologies in courses delivery very stimulating and inspiring, as they are updated about the recent technologies and myriad of them excel in using those technologies pertinently. For that reason, ICT is a big challenge for English teachers to make speaking and writing tasks enjoyable and impressive for students to learn the language out of interest and aspiration. This, in turn, would lead to long-lasting learning for students and the purpose would be fulfilled in a much more effective and operative manner. In this respect, one cannot deny that traditional ways of teaching, especially in this millennium, are becoming rigid and less motivating for many students. For that motive, English language teachers are constantly demanded to adapt their teaching methods to the requirements of our present time in such a way that they draw students' interest to learn and develop their speaking and writing skills respectively. Research (e.g. Toomey, 2001) has shown that the employment of ICTs (as complementary to the traditional curriculum of teaching) undoubtedly imparts innovation into the classroom environment. Within this framework, it has been proven that constant and systematic utilization of ICTs hand students with necessary tools of critical thinking and problem solving. Wongwanich and Ngurah (2007), for example, emphasize that the teacher-student interaction approach is a turning point in building the students' body of knowledge and boosting students' critical thinking and reasoning. According to them, when students receive knowledge in a non-centred teaching atmosphere, they strongly build a remarkable sense of critical thinking skills, "such as gathering knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation in classrooms where supportive learning environments are presented".

In the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region for example, use of technologies in teaching/learning process is very diverse within and across the MENA countries according to the socio-economic characteristics of each country. According to Mahdi et al (2015), Morocco is one of the countries in the region that has endorsed various changes in the educational system since 2005 in order to assure quality learning for all students by the integration of ICT in the learning and teaching process. Unfortunately, the scarcity of teacher trainings (to enhance their qualifications in ICT) has contributed to a great extent to the obstruction of an effective and continuous implementation of ICT in the curriculum. Nevertheless, the vulnerable preponderance of the utilization of new technologies in Moroccan educational institutions has not precluded the Moroccan government from endorsing and strongly recommending the use of ICT in teaching, particularly in the wake of the massively pervasive infection of Coronavirus pandemic. Teachers (in COVID-19 epoch) have found themselves facing various challenges that forced them to deal with a new teaching approach without any prior notice. As in many other developing countries, Moroccan educational policy-makers showed reluctance and a very timid approach toward the penetration of ICTs in the course materials. This inevitably leads to making the teaching task extremely complicated and slippery to handle the omnipresent crisis. Scarcity of technical support, lack of professional trainings, and shortage of electronic devices are common hindrances for a decent utilization of ICTs in course delivery in EFL classrooms.



Considering the vital role that technologies perform in the learning process, this study endeavors at analyzing the role of ICT in the teaching of productive skills as they are regarded equally essential in the communicative process. When talking about learning a foreign language, and in order for learners to be fluent and proficient, they ought to master both the speaking and writing skills. For many, one cannot be fluent in a language unless s/he speaks and writes it correctly and meaningfully. Likewise, speaking a foreign language well may open the doors for learners to have greater chances in joining the market force easily. According to Westrup (2003, p. 05) “a student who can speak English well may have a greater chance for further education, of finding employment and gaining promotion”. However, speaking and writing are considered (among students) to be a major challenge as the majority of them (students) find the task of learning a foreign language difficult to achieve. One of the biggest obstacles that obstructs learners from learning a foreign language is the fear of making mistakes. When people are not sure of their proficiency or when they feel they may be judged by others, they lose motivation and incentive to participate in a discussion. Thus, the lack of self-confidence, amidst learners, may lead to isolation and negligence. Viewed this way, EFL teachers should revisit their teaching methodology and the pedagogy used so as to increase students’ motivation to integrate and fit into the courses taught. That is why, the use of ICTs in teaching productive skills has shown its efficacy in transferring information and knowledge in the most useful ways.

The study also investigates some of the barriers that stand toward the implementation of ICTs amongst EFL teachers. It seeks to explore the most prominent challenges teachers face in the employment of technologies in EFL instruction. Al-Mulhim (2014, p. 487) asserts that what inhibits a proper utilization of ICT in teaching “could be either teacher or school related”. Similarly, in order to measure up to the expectations of this study, only teacher-level perceptions and barriers will be investigated. Equally important, the present research tries to answer following research questions:

1. Do ICTs enhance students’ productive skills?
2. Is the teaching of productive skills through ICTs fruitful?
3. What are the difficulties faced by EFL teachers in using ICTs?

These research questions drive us to formulate following hypotheses:

1. ICT tools help EFL teachers in the teaching of productive skills.
2. ICT equips EFL learners with the required tools to consolidate their productive skills.
3. Teachers may face many obstacles that can impede their constant use of ICTs within the classrooms.

