Forging Inroads: E-learning Strategies in English Language Classrooms

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Article History: Submitted-21/04/2020, Revised-26/05/2020, Accepted-31/05/2020, Published-05/06/2020.

Abstract:

The emerging trends of E-learning in the modern scenario have been equally constructive for language teachers and language learners. It is to be argued that the skilful integration of authoring techniques coupled with the instructional methods of teaching have become critical for the optimisation of technology in language learning/teaching today. E-learning tools have been successful in enhancing the concept of learner centeredness. In order to make efficient use of E learning in classrooms, it becomes crucial that appropriate authoring tools are selected for facilitating the development of e content to be skilfully implemented into the learning process. It follows that the confidence and effectiveness of both the teacher and the learner be raised to meet the changing requirements of education in a more efficient way.

This paper attempts to analyse the role of E-learning in empowering language learning and explore the perceptions of students and teachers regarding the use of e-learning pedagogical tools in a language classroom.

Keywords: pedagogical tools, integration, language learning/teaching, E-learning.

Information and communication technology as a revolutionary tool which nurtures and hones the knowledge base of the users has witnessed a tremendous boost over the past few decades. Its influence has pervaded all sectors of life and has undoubtedly acquired a strong foothold in the educational sector. Owing to their extensive effectiveness and considerable potential to support effective interactive teaching approaches, it has opened up horizons in language pedagogy and language learning. ICT in education refers to the use of educational technology in the teaching and learning process. The innovations in the field of technology have taken huge strides henceforth paving the way for innovative techniques in the pedagogical arena. The emerging trends of E learning in the modern scenario have been equally constructive for language teachers and language learners. This paper attempts to analyse the role of
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E-learning in empowering language learning and explore the use of E-learning pedagogical tools in a language classroom. It will further demonstrate that E-learning offers flexible online learning solutions.

Before elaborating upon the concept of E-learning, it would be worthwhile to review the various methods in language teaching that have been in vogue over the years. Francois Gouin in The Art of Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages (1880) advocated the Series Method, which was followed by the Direct method, the Audio-lingual method and the Cognitive Code learning Methods of the 1960s. However, as H.H Sterns points out, this search for an ideal method for the teaching of language “has been increasingly unproductive and misguided” (251). These methods, deemed to be the crucial tool of language teaching, fail to take into account several factors pertaining to the learner, the classroom and their socio-cultural linguistic backgrounds. This thereby leads, to use Philipson’s term, to a kind of “linguistic imperialism”. The 1970-1980s saw a shift of focus from the teacher to the learner in the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT). This shift favoured interaction between the teacher and learner as against the rigid and cordial atmosphere of the language classrooms of earlier times. The current emphasis on the usage of language in social contexts stressed the communicative competence of the learners rather than the traditional methodology of grammatical competence emphasising formal instruction and drill–like practice. Simultaneously, there was a growing enthusiasm in the use of computers in education. As the CLT method provides scope for varied teaching materials and situations, it is to be deduced that Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) came into prominence affecting changes in teaching methodologies. As teaching methods changed to Audio-lingual and Communicative approaches, CALL software included simulations and more interactive programmes. Nevertheless, such learning strategies employed with the assistance of CALL had its own limitations. It is here that E-learning makes its entry, providing scope for implementing the required diversity and experimentation to enhance the learner centeredness of language teaching.

It is to be argued that the skilful integration of E-authoring techniques coupled with the instructional methods of teaching have become critical for the optimisation of technology in language learning/teaching today. This calls for a total re-structuring of the language teaching curriculum to suit the needs of the present generation of learners. “The use of technology can facilitate a move from didactic classroom teaching to participatory, decentralized, and interactive group learning” (Mohanty&Vohra 22). It also involves a major shift in the role of teachers as deliverers of knowledge to moderators and felicitators as the

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teaching/learning process is no longer teacher centred but learner centred. With the advanced network information technology, the learning of English today is no longer confined to traditional classrooms. The interactive computer networking increases the learning motivation of students and provides them with a self-learning environment. What Alan Maley suggests regarding the role of teachers using the communicative method may well suit this context:

They can no longer be regarded as possessing sacrosanct knowledge which they dispense in daily doses to their docile flock. Instead, they will need to set up tasks and activities in which the learners play the major overt role. It is then their job to monitor these activities and to modify and adjust as time goes by. (95)

As the contemporary student population (often called the “Net Generation”) who have grown up using information and communication technology expect it to be used in their educational experiences, growing numbers of teachers are increasingly using it to support their teaching (Naidu3). This makes it significant for the teacher to no longer rely on the chalk, the board and the text book for teaching a language. On the contrary, the teacher resorts to varied ELT materials to enhance the learner-centeredness of the classroom. Innovation of pedagogical techniques have become the need of the hour. It becomes essential that the teacher diagnose the needs of her students and equip them with appropriate pedagogical techniques. As the key to a dynamic classroom reveals the effectiveness of the teacher’s approach and its practical implementation, it is up to the individual teacher to ascertain the method to be adopted. Innovative pedagogical techniques coupled with feedback from the students can help the teacher in reshaping and modifying her approach to cater to her students. More and more teachers are resorting to computers as they have become less expensive and easier to handle. The new millennium with its rapid development of the information society has given rise to extremely dynamic changes in the various tools and technologies applied to the learning process. This opens up new avenues for E-learning teaching strategies in the language classroom.

