

## High Tech & Low Tech Out-of-Classroom Language Learning for Arabic L1 Speakers of English

Anthony K. Kripps

Salalah College of Technology, Sultanate of Oman

### Abstract

As early as the nineteenth century the value of foreign language learning outside the classroom was recognized. In the 1960s, a statistical correlation was found between learners' extracurricular use of the target language and their scores on standardized foreign language proficiency tests. Subsequently, a direct correlation was found between TOEIC/TOEFL scores and extracurricular use of English, as reported by test-takers. Finally, in the 1990s out-of-classroom language learning (OCLL) was dubbed a strategy. Increasingly, researchers are acknowledging that more second language acquisition takes place outside the classroom than inside. This article surveys research into both low-tech and high-tech extracurricular language learning in the light of measurable proficiency gains. High-tech includes blended learning and Computer Mediated Communication. Special attention is paid to the situation of Arabic L1 learners of English.

*Keywords:* blended learning, CALL, CMC, extracurricular learning, proficiency gains

## **1.Introduction**

In Asia and the Middle East in the 21st century, foreign language instruction continues to be largely teacher-centered at the primary and secondary levels (Tushyeh, 2005; Al-Issa, 2007; Al-Jadidi, 2009; Fareh, 2010; Al-Mohanna, 2010). Although the younger generation of teachers has been trained in communicative approaches to language teaching, a majority teach the way they were taught through a combination of grammar-translation and audiolingualism . In doing so, teachers can satisfy their immediate goals of finishing the textbook, following the syllabus, preparing students for a written examination, and finally maintaining disciplinary control over the students (Al-Issa, 2007; Al-Jadidi, 2009; Al-Mohanna, 2010; Al-Saadi, 2011). As a result of their teacher-centered classroom experience and because of the cultural norm that all knowledge derives from the teacher, language learners in Asia and the Middle East consider the classroom as the only place where learning occurs (Thamraksa, 2004; Reinders, 2000, 2005; Handhali, 2009). Consequently, they do not seek opportunities for more exposure to the target language, which involves taking responsibility for their own education (Malcolm, 2004; Vrazalic et al, 2009; Al-Saadi, 2011). Additionally, Omani and other Arabic L1 undergraduates strongly dislike courses that involve self-study (Al-Saadi, 2011). Thus the situation of English language teaching differs according to world region in two important ways. First, where English is a foreign language (EFL), the learners in Asia and the Middle East are mainly monolingual, whereas Europeans are more than 50% bilingual and more than 40% multilingual (Eurobarometer Survey, 2012). Secondly, speaking a foreign language with one's compatriots is considered unnatural or socially awkward in much of Asia and the Middle East (Hyland, 2004; Marefat & Barbari, 2009). However, Northern European and Americans are less inhibited. The main issue is getting learners to realize the value of classroom interaction between peers but in a foreign language. Once that is achieved, just about anyone will undertake it. Unlike in Western countries, classrooms in Asia and the Middle East tend to be overcrowded, and students' exposure to English is generally limited to 45-minute sessions four to five times per week. In a classroom of 45-50 students, it is not possible for the instructor to check the oral proficiency of each student individually. Moreover, teachers avoid introducing communicative activities, such as role plays and games, for various reasons. Either they worry about losing disciplinary control over the class or they know that students will immediately revert to the native language (Cheon, 2003; Al-Mohanna, 2010; Al Saadi, 2011).

## **2.Extra-curricular Language Learning Research**

Self-study and autonomous learning have traditionally been the norm in Western countries, such as using the Bible or phrasebook to learn another language in the absence of native speakers or qualified teachers. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the most widely known methods for learning a language outside the classroom included overseas study in the host country and finding expatriate workers or tourists to converse with (Sweet, 1899). In the 1960s the first large-scale survey of foreign language learning revealed a statistical correlation between proficiency and extracurricular use of the target language. The most important of these uses are: time spent abroad (semester or year), use of L2 at home, use of L2 in social settings (office or with friends), reading three or more books in L2. Other extracurricular uses of the target language at American universities include: language dormitory, language table, language club and pledge. All of these were found to correlate significantly with proficiency by increasing exposure to the target language (Carroll, 1967).

More than thirty years later, researchers at ETS further corroborated the findings of Carroll's study of the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) by showing the direct correlation between proficiency scores of TOEIC test and use of English outside the classroom. In particular, for all the nationalities surveyed by ETS, those test takers with the highest scores had spent at least three to five months working or studying in an English-speaking country (as shown in tables 1.0 & 2.0 below).