2. Literature Review

The outbreak of COVID-19 around the globe and the abrupt closure of schools have forced all Moroccan EFL teachers to use ICTs in the EFL classroom. Given the prevalence of English in Morocco, there has been a high demand for productive skills in language programs. These skills are both functional and communicative, and help accomplish tasks. Similarly, they are the skills that are predominantly emphasized in language fluency, particularly with respect to role plays, presentations, homework assignments, and class participation as a whole. This is not to say that receptive skills (i.e. listening and reading) are not important. With teaching experience, students who equally study the four language skills appear to increase their lexicon and language proficiency, and boost their confidence. It must be noted that Moroccan students consider speaking and writing as “la bête noire” of the curriculum because the latter are demanding in terms of form and content, and are both governed by syntax and semantics. Sentence construction and meaning making are two equally primordial elements in the intelligibility of any human speech, be it verbal or written. In fact, the integration of ICT into the classroom and as part of the students’ learning process (guided or independent) would be an invaluable asset for learners’ linguistic progress (Aherrahrou & Makhoukh, 2016; Dkhissi, 2014). Likewise, there is a great deal of attention paid to the correlation between technology and productive skills due to the “cognitive strategies and generic competencies that are instrumental to today’s student-centered, flipped classroom” (Pérez, 2018, P. 1).

Since speaking and writing are both cognitive and functional, they are slightly different. This is to say that speaking is almost always intended for face-to-face communication, whereas writing is always used by writers to communicate their ideas to recipients who are separated by time and space. For Burn and Joyce (1997), speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information. This suggests that speaking is more than the production of meaningful utterances. It intends for the speaker to process information and interact at the same time, which creates a meaningful verbal exchange with other interlocutors. Harmer (2001, pp. 122-124) asserts that “speakers need to structure their discourse if they want to be understood, especially in more writing-like speech, such as giving presentations.” In the same manner, Harmer (2001, pp. 122-124) emphasizes that “writing has to be both coherent and cohesive.” Coherent writing is understandable because one can follow the sequence of ideas and flow of meaning. Conversely, cohesion is a more technical component, since the attention is paid to different linguistic patterns of connecting ideas across phrases, clauses, and sentences. Halliday (1970, p. 141) explains that “the nature of language is closely related to the demands that we make on it, the functions it has to serve.” Interestingly, Malinowski (1923) supports the claim of Halliday by adding that the functional view of language overlooks the sentential level, while emphasizing the significance of discourse in context. This makes perfect sense as what matters most in any genre of discourse is the fluency and intelligibility of the speaker. However, accuracy, grammar, is important, but it is not as important as fluency. Even though sometimes certain EFL teachers prioritize accuracy-oriented activities over fluency-oriented activities. A good example to explain this ongoing linguistic battle between accuracy and fluency is when EFL learners learn grammar rules (i.e. tenses, articles, prepositions, conditionals, passive and active forms), they are still not capable of using them correctly in real-life conversations. These language problems can perhaps be perceived as those rules studied in class were not functional. They were merely designed for the sake of classroom activities where the learning environment is encouraging and stress free.

The Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training has signed a number of partnerships with the Moroccan-American Commission for Educational and Cultural Exchange (MACECE). Such partnerships enable Moroccan students and/or teachers to benefit from various scholarships and grants either for studies or professional development. The variety of activities enacted in these types of programs open a promising window for EFL teachers to not only systematically refine their pedagogical skills, but also learn how to use technological tools to successfully deliver online courses. In the same vein, Morocco has signed another partnership with the US Embassy in Rabat, which has abundantly given rise to free online courses during COVID-19 for students. Such courses have strongly emphasized productive skills as they continuously enhance students’ communicative skills in written and non-written formats. Furthermore, the aforementioned ministry and the Regional English Language Office (RELO) together coordinated a few programs that greatly helped EFL teachers embark on well-grounded digital professional development trainings so as to promote their teaching to current trends. There is no doubt that these efforts will unquestionably lead to best practices in the realm of TEFL.

According to UNESCO (2002) ICT has become, within a very short time, one of the basic building blocks of modern society. Many countries now regard understanding ICT and mastering the basic skills and concepts of ICT as part of the core of education, alongside reading, writing, and numeracy. In effect, ICT is becoming an indispensable part of our education system, and can largely change the way we perceive education in general and TEFL in particular. With the use of blended learning and flipped classroom, both technology-based, the EFL classroom can break away from old teaching methods, such as the grammar-translation method (GTM), recitation, teacher-centred approach, and so forth. Over the years these methods have proven that they do not encourage learners to use their meta-cognitive skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving. Within this framework, the Directorate General of Education and Culture’s report (2009) asserts that recent technological innovations have led to a paradigm shift in teacher and learner roles with regard to pedagogy. With

ICT, EFL teachers appear to handle and monitor speaking and writing skills with more ease and motivation, using effective fluency-oriented activities that motivate learners to confidently speak, write, express, present, research, and most importantly enjoy the process simultaneously.

Davis and Shade (1999, p. 225) draw an interesting parallel between technology and language contending that, like literacy, “technological fluency” can be attained if technology is “integrated into the classroom environment”. As for Gardiner (1993), he stresses that hypermedia-based teaching material is educationally superior because it simulates the real life situation and students deal with information from many sources. As a result, students’ autonomy, comprehension and interaction increase immensely.