To understand the relevance of E-learning in the pedagogical scenario, it becomes imperative that we understand the concept. E-learning is commonly referred to the intentional use of networked information and communications technology in teaching and learning (Naidu 1). It involves formal and informal learning and training activities via the use of all electronic media like Internet, intranet, extranet, CD-ROM, TV, cell phones,
notepads, personal organizers, tablets and the like. However, in this paper I shall limit my discussion to the role of computers in the field of language learning. The aspects of flexibility and the unique interactive ability of computer designed programmes make it the sin qua non of language teaching as against the earlier forms of technology.

Contemporary information and communication technologies offer sources for authentic learning which can be integrated into the language teaching curricula. “They afford us opportunities to capture and/or represent real-world scenarios for use by learners within the conventional classroom. These representations can include actual images or simulations of complex phenomena from the field which can be a lot more easily integrated into the classroom curricula” (Naidu16). The point to be taken care of here is that authentic situations may carry cultural references which have to be carefully managed by the teacher. Such authentic situations (in the form of pictures, films) prove to be germane in teaching unfamiliar cultural references that students come across while reading and learning literature. As David Crystal comments: “Authentic examples can make lessons come alive, providing students with a realistic perspective that can increase their stylistic awareness and creativity” (16). Until the nineties, most language instruction has been verbal and it is an accepted fact that most learners extract and retain more information from visual presentations than from written or spoken prose. This gives the visual modes of language teaching like E-learning an edge over the others and as a result are being preferred by most learners (Felder and Henriques24). E- learning provides ample scope for practice since it is not time or space bound learning and the learner is able to access the intricacies of the language learning- the grammatical, the pronunciation or the vocabulary levels. As the errors of each and every single learner can be rectified on the spot, unlike the earlier methods which involved mass drill and oral practices, E- learning helps to cater to the needs of the average and the excellent student. Recent researches conducted by educators stress upon integrating ICT in classroom-based language teaching and strongly recommend the use of E-learning pedagogical tools by language institutions in order to keep abreast of current developments in the realm of knowledge output (Kern 200).

In order to make efficient use of E- learning in classrooms, it becomes crucial that an appropriate authoring tool is selected for facilitating the development of e content to be skilfully implemented into the learning process. Normally E-tools make use of basic software applications like Power Point, web Based Content (HTML) and Flash based Presentations. The software is to be chosen depending on what the teacher intends to teach. Moodle is a well known free open source E-learning software platform which is most

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effective in conducting language learning sessions. Other widely used open source e learning applications include Olat, Claroline, Dokeos, Kahoot and eFront. You Tube Edu allows students to listen to important lectures from leading educators all over the world. ESL Video allows language educators to create quizzes from virtually any video on the internet. Teachers tailor their video quizzes to specific learning units or create simple vocabulary quizzes and can embed the quizzes into their classroom site. Screen Hunter 4.0 is a freeware edition which allows users to capture images and paste it into other applications like MS Word or PowerPoint. The Hot Potatoes which has authoring tools allows the development of several types of interactive web based exercises. As softwares can be expensive, institutions and teachers may not opt for them. In a country like India, most educational institutions lack elaborate infrastructure for ICT and virtual learning classrooms for language learners. Language learning labs can be designed and free softwares like iTALC can be installed. I would also like to make a reference to Computer on Wheels (COWs) which would be more practical in this context. COWs are carts which carry laptops, LCD projectors and printers that can be taken from one classroom to the other (Mohanty & Vohra95). The advantage COWs have is that the schools do not have to install computers in every classroom and can also access the Internet if it makes use of a cableless network. Another alternative could be setting up a few audio-visual rooms fitted with a multi-media computer and teacher can make online or pre designed preparations.

