

Paradigm Shift in the English Language Teaching - Challenges Faced by the Teachers and the Learners during the Pandemic

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Abstract

English Language Teaching has been undergoing continuous changes in both the techniques involved in teaching and the methodology of teaching. This is significant as English is accepted as a global language and serves as a medium of communication in many nations and also a medium of instruction in schools and colleges in some countries. In the present situation where the whole world is battling against COVID - 19, it is critical to adopt the latest technological developments so that teaching-learning is uninterrupted. There are a variety of platforms and applications that can aid in teaching remotely and can also support interactive classes and assessments. Some of the tools are extremely teacher friendly which helps the teachers in sending study materials, quizzes, assignments and also assess them and share the grades and feedback to the students. These tools are of a great help to the teaching fraternity as they keep the teachers and students connected. Being said, the ICT Tools also have both advantages and disadvantages as any other technology. This paper is a sincere attempt to explore the paradigm shift in the English language teaching with all the technological tools and platforms and the merits and demerits of using the tools with some remedial measures which may aid in overcoming the challenges faced by both teachers and learners.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, ICT Tools, Merits and demerits, Remedial Measures

Introduction

English language Teaching (ELT) is the activity of teaching English to people whose first language is not English, in other words, non-native speakers. This is significant as the English language tops the list of widely used languages in the world followed by Mandarin. English is used in almost all the fields like Science, Computing, Media, Internet and Tourism to name a

few. English is also listed as the official or co-official language in over 45 countries and is also spoken extensively in various other countries where it has no official status. Half of the business deals and documentations and two-thirds of all scientific research publications are done in English. This proves the importance of English language and the ELT in various non-English speaking countries including India.

Introduction of English in India

English was introduced in India in 1498 with the discovery of the sea route to India by Vasco da Gama. East India Company entered India in the eighteenth century and the English language was widespread in the nation. Christian missionaries added to the spread of the language which further got augmented by the establishment of schools and colleges for teaching English. T. B. Macaulay introduced the teaching of English in the South Asian Subcontinent in 1835. Higher education in India was provided in English and thereby people who wanted to pursue higher studies were forced to learn English and be good at the language. On that account, English gradually became a language of the elite class in India. The growth and spread of English in India further increased as universities were established in important Indian cities like Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai (formerly Calcutta, Bombay and Madras respectively).

Present Status of English

In the present day, due to the advancement of Science and Technology and globalisation, there arises a need for learning English and acquiring proficiency in the language as English has become an international language. Even today, English remains the medium of communication in many schools and colleges. In India, English is the most widely spoken language only next to Hindi. After the USA and the UK, India is ranked among the top three countries in the world with respect to the usage of the English language. The current position of India in the international sphere is partly due to the proficiency that educated Indians have acquired in English. That is why, more and more importance is given for English language learning which makes the field of English language teaching ever-growing and improving. New techniques and methodologies are introduced in the teaching-learning practice to make the learner more comfortable. In the present scenario, when the whole world is affected by the pandemic COVID-19, the teachers need to shift from their usual mode of teaching to other methods has become inevitable. Before discussing the shift in English language teaching, it is crucial to understand the pertaining situation around the world because of the pandemic.

Pandemic

A pandemic is basically an epidemic or infectious disease that spreads across nations affecting numerous people. Large scale outbreak of diseases increases morbidity and mortality over a wide geographic area and causes significant economic, social and political disruption. These kinds of diseases existed even during the days when humans were hunters and gatherers. Epidemics like Malaria, Leprosy, Tuberculosis, Influenza, Smallpox and others appeared during this period. The Black Death that hit Europe in 1347 claimed nearly 200 million lives. The world has witnessed various other pandemics which have caused great havoc in the social, political and economic fields of nations around the world. Now the world is facing yet another pandemic, the spread of a coronavirus named COVID-19. Though the effects of the pandemic are on various fields, the focus of this paper is primarily on its effects on education in the wider perspective and language learning in a specific way.