Erguig (2009), Hew and Brush (2007), Jung (2005), and Kerouad and Fagroud (2015) all shed light on the changes that ICT implementation can potentially bring about to both TEFL and the EFL learning process itself, along with bolstering students’ motivation and receptiveness of English as a foreign language. Research and practice have shown that the use of technology in language teaching can enhance learning in many ways beginning with motivation and ending with incremental fluency. In this regard, Al-Jarf (2004) analyzed the effects of the use of technology in teaching writing to EFL college students at King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. In his study, two groups were using the exact traditional textbook-based writing instruction. However, the students of the experimental group were encouraged to use their electronic devices to proofread and edit their essays at home. Subsequently, both groups were tested and the findings revealed that the experimental group largely made a bigger progress in their writing assignment. Likewise, they displayed a remarkable degree of motivation and self-esteem. In brief, the inclusion of technological tools had a positive impact on students’ attitudes toward the writing task, and thus the outcomes happened to be positive as well. It also encouraged them to do more research and check vocabulary, grammar, and style. These components make a lot of difference in the writing process. Thus, ICT can be very empowering (especially) in writing as the amount of research devoted to a certain topic can greatly affect the quality and quantity of any given assignment or research paper.

Soussi’s (2015, p. 842) study specifically points out that ICT has the potential to open language teaching classrooms into newer horizons, yet it needs to be integrated. Nonetheless, he problematized the application framework of ICT as it is not an easy task, taking into account the current conditions of the Moroccan education system. These conditions can be summarized as technological scarcity, lack of time, shortage of electronic resources, lack of confidence to use ICT equipment, untrained teachers and students, and so forth that hinder the utilization of ICT. Thus, considerable support is needed for teachers and students in terms of training, equipment, time, and digital resources.

On the whole, the presence of ICT in EFL instruction, especially when teaching productive skills is becoming an overwhelming necessity as it has proven to change the classroom dynamics, as well as have positive effects on learners’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In fact, speaking and writing are among the main markers of one’s literacy. Therefore, they should receive a formal and stimulating teaching environment as the world is becoming more digitalized than ever and technology is strongly visible in all domains. The EFL classroom should move forward to more innovative and newer teaching trends in years to come.

3. Methodology

The current study is purely quantitative. The researchers heavily relied on the use of a teacher-based questionnaire to gather maximum data from participants during COVID-19. The subsections below provide a thorough description of the research participants and instrumentation.

3.1 Participants

The questionnaire was randomly administered to 50 EFL teachers working in different schools across Morocco. The aforesaid research instrument was sent out through Google Forms. The majority of participants’ age group ranges between 31 and 40 years old. They were contacted via email and/or social media (i.e. WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger). Males constituted 51%, while females 49% having almost an equal share of responses. The gender variable is not to be taken into account in this study. All the data has been gathered during the months of May and June, 2020.

3.2 Instrumentation

This quantitative study theoretically and empirically aspired to gather bona fide data. Hence, the researchers ensured to incorporate questions that were relevant to the research topic in order to yield reliable results that will be conducive to making firm conclusions about EFL teachers’ perceptions and attitudes toward the role of ICT in the teaching of productive skills, as well as the different obstacles that may rise, and hence inhibit the proper use of ICT in education during COVID-19. The questionnaire encompassed seven close-ended and two open-ended questions. Impetus behind the use of open-ended questions is to give enough room to participants to describe the approaches adopted in the teaching of productive skills, as well as the ICT obstacles encountered by the EFL teachers in Morocco. In fact, both close-ended and open-ended questions are equally important, and hence form the crux of this study.

In an attempt to ensure the validity and reliability standards of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted. Three English instructors were invited by email to participate in the evaluation of the questionnaire’s content and form. The results of the evaluation revealed that the last three questions sounded a bit redundant. There were also some typos. Therefore, the researchers took these remarks into consideration. After 24 hours, the questionnaire was sent out to participants via Google Forms.

3.3 Data Analysis

In this section, the data is analyzed through descriptive statistics. The figures were obtained from Google Forms and are all based on the questions written in the questionnaire.

4. Results and Discussion

We believe that the results have been clearly analyzed and discussed through the heremneutic approach (descriptive statistics).

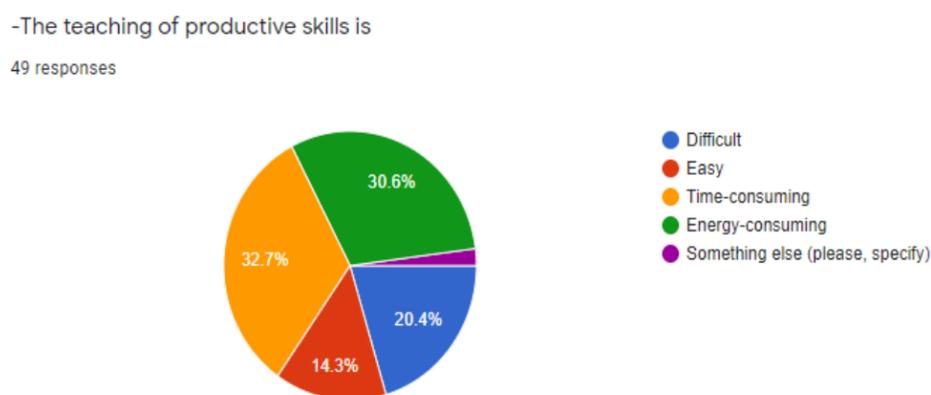


Figure 1: The Teaching Nature of Productive Skills

Fig. 1 shows that 32.7 percent of the participants consider the teaching of productive skills to be time-consuming. This percentage is significant and indicative of the immense amount of time devoted to lesson planning, content preparation (visual and non-visual), presentations, activities, and evaluation. In fact, EFL teachers tend to spend a great deal of time in teaching language components (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, stylistics, pronunciation) and writing mechanics (e.g., punctuation, cohesion and coherence, capitalization, indentation). Students cannot perform well in class if they do not master basic notions of speaking and writing genres. Correction of homework assignments in large classes can also be one of the primary reasons that teachers consider speaking and writing to be time-consuming. It would also be difficult for teachers to manage classroom activities and equally give the chance to everyone to participate, especially if the approach adopted is a communicative one.