**Table 1:** *Time Spent Abroad versus TOEIC Score (ETS 2005)*

Duration	TOEIC Score
Less than 6 months	554
6-12 months	696
More than one year	742

Unfortunately, Arabic L1 learners of English are less likely to take advantage of overseas study in an English-speaking country (Malcolm, 2004). For example, both graduate and undergraduate enrollments from Middle Eastern countries in USA in 2010/2011 amounted to 5.8% of all world regions (Chow & Bhandari, 2010).

In countries like Japan and Korea, test takers reported using English less than once per week, which correlates with their low English proficiency. By contrast, daily use of English by test-takers from Singapore and the Philippines correlates with scores that are among the highest in Asia (Chow & Bhandari, 2010).

**Table 2:** *Mean Total TOEIC Scores by Frequency of English Usage (ETS 2005)*

Frequency of English usage	Listening	Reading	Total
less than once per week	293	262	555
every week	322	292	614
2-3 times per week	333	297	630
daily	363	317	680

In general, anxiety and embarrassment about making mistakes are among the greatest obstacles to using English communicatively outside the classroom (Inguva, 2007). For example, in one survey 54% of undergraduate respondents from Saudi Arabia reported using English rarely or never outside the classroom (Malcolm, 2004). Two surveys of undergraduate non-English majors in Thailand gave the same responses (Puengpipattrakul 2007; Pawapatcharodom 2007). Not surprisingly, the TOEIC scores for both KSA and Thailand are among the lowest worldwide.

### 3.0 Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)

One of the most popular pass times among the Net Generation is chatting by text or voice or in combination (Malcolm, 2004). Only during the last decade has the value of CMC chat to foreign language learning begun to be examined (Chun, 1994). Research has concentrated on learner attitudes to CMC, as well as measurable gains in oral proficiency. These topics are discussed below.

#### 3.1 Learner Attitudes to CMC

Classroom research has shown that, regardless of their native language, many learners agree that CMC interaction is more enjoyable than face-to-face (F2F) interaction in the classroom with both peers and instructor. The reason for this higher preference is that, because CMC interaction is not face-to-face, there is less stress or risk of embarrassment from making mistakes. Learners highly rate CMC because it increases their exposure to the target language and gives them a sense of self-improvement (Cheon, 2003; Lengluan, 2008).

However, to be successful CMC requires that both the learner and the teacher have computer literacy or prior experience with chatting (Patronis, 2005; Alahmadi, 2011). As with distance learning and self-study, CMC as a pedagogical tool requires that instructors monitor online activity and provide feedback in the form of positive reinforcement (Rybak, 1980, 1983; Umino, 1999; Patronis, 2005). As many teachers are from the pre-Internet generation, their own lack of know-how in this area makes them hesitant to incorporate CMC in their teaching (Shaabi, 2012). Finally, there is a disparity between urban and rural areas in terms of Internet access (Al-Adi, 2009). Some representative research into learner attitudes is shown in table 3 below.

**Table 3:** *Research on Learner Attitudes to CMC*

L1	L2	CMC mode	Researcher
Arabic	English	Graphic chat	Alahmadi 2011
Arabic	English	Discussion board	Patronis 2005
Korean	English	Graphic chat	Cheon 2003
Thai	English	graphic chat	Lengluan 2008

#### 3.2 CMC and Oral Proficiency

Approximately 57% of research in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) between 1990 and 2000 concerned English L1 learners of European languages: French, Spanish, and German. Of these studies 86% concerned the proficiency gains of first-year or elementary learners. Finally, oral-aural skills account for less than 10% of these studies (Kripps, 2009). As graphic chat involves only writing skill, one might wonder how it could improve oral proficiency. Research on cross-modality transfer from writing to speaking skill is very limited, and scant evidence suggests that graphic chat might enhance speaking skill, although it cannot replace oral practice. However, in one early study, participants admitted to either subvocalizing while typing or vocalizing while reading messages (Payne & Whitney, 2002).

According to the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and Defense Language Institute (DLI), French, Spanish and German are classified as the easiest languages for English L1 learners (Jackson & Kaplan, 2003; Jackson & Malone, 2009). Therefore, one has to be careful about generalizing research about proficiency gains to learners of languages unrelated to English. Nonetheless, comparison of pretest and posttest results shows significant gains in oral proficiency with course having a CMC component. Sample studies are summarized in table 4 below.