Effects of Lockdown on Education

Generally during any pandemic, the first and foremost precautionary measure taken by some of the governments worldwide is the public lockdown which is considered to be an effective method and due to this, the same has been implemented during the present COVID-19 pandemic also. There is a closure of public facilities such as public transports, public places like theatres, beaches, places of worship and all educational institutions like schools, colleges, universities and research centres. Alexander Navarro observed that during the Spanish flu, the closure of schools and colleges blunted the effect of the spread of the disease. During the previous pandemics when the educational institutions were closed, both the teachers and the learners faced a lot of issues and the teaching-learning process got disrupted.

Shift in Mode of Education

Alexandra in her article when referring to the US Influenza Pandemic that occurred in 1918-19, registers the introduction of Mail-in Correspondence Course for higher studies in Los Angeles which helped the students to complete their assignments. And for the teaching fraternity, special courses were set up during the enforced vacation to expand their subject knowledge and pedagogical skills. Now in 2020, again the entire world is facing a grave situation because of the pandemic COVID 19 and almost all the educational institutions are closed indefinitely and this

has forced the educators to adapt themselves to online teaching mode so that the students do not miss out on their learning. The reopening of schools, colleges and other research centres after the lockdown which started in the mid of March 2020, is getting postponed to avoid more spread of the disease.

War Emergency Vs Pandemic Emergency

During war times also, nations face emergency situations where the governments declare lockdown of the whole nation or the areas where war might be imminent. In such a scenario, when the war threat subsides, or when two or more nations who indulge in war come to a peaceful treaty, the lockdown will be lifted and people can get back to their normal life from the very next day. On the contrary, the present COVID situation is different as even after the lockdown is lifted, it is uncertain whether people can return to normalcy. The virus cannot be eradicated all of a sudden and there is always a threat of one contracting the disease unless and until a vaccine or a medicine is invented.

Online Classes

Due to the unavailability of a vaccine or a cure for the disease, even if the general lockdown is lifted and essential services like grocery stores, fuel pumps, vegetable stores, medical supplies, etc., resume their services, it is unlikely that the educational institutions will resume their regular classes. However, academicians and learners cannot afford to hold back till the pandemic gets over. The system of teaching and learning should get going and consequently online classes are put in effect. Experimentation is a major part of growth and development. Introduction of online classes in the school and the college level is one such experiment. There are various mediums through which education can be imparted even in a remote mode some of the Applications and aids for teaching and assessing the learners are discussed below.

Google Meet and Zoom

Google Meet is one of the applications which keeps people connected with their teams where discussions are held. This App is considered to be safe as the meet videos are encrypted. Though this App can be used as a medium to conduct meetings, this is found to be extremely useful in teaching also. A class is fixed at a particular time using Google Meet and a link is generated

which may be shared to all the participants or students belonging to a class. Google Meet is user-friendly and greatly advantageous as the teacher can share the screen and thereby present a Powerpoint or a video or an audio while teaching. Zoom, like Google Meet, provides almost all the above said features including video telephony and online chat services and is used for teleconferencing, telecommuting, distance education etc.

Google Classroom

Google Classroom is a free web service developed by Google for educational institutions with an objective to simplify, create, allot worksheets and grade them. The teachers can share files using this application that integrates docs, sheets, slides, gmail and calendar into a cohesive platform to manage student teacher communication. Just like Zoom call or Google Meet, the students can be invited by the teachers using a link generated through the App. As mentioned earlier, assignments can also be created by the teachers and sent to their respective students. The students receive notification regarding the same to be submitted along with the due date for each task given. After the students submit their completed work, the teachers can evaluate and return them along with the marks or grades and also their individual comments for each student. A teacher handling a number of classes can compartmentalise each class and manage the study aids, assessments, marks and grades effectively. Even online tests may be conducted using Google forms which can be integrated with the App.

Edmodo and Kahoot

Similarly, an App named Edmodo is also found to be very effective as it enables teachers to share study materials, distribute quizzes, assignments and manage communication with students, colleagues and parents. Kahoot is a game-based learning tool used to impart education and perform assessment using multiple choice quizzes that can be accessed via web-browser or Kahoot App. This is considered to be one of the assessment tools to review students' knowledge and course attainment. This is becoming popular as it serves as a break from the traditional, regular classroom activities and it is highly interactive.