For some students, language growth can be slow, and hence teachers have to slow down the pace, and be patient, especially with struggling learners. To overcome this issue, teachers tend to use different teaching approaches and methodologies in order to tap on learners' multiple intelligences.

Both speaking and writing require regular monitoring and supervision, particularly if the in-class activities are fluency-oriented. In terms of teachers' input, it has to be stimulating and interesting. This requires teachers to constantly look for themes and topics that are genuine and relatable to students so as to resonate with. The more interesting the topics are, the more relatable students are. Viewed this way, classroom dynamics can drastically be vitalized, as well as students' linguistic production can increase in spoken and written formats through seamless communication of ideas. In brief, language fluency can enormously grow if the EFL classroom embraces quality learning and an encouraging environment where there is less lecturing and more interaction.

The choice that received the second highest percentage is that the teaching of productive skills is energy-consuming. For a lot of teachers, productive skills are labour-intensive as they demand continuous work, supervision, and focus in activities like drills, role plays, scenarios, and free-writing. The last of these is generative, exploratory, uncontrolled, and most importantly relatable. Testing in large classes can be laborious, since teachers are required to read and correct students' composition and provide written feedback. Such notes help students learn more about the genre they write in, as well as possible ways to improve the content and style.

The choice that received the third highest percentage concerns the teaching difficulty of the aforementioned skills. In effect, speaking and writing tend to be difficult, especially when students are exposed to accuracy-oriented activities, such as tenses and pronunciation. For many students, the past progressive and past perfect are discombobulating as both tenses deal with two actions/events that happened in the past, but of course with certain grammatical and semantic differences. Similarly, at the level of pronunciation, there are numerous words that are easy to pronounce, but difficult to write, such as *dough*, *caught*, *cough*, *thought*, *taught*, *though*, *thorough*, *lieutenant*, and so forth. These language specificities might be challenging for some teachers to teach to EFL students, and hence require constant preparation and careful attention.

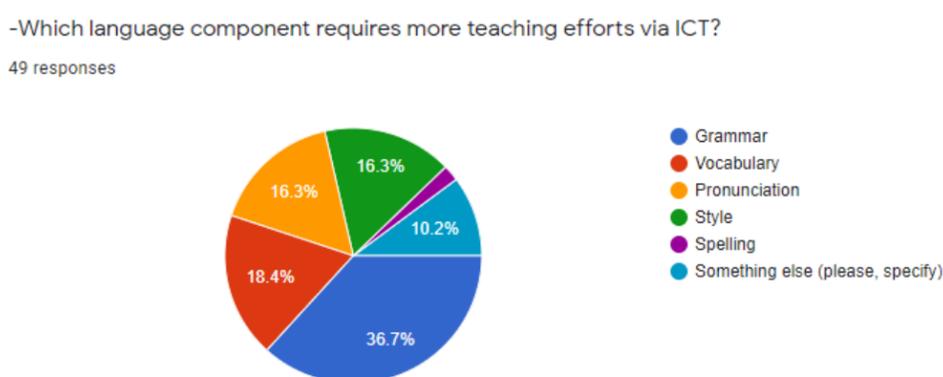


Figure 2: Teaching Efforts of Language Components via ICT

According to the chart in Fig. 2, 36.7 percent of the participants believe that grammar is the most demanding constituent in terms of efforts in the teaching of productive skills, followed by vocabulary 18.4 percent, then pronunciation 16.3 percent, and finally style with a percentage of 16.3. These percentages are striking and expressive of the paramount importance to these language constituents. They interchangeably function and are very interdependent. To begin with, grammar is tantamount to the backbone of human language. It is logical and works by rules. Such rules are important in the construction of phrases, clauses, and sentences. Syntax, semantics, and pragmatics are crucial components in the study of grammar. For example, sentence construction (syntax) plays a vital role in meaning making. Let us compare sentences 1 and 2.

1. William was eaten by the stars yesterday.
2. The apples were eaten by William yesterday.

Sentence 2 is well-formed and makes a clear sense, whereas sentence 1 sounds peculiar and awkward. The stars cannot eat human beings unless the use is strictly metaphoric.

