

## **Pandemic Challenges : Infusing Experimentation in Online English Language Teaching**

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*Information and communication technology refers to technological tools that are used to communicate and manage information. The pandemic has opened a pandora box of challenges specially in English language teaching and learning. English is the global language of communication and learning has to go on in spite of the pandemic. To improve the whole experience we need to revolutionize the way we teach language. We have to integrate technology into teaching for it has become an inseparable part of learning. Even the most traditional academic institutions are embracing e-learning as the new normal. In fact, teaching and learning in the hybrid mode appears to be here to stay in most educational organizations. The present paper investigates the effectiveness of using e-learning platform in teaching English language. It offers newer techniques to enhance vocabulary and develop speaking skills efficiently. Even grammar and reading texts have undergone tremendous transformation and reaped better results as compared to teaching them in the classroom mode in the traditional format. Testing and evaluation has*

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*received mixed reviews from both teachers and students- while some feel it poses immense challenges others seem to be more comfortable in online evaluation and testing. The paper attempts to study the tools that facilitate language learning in the e-mode. It also analyses the shortcomings and the benefits of teaching English language in the online mode in a country where rural-urban divide is a major factor across universities. Outcome of the online learning is also assessed to gauge the effectiveness of e-tools in language teaching.*

[**Keywords** : E-learning, Blended learning, Teaching, Language, Classroom, Tools]

## **1. Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic caught the educational institutions unaware and unprepared. Online teaching was almost thrust upon them leaving little room for preparation and training. However colleges, schools and universities across India have embraced and implemented the e-learning concept and achieved considerable levels of success. Several researches have revealed the e-learning value as compared to traditional classroom based learning has received mixed responses. While in the middle and upper middle class students favoured the online mode due to accessibility to electronic gadgets and network connectivity, the poorer students with limited resources encountered several issues like limited internet and lack of laptops and phones to facilitate learning. When it comes to language learning the same differences cropped up. The students whose exposure to language is limited due to their minimum exposure to English in government schools faced a lot of problems due to lack of face to face interaction. Their inhibitions with technology and hesitancy to ask question in online mode made them suffer academically. The students from affluent families did not have to grapple with technology and had the luxury of devices and gadgets. It did not limit their understanding. Coping with online teaching was an easy transition and network connectivity was never an issue. Thus language teaching was a major challenge in the online mode for students who are marginalized - either in terms of facilities, class or space and location like living in far off areas like Leh, Assam or in rural areas. It can be safely concluded that online teaching is both a blessing and bane.

Today, there are endless tools that can be used in the online mode which facilitate language learning. Several audio-visual material is available free of cost that help better you speaking and

reading skills. There are many internet applications and mobile applications which help you build your word bank. There are apps that send you word of the day feed which not only gives the meaning of the word but also its use in different ways and contexts, thereby creating lifelong learning. There are sites that help you build vocabulary by simply hovering your mouse on the word and it takes you through the range of application of the word in real life. Visual maps are created if you need to understand a concept and learn all the words associated with it. Virtual trips that explain ideas like climate change, gender discrimination - and practically anything current and relevant are available at the click of a finger. They help you dwell deep into these concepts and enrich your vocabulary. An enriched vocabulary paves the way for better writing and speaking. The challenge however is for students for whom English is a second language and level of familiarity is not as much as their luckier counterparts. Such hurdles create a gap and further the divide between students from diverse backgrounds, thereby disturbing the heterogeneity of the group. In such conditions the ideal scenario is blending teaching which has the benefits of both face to face teaching and learning through interactions and the use of technology as a facilitator. This ideal mix can create wonders with language because no matter how much technology may develop, computer is, was and will always be subservient to man and can never replace a teacher.

It is of prime importance that the growth of education should be in line with advancement in technology. Teaching methods have to necessarily align accordingly and from the traditional classroom centric to at least the hybrid mode if not completely online. Teachers have to adapt and acquire new skills and alter the ways in which they teach English language. If sufficient efforts are not made it will greatly impact the development of education, especially language learning. If teachers and students are adequately driven and trained to learn the e-tools in language learning and teaching they are bound to perform better and improve the quality of both teaching and learning. English language is forever evolving and tends to have an influential impact on education. Hence the need to explore innovative methods to teach language effectively and efficiently is enhanced and will help build a productive learning environment. In a study conducted by Lie (2017) it was discovered that the outdated ways of teaching English in and out of classroom was recognized as

discouraging and demotivating to the students. Gani, Fajrina and Hanifa (2015) echoed the same sentiment, “education blueprint plays a major role in developing the future of a student’s education up to the university level so it is important to prioritize the pedagogical transitions with changing times.” The methods involved in day to day teaching should produce active learning and maintain student engagement.

Swift development in e-learning has taken place as it holds an all-embracing range of technologies which includes the increase of computers, internet and social networking sites regarding the variety of ways in teaching and learning English. (Nadzrah, 2007). As technology advances it has its own impact on the student life and his /her progression. It stimulates and increases attention span in class. E-learning has been gaining snowballing attention thereby increasing learning and teaching in education. The ready availability of visual texts, graphs, multi-media - all change the experience of language learning and entice the learner and motivates them to learn actively.

The outbreak of Covid-19 has shaken the edifice of English language teaching and learning community across the globe and greatly dented the process of learning. Educators, in the absence of sufficient training and orientation have been grappling to adopt to remote teaching. It is important to address the challenges and educational issues in online teaching of language so that outcome can be optimized.