In addition to the above mentioned teaching, there are other ICT tools available such as Quizzez, Quizlets, Pliquers, Turn it Out, etc. New advancements, like the study aids and kits mentioned

above, in the course of teaching-learning become a necessity taking the current events into consideration. Combating circumstances like these and continuing the normal life in the education sector seem possible only due to these enhancements in the study tools. As a result, many educational institutions and teachers have already started making use of any one or more of these kits. However, online teaching and learning is not without its own advantages and drawbacks.

Language Learning via ICT Tools

All the applications discussed earlier in this paper can be utilised efficiently in imparting language education and training the learners in all the four skills namely, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. For the receptive skills like listening and reading, the teachers can use any one of the above said tools as most of them support video streaming along with audio. The learners can also read from the presentation shared by their teachers and answer the questions posed. Kahoot, Quizzez etc. support Quiz or multiple choice questions. Hence, they can be used for assessing the learners' reading and comprehending skills. For productive skills like writing and speaking, Google Classroom is extremely convenient. Writing exercises under various topics like creative writing, free writing, technical writing and much more can not only be assigned to the learners but also assessed and returned to them with individual feedback. This helps in improving their writing skills as the learners do their job at their own pace and submit them individually to their teachers. Google Meet and Zoom can be effectively utilized to enhance the speaking skills of the learners as the students can talk freely without any inhibition or anxiety as they need not face the audience. Group discussion, role play and mock interviews can also be conducted via these mediums.

Merits of Online Mode of Teaching

There are numerous advantages in online teaching and learning. The first and foremost benefit of online education in the present pandemic situation is that the students do not fail to hit on learning. The students receive uninterrupted learning which they do at the comfort of their homes, thus avoiding exposure to potential virus carriers. Moreover, as the teachers and the learners do not commute, it is found that there is a drastic reduction in pollution and the students get more time which they can effectively spend on learning new skills or hobbies. Since most of

the educational Apps allow recording of the meeting or the class, the learners who face difficulty in understanding the concepts get an opportunity to revisit the video as many times required and learn at their own pace. Students who are passive learners and silent listeners due to their shyness or fear to raise questions in regular classrooms find it easy and comfortable to respond and even pose questions or give suggestions during the video lectures either orally or by typing in the chat box. Especially the students with speech anxiety are encouraged to communicate with the teacher and be interactive in the online classes. Thereby the interaction between the teacher and the learners is optimum in the online mode of teaching which enriches the language skills especially, the speaking skills of the learner.

Demerits of Online Mode of Teaching

Though there is a great deal of advantages in online teaching-learning mode, it has its own limitations and challenges also, for both the teachers and the students. One of the most predominant demerits of online teaching is the chronic absenteeism on the part of the learners. Students from rural areas have network issues and some students might not have smartphones and data required for the online classes due to their economic condition. This can be one of the reasons for their absenteeism. Students also sometimes tend to log in and indulge in their own activities like surfing the internet, as the teachers do not have direct contact with the students. Rarely do the students make fun of the teachers and they even bully the teachers which has a negative effect on them. Other than this, the teachers also face a lot of challenges using the different means of teaching aids due to varied reasons. Most of the teachers are not adequately knowledgeable or trained to handle the virtual mode of teaching as the present scenario is unprecedented. The teachers were not given sufficient time for preparing themselves for this huge transition. Consequently, they face challenges in the effective usage of the technological tools though they are trying hard to learn them. Sometimes the parents also sit along with their wards and start criticizing the teachers which creates anxiety among the teachers and also takes a toll on their confidence and thereby affects their performance.