Back to the main issue, EFL teachers make a lot of efforts in teaching language accuracy through grammar, such as (determiners, derivation, inflection, reported speech, tenses, articles, irregular verbs, adverbs, and so on.). To be able to prepare exercises and design activities through the use of ICTs either through PowerPoint presentations, interactive boards, or Moodle can be difficult for most of the teachers. As we all know, digital illiteracy and ill-equipped classrooms are still a big issue in the EFL instruction in Morocco. These perhaps might be the root causes of why teachers make a lot of efforts in teaching grammar. Additionally, grammar demands perpetual

monitoring and checking as students mostly make mistakes at the level of tenses in both speaking and writing, especially when talking about events in the present and past at the same time. This can be slippery for them, and teachers have to intervene regularly if the activity is purely accuracy-oriented. This also can imply that EFL teachers are comfortable and make less efforts when using traditional grammar textbooks since exercises are already provided with answers. Hence, teachers are nearly always in control, and in the center of the classroom without the competition of ICTs. With the employment of such textbooks, teachers constantly photocopy or print teaching materials and exercises. This has proven to be unsustainable, particularly if sustainability is among the top priorities of a certain school. In fact, grammar in digital textbooks comes with listening to help students improve their pronunciation, and this can be difficult for teachers and students, particularly if the school does not have an audio and/or video lab.

There is no doubt that vocabulary (morphology) is the building block of any language. Naturally, speaking and writing are heavily banked on a fairly good reservoir of words and expressions. The larger the reservoir (lexicon) is, the more comfortable the use of productive skills becomes. This certainly requires practice in real-life settings where teachers are encouraged to help their students with drills and role plays. Visual aids are equally important in this process. EFL teachers potentially find it difficult to teach vocabulary through ICTs as it takes time to do research to find the right images that can be used in the classroom. The more authentic vocabulary is, the more active students become. In the same vein, dividing students into small groups to present or debate can be tiresome, but essential for vocabulary growth as students learn from the mistakes of each other regarding both spelling and pronunciation.

Pronunciation is an issue that can generate a lot of problems in the EFL classroom. Phonetics and phonology are two fundamental processes in verbal language production. In effect, teachers find it energy-consuming when teaching intonation, gemination, aspiration, deletion, diphthongs, voiced and voiceless sounds, transcription, and so forth. In the same manner, these specific language processes demand constant intervention on the part of teachers as they are more accuracy-oriented in lieu of fluency-oriented. Videos, audios, Podcasts, TED Talks, webinars, Khan Academy, and so on can all be effective and efficient ways to help students enhance their pronunciation in real-life and specific contexts. Learning by imitation has proven to show positive effects in foreign language instruction. It must be noted that the preparation of these listening activities calls for careful attention and continuous research as teachers have to find the appropriate listenings that perfectly match students' levels as the class (often) tends to be mixed-ability.

Style is mostly required in writing. It is a distinctive feature in one's writing. It also makes one's writing flow naturally and beautifully. EFL teachers are themselves in a continuous effort to develop their own writing style through reading and writing. Why teachers make less efforts in comparison to other language constituents is may be because they display short reading passages to students through a data projector. The emphasis, in this activity, is to stimulate students through the use of vocabulary, thought development, exemplification, elaboration, analysis, synthesis, and so on. Once more, imitation can be useful at this stage, as well as positive feedback from teachers to encourage students to write even after they finish school. It is a skill they will develop for the rest of their lives.

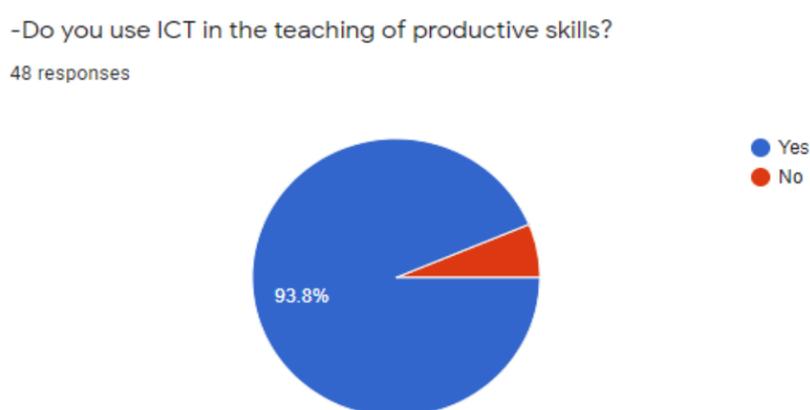


Figure 3: The Use of ICT in the Teaching of Productive Skills

Chart in Fig. 3 shows that 93.8 percent of the participants implement ICTs in the teaching of productive skills within the academic environment. They are more inclined to use technology to channel information. Only 6 percent of the participants seem to be resistant to the use of ICT in their teaching. EFL teachers demonstrate strong tendency to base their teaching of productive skills on the utilization of ICT. This absolute embracement of ICT by most educational corporal reinforces the hypothesis of the current study that presumes that ICT tools help teachers in accomplishing their mission effectively. For many instructors, ICT becomes a decisive building block in the academic environment. Research demonstrates that the adoption of ICT in the teaching experience alongside other traditional methods have a magical effect on student's academic journey. This merit aligns with Frizler (1995) who asserts that though technologies can never replace teachers, they can be prolific complementary materials to boost the quality of instruction process. This finding implies positive teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward the utilization of information technology in course construction.