A variety of E-learning techniques can also be applied in pedagogy. Instead of restricting them to a single software, exposure to varied software sources and online educational websites is an essential requisite. Reviewing a number of sites invests them with the right skills for assessment and grading of materials. Special websites and instructional programmes can be designed catering to the needs of the students. To build E-learning content for computers, it should contain navigable pages and be presented in the form of sound, text, pictures and animations. For an onscreen voice recorder, effective sound recording and editing softwares like Wavepad or Audacity could be employed while Video Pad & Editor for video editing, GIF Animation Technology for animations could also be utilised for developing E content in language teaching. exe ELearning is an E learning tool which can be effectively used by language teachers by making use of the above mentioned softwares. MALTED is another E tool which works at the college level and Jclic could be used for the school level. For this it becomes crucial that the teacher should be well equipped to analyse the requisites of the students and collect and digitalise material accordingly.
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Students also have the benefit of choosing teaching materials in accordance to their competence level and can engage in discussions with their peers and the teacher.

A question which this discussion automatically presents is: Do we require teachers in future? What is to be deduced is that it does not make the teachers’ role obsolete, on the other hand, it entrusts them with an additional responsibility of analysing their classroom situation and selecting an alternative which is likely to be most effective for the circumstance. Good teaching is an “invention and personalisation” as J.A Zahorik puts it, and he further identifies a good teacher as one “who assesses the needs and possibilities of a situation and creates and uses practices that have promise for that situation” (22). For the right optimisation of E learning it has to be skilfully incorporated into the learning environment. The teacher can predesign activities and can make use of pre-created web activity programmes for learning grammar and vocabulary, reading, listening and speaking activities and task based programmes for writing activities. By successfully completing these tasks the learner will have accomplished the intended learning outcomes. Through teacher-made web activities (e.g., quizzes, gap-fill exercises, drop-down questions, crosswords, jumbled-sentence exercises, jumbled-word exercises, ordering exercises, matching exercises), teachers can also provide students with language exercises directly related to their classroom lessons in line with the evolving syllabus of their language courses. By incorporating language games such as crosswords and quizzes, students can practice and test practical skills with fun as an extension of learning activities. According to Bertram Bruce, students should "learn technology, learn through technology, learn about technology" (222). To provide diverse experiences and perspectives, we can infuse opportunities for students to learn to work the technology itself and to develop those technological skills through the study of the English language and its pedagogical content.

**Challenges and Strategies in Implementing E learning.**

Though E-learning creates a paradigm shift away from traditional methods of instruction, its actual implementation throws up a wide array of the challenges which can be broadly categorized in three areas: technical, administrative and academic. The introduction of computer implementation and use in schools as a first step to E Learning faces many challenges. It is up to the administrative bodies to promote effective E learning by establishing adequate infra structure, providing training for members of the staff, evaluating both the output and the process in order to implement remedial measures and updating ICT
strategies. The mere availability of computers, related support hardware, software, and peripherals will not guarantee the usage of E Learning resources. As the new ‘net’ generation is more competent in handling computers than many of their teachers, it becomes equally challenging for the teacher who has to make the shift from the print technology to the digital one. Improvisations would have to be made by each school depending on their demands, the number of students accessing the Internet at one time and their location. The technical problems could involve a crash of the system, voltage fluctuations, slow internet and also the infrastructure of the schools to provide computers. Lack of staff to monitor the working of students may also decrease the efficiency of this method. A major challenge faced could be the fixed mind set of teachers. When some are willing to opt for change, others consider it as a waste of time and energy. Above all, teachers may lack the expertise and proper knowledge required to restructure the learning material for E learning purposes, thereby giving rise to confusion among the students. Also students with poor educational background and digital incompetency may pose difficulties. It would be appropriate to let students work at their own pace if a series of graded activities are made available on the school server. Here again all students may not have a net connectivity at home. A solution could be to develop this system on the school intranet (Mohanty168). Motivating teachers is of paramount importance for the success of any E learning programme. In order to make the teaching/learning process enjoyable, it demands that this transition be desirable and beneficial. For teachers whose training has not e-equipped them with this transition, time has to be given so that the teacher can devise strategies to understand and integrate E learning into their traditional method of instruction. Teachers may complain of lack of time and confidence in the preparing learning language programs for learners, school clusters could be formed wherein teachers handling learners of the same age group can share language activities, examinations and assessment models and also tailor instructional material into enriching and enjoyable. E learning activities, enabling the teacher to devise effective pedagogical objectives which take into account all the contextual variables in a classroom proves to be a sound and comprehensive approach. Moreover, it has the added benefit of revising activities, lessons and curricula.

It is to be thus construed that E learning is one of the best options for making language teaching/learning both interactive and resourceful. The present pandemic scenario has led to widespread usage of online platforms which include EdX, Udemy, Coursera and Initiatives taken up by the MHRD as MOOC courses. These courses while providing a flexible schedule
and environments, offers more choice of course topics at lower costs being flexible with respect to time and place offer umpteen scope for learning to happen. However, in order to utilize the full potential of ICT and to equip students with skills to be life-long language learners, it follows that the confidence and effectiveness of both the teacher and the learner be raised to meet the changing requirements of education in a more efficient way.

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