**Table 4:** *Research on CMC and Oral Proficiency*

L1	L2	CMC mode	Researcher
English	Spanish	Graphic chat	Payne & Whitney 2002
English	French	Audio-graphic chat	Lamy 2004
English	Spanish	Audio-graphic chat	Volle 2005

### 3.3 Blended Learning

The incorporation of CALL, CMC, and e-learning into traditional classroom instruction is called hybrid or blended learning. In the USA and Europe blended learning courses exist for languages as diverse as Arabic and Japanese. The latter are classified “challenging” languages by FSI and DLI because between 1200 to 2000 hours of intensive instruction are needed to reach level 2 “limited working proficiency”. But in a traditional undergraduate degree program, these hours would need to be spread over 8-10 years for native speakers of English to reach level 2 in Arabic. That is roughly equivalent to level 1+ “advanced elementary proficiency” on the TOEIC for Saudi test takers’ average score of 409 (ETS, 2005). For FSI level 2 and TOEIC level 1+ the learner should be able to conduct a job interview, participate in meetings, and engage in casual conversations on familiar topics, but as a blue-collar worker. Since the extra number of years to reach FSI 2 is not feasible in a traditional academic degree program, blended learning is considered a viable option in the USA and Europe. In five blended learning curricula surveyed by this researcher (Table 5), time spent online is at least equal to F2F instruction time in two cases. In the other three cases, the time that students are expected to spend online is between two to five times the amount spent in the classroom.

**Table 5:** *Blended Learning Models*

Total per semester	L1	L2	CALL	F2F	Researchers
60-70 hrs.	English	Arabic	2-3 hrs/wk	2 hrs/wk	Peterson (2002)
95 hrs	English	Chinese, Japanese, Korean	5 hrs/wk (+ 5hrs/week self study)	1 hr/wk	Fleming & Hiple (2004)

60 hrs	English	Spanish	2 hrs/wk (two-50 min. chat sessions)	2 hrs/wk	Payne & Ross (2005)
150 hrs	English	Spanish	7 hrs/wk	3 hrs/wk	Blake et al. (2008)
60-80 hrs	English; Italian	Italian; English	4-6 hrs/wk	2 hrs/wk (10 wks/sem.)	Guth & Petrucco (2009)

### 3.4 Social Networking

Teachers in Asia and the Middle East agree that one of the biggest problems to incorporating the Internet in the classroom is students navigating away to unrelated websites, most prominently Facebook (Chairungruang, 2005; Al-Adi, 2009). Rather than combating the social networking phenomenon, some schools have begun integrating the discussion board feature of Facebook into the curriculum. Surveys of learner attitudes about using Facebook in their English courses reveal the same positive aspects as those found for CMC chat and discussion boards (Ng, 2010; Osman, Abu Bakar & Yassin, 2010). One researcher discovered that message postings in the target language on formal discussion boards were surpassed by postings on Facebook (Lamy, 2011). A 2010 report on Facebook use in the Middle East found that postings in English were more than two-fold more numerous than postings in Arabic (Facebook MENA, 2010). Therefore, educators might want to consider Facebook a potential friend rather than foe for learners both inside and outside the classroom.

## 4. Conclusion

In 1933 when Leonard Bloomfield described foreign language teaching in the USA as an “appalling waste of effort”, he was referring to a system that was still deeply grounded in grammar translation and teacher-centered learning. In an American foreign language classroom of 20-25 students each learner might get 10 minutes of aural-oral practice, with some 320 hours of listening and 27 hours of speaking practice during the academic year (Asher, 1974). By contrast, in the Middle East students in a foreign language classroom of 40-45 might be lucky to get five minutes of aural-oral practice. However, the total target language exposure during the academic the year is reduced by teachers’ and students’ use of the mother tongue (Al-Mohanna, 2010). It has already been found that in the classroom greater use of the mother tongue correlates negatively to oral proficiency in the target language (Carroll, 1967). Regrettably, this fact is either ignored or forgotten in EFL environments today. Since more language acquisition potentially takes place outside the classroom than in it (Hyland, 2004), we should be looking for more ways to integrate extracurricular learning into the foreign language curriculum and ways to guide learners to seek opportunities to use the target language extracurricularly.

**About the author:**

**Anthony Kripps** received his Ph.D. from Indiana University and his M.A. from Georgetown University. He has taught EFL in Asia and the Middle East for more than fifteen years. His research interests include CALL, self-teaching of language and multilingualism. He has taught other languages than English, such as French, Greek, Korean, Serbian, and Uzbek.

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