There are several ways in which ICTs can improve EFL learners' cognitive skills. New technologies provide students with rich and diverse ways of learning. In the case of promoting productive skills, different techniques and methods can be applied by EFL teachers for the benefit of students' interests. Drilling and simulation, for example, are mandatory in the teaching of both speaking and writing. Drilling is a strategy that has been widely used to teach foreign languages. It puts emphasis on repeating structural patterns through oral activities or written ones. Drilling has been proven to be very helpful for students to master language pronunciation and spelling. Simulation, on the other hand, is another technique that EFL teachers have opted for many years ago. Most of the educators would agree that this technique is vastly appreciated among both instructors and learners. It gives more space for learners to practice their speaking skills, and hence boost them to a higher level. Learning productive skills through simulation and drilling makes the process more enjoyable and creative. However, learners might quickly lose interest and affection toward drilling and simulation games if they are improperly presented to them. In this case, ICTs emerge to assist teachers in backing up the allotted syllabus. Teachers may decide on making use of ICT in drilling and simulation activities to guarantee a joyful environment within the academic venue. The use of audio and video sources supplies learners with fascinating opportunities to enhance their speaking and writing skills.

Equally important, EFL teachers can include ICT in their course conveyance with the aid of interactive boards and data show projectors for their great impact on students' valuable learning and full integration in the course. These engaging techniques are believed to drive EFL learners' enthusiasm toward practicing productive skills. Interactive boards, videos, and data projectors are all visual instruments that display an enormous effect on students' imagination and creativity. Such tools impart communication in a visualized and adorned manner. The quality that visual instruments prompt student's cognitive abilities to actively take part in class making by means of looking for relevant vocabulary through context clues and employ them appropriately in their daily language use. This argument aligns with the widely known saying 'an image is worth a thousand words'. Through the agency of images, both teachers and students can work in a comfortable milieu. Similarly, the use of a data projector by students to deliver their presentations may make the task easier and more pleasing. Thus, when students are exposed to visual aids in their learning process, their ability to store information in the brain and use it whenever is possible becomes more reachable. Likewise, ICT keeps both EFL teachers and learners interconnected and work collaboratively even outside the academic setting. Teachers can take advantage of multiple technological supports to assign writing tasks to students and provide their feedback instantly without the need to wait until they meet in class.

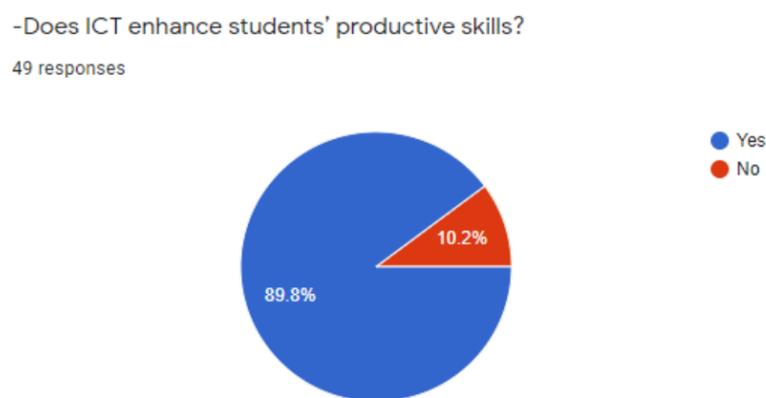


Figure 4: ICT and the Enhancement of Productive Skills

This question was specifically addressed in order to unveil EFL teachers' perceptions about whether ICTs enhance the teaching of productive skills. It is striking that the answer is in the affirmative with a percentage of 89.8 percent (see Fig. 4). This means that ICTs play an integral part in the development of students' productive skills. The use of group discussions, webinars, presentations, writing workshops, and so forth can be eye-catching and impactful. Ostensibly, this imbues potential, attention, and constant monitoring. In this respect, blended learning and flipped classroom are together necessary and useful teaching methods that can incrementally accentuate the presence of ICTs in the EFL classroom.

To make the classroom more stimulating and rejuvenating, interactive boards and data projectors can effectively encourage students to openly and freely speak their minds and express their concerns. Students can orally perform in class with the use of PowerPoint presentations. In terms of writing, students can have a direct control by displaying their writing in class under the supervision of their teachers. It will be tantamount to a writing show for other learners to contemplate and learn from the mistakes made. In actuality, students' linguistic competence grows when teachers are closely working with them. Innovative methods are almost always recommended as they visually and aesthetically stimulate students through colours and sounds.

Recording students' presentations can also be helpful as they can later check and work on defects if any. As for writing, students can type faster and correct mistakes in a clear manner. Likewise, they can use a multitude of software tools that help improve the quality of their writing, such as grammar checkers, spell checkers, thesaurus (synonymy), and so on. Regardless of the usefulness of the aforementioned tools, one should pay more attention to the context in which words are written. Computer writing enables students to personalize their work methodology and choose their own pace. It also injects in them the practice of research and autonomous learning. More importantly, teachers' roles seem to change a few different classroom aspects, such as lesson planning, activities, evaluation, and teacher-student relationship. It is obvious that teachers enjoy less power through the employment of ICTs as their main role is to facilitate learning and orient students. Conversely, in traditional teaching, EFL teachers enjoy a lot of power as they are the only dispensers of knowledge.

