

Reshaping teaching with technology

By TASHNY SUKUMARAN
educate@thestar.com.my

TODAY'S students are "Digital Natives". They have grown up only knowing the presence of powerful social and information tools that enable them to collaborate and communicate with those far beyond boundaries previously hindered by physical and geographical limitations. Many in the teaching profession are "Digital Immigrants" who have taught in a world largely absent of technology.

In order to bridge this gap for the 21st century, Cambridge English For Life (CEFL) believes that a transformation of schools or more accurately 'the way we teach' to meet the needs of a different type of learner for a different type of job market must be addressed.

Market leader of teacher education and English learning, CEFL is committed to putting powerful yet easy to use transformational education technologies in the hands of our teachers.

"It is not surprising to find children who are used to wielding technology at home come to school and experience teacher-centred, prescriptive, didactic teaching or being asked to complete worksheet after worksheet, all for the poorly defined purpose of mastery. The children quickly lose interest, become disengaged and soon, to their utter disadvantage, "log off", "hibernate" or disastrously "power off"!

"So, a gap exists between the way children live and the way they learn in schools. As long as this gap continues to widen, the result could mean the complete irrelevance of the educational system as we know it," said CEFL chief executive officer Dr Elsie Chin.

She was speaking at a recent teaching and learning symposium, held in Shah Alam, Selangor. It was part of CEFL's professional development series to upscale teaching methods. Other speakers included Universiti Putra Malaysia's Modern Language and Communication faculty Assoc Prof Dr Mardziah Hayati Abdullah, English language and literature solutions provider and former magazine editor Merina Hew and Nobel International School head of English Mark Wright.

Dr Chin said that today's workplace demanded collaboration, creativity and rapid concept attainment within changing contexts. Information design, management and dissemination, thoughtful analysis, effective communication, and the ability to construct knowledge are the skills demanded by today's innovation-based economy. These are the key indicators of success.

Technologies that have made their way into our education system are really business productivity tools that have been re-purposed and subsequently pitched to the market as educational tools – despite the fact that supporting best practices in teaching and learning was not a factor in their original design.

Panelists from CEFL centre's symposium themed 'Transforming Teaching and Improving Learning in the 21st Century' couldn't agree more. The education system must keep pace with modern transformation to prepare students for success in this day and age.

"How do teachers compete with the online gaming experience that children are so immersed in," said Sharon Ovinis from Star Media Group Berhad's Newspaper-in-Education programme. She was speaking on a panel with Taylor's University's Language

A teaching and learning symposium was told that the education system must keep pace with modern transformation to move forward.



Light moments: Teachers share stories on their teaching experiences.



1 A holistic learning experience: Hew points out that all components of language learning – listening, speaking, reading and writing – should be given equal weightage.



2 Moving forward: Prof Dr Mardziah stresses on the importance of benchmarking Malaysia's English language users on a globally recognised scale and platform.



The potential of technology in the classroom: Dr Chin (centre) explores digital tools available for teachers to utilise in the 21st century classroom. Looking on is Ovinis (left) and Chandra Sakaran.

Centre head Chandra Sakaran, school principal Chris Franklin and parent Justina Tan.

During the forum, the difference in learning styles between "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" – those not so familiar with new technologies – was explored.

Ovinis used the example of *The Star* Online, saying that it had five million users monthly and 45 million page views.

"The website is updated every 15 minutes. This speaks volumes – young people who may not enjoy holding and reading a piece of paper are going online these days for their information. They want information instantly – we have to adapt and evolve – to meet market trends," she said.

Tan said that as a parent, she felt digital learning could potentially "make parents insecure" as technology was relatively unfamiliar ground.

"What parents want for kids is for the school system to provide us an assurance that it's a safe learning platform."

In the day-long forum, the speakers explored the difficulties in teaching English, in terms of making it interesting and accessible to children as well as addressing the digital age and the importance of using "21st cen-

tury tools" to get messages across.

Dr Chin said that many "old school educators" could display resistance towards the integration of digital tools, or worry about maintaining a "professional" air in the classroom. "However, we want to assure teachers that it is still very important for them to understand the unique opportunities that these digital tools can create for them to be able to connect better with their students in or out of the classroom."

This was echoed by Hew, who believes that many young people are readier to learn through technology, conducting classes via Skype and using apps such as Evernote and WhatsApp to communicate and share with students.

School improvement specialist coach Yong Wai Yee who was at the conference on a school visit to look at 21st century classroom learning, said that she enjoyed Merina Hew's journey on English language learning. The conference on the whole, was a productive one documenting the pendulum swing in the teaching and learning of English in the classroom. "All speakers emphasised that the 'kill and drill' in language teaching should move over to make room for what Dr Chin points

out: the digital native centred classroom," said Yong.

Another participant Ngai Siew Lai found the symposium an inspiring one. As an educator, she has always been driven to keep abreast of the "boundaries which are becoming borderless".

"I realised that I needed a transformation from being a passive and outdated digital immigrant to getting in contact with the digital natives (students) of today. We need to give them space for self discovery and active learning. I am also proud that CEFL has been on the right track and in sync with the global standards of English. I also truly enjoyed the videos clips especially the one titled "What would the world be without TEACHERS?" It proves that we, as educators, can instill values in the lives of our students to further guide and inspire them," said Ngai.

The inaugural forum is in conjunction with the centre's 15th year anniversary.

Commenting on the forum, Dr Elsie said that it had garnered a lot of positive response and she hoped to make it an annual event.

"We had over 200 participants, 52 of whom are non-CEFL teachers to bring diversity to the group," she said.