## **2. E-tools that Facilitate E-learning**

A number of e-tools have been identified that contribute to the effectiveness of e-learning. Lee et al. (2003) argue that web-based instruction programs improve oral proficiency and communicative skills by exposing learners to a realistic language learning environment and make the learning of language livelier and more interactive. There are endless worksheets and practice material in reading, speaking, listening, grammar, writing and vocabulary which aid learning. These sites and tools provide authentic activities within context which are self-exploratory and the teacher only acts as a mentor. There are multiple points of view that are available and your arguments and opinion need not be framed only after listening

to the view of your classroom teacher. This by no means undermines the importance of the teacher because the explosion of information does not make you knowledgeable. The role of the teacher in the online mode is even more crucial to ensure your wanderings are purposeful.

Earlier it was thought that most online tools are one sided i.e. there is no scope to clarify doubts. However, most sites nowadays have a discussion forum which answers your queries promptly. There are experts in the field ready to resolve your queries. This creates an environment of interaction and collaborative learning attempting to improve their language via e-learning mode. Lee and Pyo (2003) revealed that "writing abilities of learners improved in classes involving the use of web-based instructions than in traditional classroom made."

There are many reasons which makes learners embrace the online mode happily. All communication is via mail which is cost effective mode and the teachers in turn find it convenient to keep track of the student's progress because everything is stored electronically. The ease of accessing information improves performance and also improves the comprehension skills. There are impending factors too-scarce internet resources makes this an unequitable resource not equally and evenly available to all. Secondly, limited awareness and lack of sufficient orientation and training does create a barrier in learning. Online learning is no doubt cost effective and helps overcome geographical boundaries. It offers greater flexibility and managing online assignments is easier if comfort with technology is achieved. Online teaching tools help to create support material which helps to build knowledge material for language learners. It has also been hinted that e-learning mode is more interactive than traditional classroom mode. According to Smith (2001) e-learning makes education easier for slow learners as these learners require more response time in order to participate. Online language teaching includes fostering learner reflection and inculcates higher level cognition. The control in the e-learning mode is learner centered and usually stimulates rich and interactive experience for learners. It broadens the limit beyond classroom and helps overcome hurdles of place and time. When spatial and temporal restrictions are lifted and there is no traditional educational

setting the student experience a sense of freedom and flexibility. It allows adaptability to a variety of techniques and offers a pressure free zone the students have the freedom to proceed at a comfortable pace and the learner can tailor make and personalize the material at hand to suit his / her learning pace. This enhances productivity and takes it closer to global standards. However, the lack of face to face social interaction is the biggest drawback of online teaching. It creates a sense of loneliness and isolation. This feeling of emptiness is even greater in students who are introverts and pessimists. It further draws them into their shells and makes them isolated. Technical snags and breakdown also create a block in learning because the flow of learning is interrupted. In addition to this, the cost of production of e-content is in itself a big challenge. It is not only expensive, and the cost of production is exorbitant. In addition it requires a fair mastery of technology to develop e-content.

Carneiro and Nascimbeni (2007) state “like any new and complex phenomenon e-learning has been attracting a lot of interest from different stakeholders in the education sector. From postal tuition, part time learning, correspondence education to extra mural studies, open and distance learning was institutionalized in 1968 in UK.” The system of blended learning has been in practice for a while in India too but the system gathered momentum during the Covid-19 pandemic as an alternative to classroom teaching. The virtual learning mode was initiated in India by CBSE and was immensely successful. It is a story of success all the way in the education sector and as a platform the offers education for all. E-tools in English language teaching offer an assistive technological tool to access knowledge. It, in a way, also disallows the intimidation by a strict teacher in a physical class. “E-learning recenters a hegemony of the dominant discourse of rote and memory-based learning” (Singh, 2010). Professor Roger Mc Haney calls it “the new digital shoreline with indigenous, populations at its edges.” In a traditional classroom, in a language class unless the teacher is sufficiently motivated, it spells disaster and doom for the student. To ease the burden off language students, the teacher may cause further damage by encouraging rote learning and setting question paper with familiar questions. The factors are not there in online teaching and learning because it gives equal opportunity to slow learners to follow

lessons at their own pace. They also have the option of revisiting the study material thereby overcome the fear of being reprimanded and humiliated by an occasional difficult teacher.

Evaluation and assessment, however, is under debate. Evaluation, is text centric in a traditional classroom and the teacher actually plays a positive role through detailed assessment guidance. In the online mode evaluation is generally mechanical and objective type questions are usually tested and assessed leaving little room for real learning. In spite of all the innovation and technological advancement assessment is honestly sacrificed in an online class. It depends to a large extent on rubrics set and lack of face-to-face interaction prevents the teacher from commenting in detail on the performance of the students. Hence there is a wide gap between what is taught and what is learnt. This disconnect between teaching and learning needs to be bridged. There is no dearth of online language courses on the internet. Some come at a handsome price and certificate and others are free of cost but the genuineness of the course and the ultimate outcome in terms of learning still remains questionable.

### **3. Conclusion**

The use of information and computer technology in English language teaching is a mixed package. On one hand it is inescapable in the current situation, on the other hand it calls for much caution when it comes to implementation. According to Pete Sharma and Barney Barret (2007), "there are several reasons for using technology in language teaching. Technology can be liberating and motivating at the same time. It also allows one to work autonomously or collaborate with others as it suits the learner."

There is facility of instant feedback in online teaching and you can immediately trace your progression in a language class. As an extension of traditional classroom and as supportive aid and study material, technology can be a blessing. It is also time saving and flexible. Online e-learning tools can promote language learning with fresh, authentic and motivating study material. with limitless accessibility. Using blended learning which they define as a language course that combines a face to face classroom component with appropriate use of technology. Peti Sharma and Barray Banret

suggest that positive learning outcomes are most apparent when clear roles are assigned to the teacher and to the technology. The above paper has attempted to review the rationale behind ICT use in education, classification of e-learning tools and tries to enhance the learning experience of the language learners. Language skills can be developed through e-learning tools but a balanced approach needs to be adopted.

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