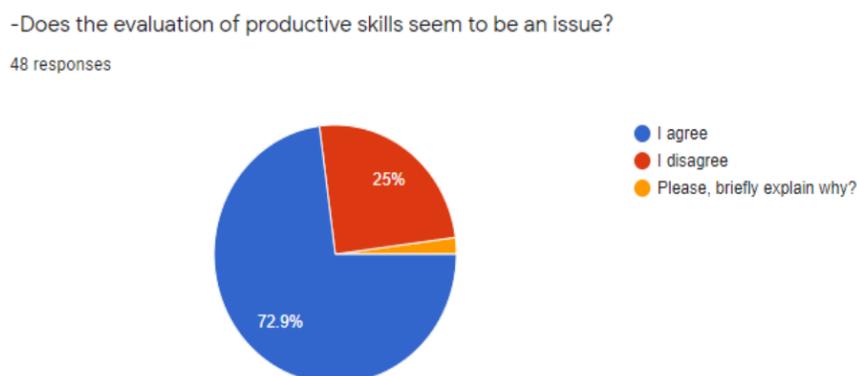


Figure 5: The Evaluation of Productive Skills through ICT

As the chart (in Fig. 5) illustrates, 72.9 percent of the participants see that the evaluation of productive skills seems to be difficult and confusing for some EFL teachers since most of the time these skills are fluency-oriented and teachers do not know what to assess exactly, whether it is the content, fluency, flow of ideas, language problems, etc. For the receptive skills, teachers' evaluation of students' performance tends to be trouble free because the main task is to assess students' accuracy in which utterances should not contain phonological, grammatical, semantic, and/or syntactic errors. However, weighing up learners' productive skills is difficult, and hence teachers sometimes feel they are unjust toward student's output. As there is no clear proficiency measurement scheme, rating EFL students' performance becomes more challenging for EFL teachers, many teachers would agree upon 'speaking rate' as an indicator of student's fluency. For many, speaking should be automatic in the sense that speakers should not frequently halt and pause in their speeches. However, for many other teachers, fluency is based on style, coherence and cohesion, to name a few. Thus, evaluating students with respect to their speaking rate might be unjust because other factors may arise, such as anxiety, panic, stress, and so on. With reference to assessing writing fluency, the task becomes even harder than that of speaking assessment. Teachers are most of the time struggling in rating students' writing output because of students' different linguistic production. More advanced and risk-taker students tend to use highly challenging structures, e.g. the use of compound and even complex sentences, if-clauses, subjunctives, and so forth. These types of students are more prone to make mistakes, and hence score very low as compared to their peers who would choose simple and short sentences to avoid mistakes and errors. This situation is regarded amongst practitioners as unfair to daring students who take risks, as well as counter-productive in nourishing creativity and productivity. Consequently, some researchers claim that evaluating learner's output should be based on seriousness of errors, and not on the aforesaid problems. Errors that hinder the completeness of meaning should be considered graver than those which do not. In essence, assessment looks to be very problematic worldwide since there is no unified framework on what to take into account while assessing learners' language performance. Seriously enough, this issue becomes more unpleasant when dealing with the evaluation of productive skills. Thereby, this point of contention should be given abounding consideration in hope to find fair and applicable evaluation rubrics in the case of Moroccan EFL learners.

Question 1

-What approaches do you use in the teaching of speaking and writing?

This open-ended question was incorporated in the questionnaire in order to unravel the approaches employed in the teaching of productive skills. It is remarkable that one answer was repeated at least 20 times where participants emphasized the use of the communicative approach. Such an approach stresses language use where the knowledge gained is applied to real life. It prioritizes meaning and fluency and deprioritizes grammar because the main purpose of this approach is to turn on students to use language without being caught up in language categories. The input should be useful as it will push students to produce output that is relevant to their learning needs. In

speaking, for example, students can watch videos on YouTube, and then adopt emulation. They can also carefully listen to their teachers, while speaking, and hence correct different aspects of pronunciation. This will improve their listening skill simultaneously. On the other hand, writing requires more time and efforts to develop. Therefore, many teachers usually go for teaching writing as a process rather than a product so as to enable students understand different writing mechanics and genres (paragraphs, essays, articles, stories, and so on). Other frequently used approaches (according to participants) are situational, content-based, and learner-centred.

For the situational approach, teachers attempt to create authentic and real-life contexts where they encourage students to use specific words and expressions either through speaking or writing that are tied up with the situation (at a coffee shop, in a library, in a hospital, etc.). This language contextualization is useful in helping students utilize words, phrases, and expressions properly and precisely. This will pave the way for the development of a practical mastery of productive skills.

The content-based approach is as important as the previously mentioned approach. It aspires to primarily help students in the assimilation of writing through brainstorming, retaining information, analyzing, discussing, etc. Such an approach enables EFL students to focus on meaning instead of layout. This will greatly enrich their vocabulary and topical knowledge as most of the activities are content-based in lieu of grammar-based.

The learner-centred approach prioritizes student needs. It puts students at the heart of the learning process. This signifies those students choose the content, activities, teaching style, and so on. In other words, they become active contributors to class making. In fact, this approach can enormously change the dynamics of the EFL classroom and can boost students' motivation, mainly in productive skills as they require the affective dimension. Flexibility, patience, innovation, and motivation are important markers for a sound EFL classroom. The diversity of approaches in the teaching of productive skills will unquestionably create a positive learning environment where students are continuously motivated to embrace the EFL instruction with an open mind and heart that will enrich the experience of everyone in the classroom.

Question 2

-What ICT obstacles do you face in the teaching of productive skills?

The participants were asked about potential obstacles that may impede the teaching of productive skills. Most of the participants agreed that the main constraints to the use of ICTs in the teaching of productive skills are internet connectivity and technical support related-problems. In fact, one cannot prioritize one obstacle to the use of ICTs in teaching over another, for they are interrelated and one occurring disabler leads to other disablers that may obstruct effective usage of ICTs in the teaching process. However, institution-level barriers seem to be more prominent in aggravating the situation. Inaccessibility to electronic devices and unavailability of high speed connection indoors seem to be key obstacles to espouse ICTs in teaching. The lack of ICT support within schools can weaken the take-up of ICT. In the case of Moroccan schools, especially public schools, access to ICT tools is very limited. Many classes are not well equipped with technological gadgets, and as a result teachers find themselves facing a wide range of problems, such as poor network providers alongside unreliable and slow internet connectivity that make the mission of ICT adoption in one's course, more specifically if the allotted course is communication-oriented. Viewed this way, the teaching of productive skills through the use of videos requires steady network performance, for any kind of internet fluctuation may cause distraction and disturbance inside the instructional setting. Interactive boards, computers, data projectors, speakers, and other technological tools are essentially required in the teaching of productive skills. Any shortage in the supply of technological gadgets contributes rigorously in restraining the utilization of ICTs in the class.

Equally noteworthy, another commonly emerging obstacle to the use of ICT among the participants is lack of effective training and professional development. Indeed, the factor of lack of training is mentioned in the literature as one of the rudimentary problems that obstruct ICT adoption within academia. Implementing ICTs in class has never been an easy mission; teachers have to be acquainted with different ICT tools, and should decide before coming to class what is the appropriate ICT tool(s) to use so as to pertinently achieve the course goals. Most essentially, lack of substantive awareness of how to use ICTs puts EFL teachers in a labyrinth that is full of obstacles and complications. This, in turn, leads to a load of negative attitudes toward the use of ICT in teaching as teachers feel embarrassment in front of their students. Little experience on what to include in course delivery and how to use ICT gives rise to anxiety and discomfort within the class atmosphere.

Referring back to the teaching of productive skills, most of the teachers conceive of writing and speaking tasks to be overwhelming and demanding in terms of time and energy. The application of drilling and simulation, for instance, requires too much time and energy to control large classes in order to bear fruit. For the majority of EFL teachers, adhering to the traditional methods of teaching saves time and energy, especially for teachers who display poor performance in using technology. Hence, lack of skills, support, confidence, and expertise to teach effectively through the use of ICT sparks off hostility and resentment to the implementation of educational technology both indoor and outdoor. The use of videos, for example, has demonstrated to be useful in improving writing and speaking skills. Nonetheless, its use requires more adjustment to the teaching process and decisive solutions to digital illiteracy. This way, teachers will gain the required skills and confidence to implement digital sources within the educational framework and students will be more attracted to fully immerse into the course instruction. Teaching via technology erodes minimizes monotony and boredom inside the classroom by making it outstandingly fascinating and engaging. In so doing, the outcome becomes extremely promising as students' writing and speaking abilities become remarkably prominent. Educational ICT integration has proven to change the academic strands with respect to roles and approaches. Teachers shift their role from 'sage on the stage' to the 'guide on the side', a more advice-giving role than a one-way to transmission of information role. This shift in roles and approaches colossally affect educational standards and dimensions since instructional technology affords more values and benefits to the learning process and its journey. Given this fact, educational policy makers are required to supply schools and institutions with necessary technological facilities and trainings to make the learning process efficacious and constructive.

5. Conclusion

This study aspired to investigate the role of ICT in the teaching of productive skills in English during COVID-19, while emphasizing the perceptions and obstacles that teachers encounter. The main research instrument used to collect relevant data was a teacher-based questionnaire. The numerical data revealed interesting findings with respect to the EFL instruction in Morocco i.e. majority of the teachers is well aware of the instrumental role of ICTs in the teaching of speaking and writing. In fact, the utilization of ICTs seems to change a plethora of classroom dynamics, specifically teacher-student interactions. They also have positive effects on students' language growth, be it fluency or accuracy. Similarly, the findings revealed that the approaches used (communicative, situational, content-based, and learner-centred) are extremely important in the application of ICTs in foreign language instruction. In brief, internet use and computers have injected constant innovation in the realm of education to make the learning process more effective and inspiring. Obstacles (that EFL teachers face) can be summarized as lack of confidence in the employment of ICTs and efficient teachers' trainings, along with ill-equipped classrooms. Additionally, some teachers are hostile to the technology use for the simple reason that they prefer to stick to traditional teaching. Innovation in teaching can often be intimidating to some EFL teachers.

In the hope of avoiding the aforementioned obstacles, course instructors are required to apply new methods to stimulate students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in order to actively participate in the learning process. In the same manner, EFL teachers should persistently process different, yet connected strategies to develop their English learners' productive skills in order to be better qualified to measure up to

the expectations of the outside world demands. In this respect, teachers should no longer be the only distributors of information, but rather facilitators and moderators of the teaching space.

5.1 Further work

Future studies should be oriented toward the empirical examination of ICTs in the evaluation of productive skills. Researchers and EFL practitioners should also investigate the pedagogy adopted as the criteria are not the same as in traditional teaching.

Biodata

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