Teaching is a two way mechanism where the teacher communicates and the learners provide their feedback through verbal or nonverbal cues. In a regular classroom, the teacher receives the feedback almost instantaneously and can continue with the lecture based on the feedback

received from the learners whereas in the online mode, the teachers are totally deprived of this most significant facility. So, the teachers are clueless if the students have understood what is being taught to them. One of the major concerns about online teaching and learning is that the students lack physical activity. If the students attend school or college on a regular basis, they will indulge in physical activities though not all participate in sports and games, they move from one place to another as the classrooms, laboratories and canteen or mess do not occupy the same block. On the other hand in the online mode, the students sit in a particular place for hours together which is hazardous to their health. Prolonged usage of laptops, iPods or mobiles with the headphones on, creates problems in the eyes and ears leading to headaches, eye pain, ear pain, etc. Moreover, learners lose the privilege of peer learning as in college they discuss with their friends and get better understanding of the topics discussed. In the classroom, the teachers or the learners occasionally crack jokes making the atmosphere more lively and conducive for learning which is difficult in online mode.

Online mode of teaching can definitely fetch a degree for the learners but an educational institution is meant not only for awarding a degree. If so, it can very well be obtained through distance mode of learning from any university. Students socialise and learn soft skills and life skills as they actually experience success, failure and various other aspects of life from their classmates, batch mates and hostel mates. In addition, students who are self-motivated can learn their lessons effectively. Students who get motivated from their peers do not receive the kind of extrinsic motivation or inspiration as they all stay and learn remotely and therefore fail to perform well in their academic activities.

The online mode of teaching-learning method may also take a toll on people who want to improve their speaking skills especially before the audience. Public speaking is all about delivery of words in a flow before a crowd and people who have issues like stage fear and speech anxiety get used to it and start speaking effectively after a few attempts in a regular classroom. In the online mode instead, though people are urged to open up, it does not help them in getting rid of their glossophobia for which the only treatment is to expose the person to public speaking situations where they have to get on to the stage and talk in front of the class.

Remedial measures

It is an accepted fact that online mode of education is one of the most viable solutions for continuing the conduct of classes in educational institutions in the current pandemic situation. Therefore, it is evident that both teachers and learners should understand the situation and act accordingly. Teachers should try to be more empathetic and understand the problems faced by the students which includes technological and network issues, health problems and other factors like monotony as they need to sit and stare at the electronic screen for long hours. In the regular classroom, the students chat with their friends at the end of each class and before the commencement of the next class, sometimes even during the class. In the online mode, there is no such opportunity for them to relax. Similarly, the students should understand the challenges faced by the staff members as online teaching is entirely a new concept for most of the teaching fraternity and that it will take some time for them to get used to the technology and the new normal.

Basic netiquettes should be followed to avoid unnecessary disturbances and diversions during class hours. The learners can be urged to mute their mics and turn off their cameras. They can also be encouraged to respond to the teacher when asked to, as the teachers are at times clueless if they are reaching their students and want to get feedback from them so that they can proceed further. The class strength can be reduced to fifteen or twenty enabling the teachers to have a good hold on their learners with better interactions. All the educational aids that are discussed here accommodate more than hundred participants and some of them even allow thousands of participants. For a conference or a webinar, a huge number of participants should not be a problem since those who attend those programmes are self-motivated and interested in the topics discussed and moreover they do not attend due to compulsion. In addition, there is no validation or evaluation after the programme. Whereas classroom teaching-learning is done with a primary focus on the outcome of the learning which is assessed using various assessment strategies. On that account reduction of the number of students may aid in a better teaching-learning activity.

After each session, the learners may be given simple tasks including MCQs, quizzes, etc. and they may be asked to submit before the next class. The sessions can be made interactive rather than lecturing which becomes a one way communication and monotonous. If the learners are

encouraged to participate and contribute, they will be interested in learning and thereby the teaching learning process becomes more effective and fruitful.

Tips for English Teachers

English teachers can play songs or movie clippings and ask the students to answer simple questions during the class; thereby the students' attention can be held. Small activities like Spell Bee, and Word Building can be conducted which not only makes the class lively but also helps in building the learners vocabulary. Kahoot can be used to make the class more interactive through online quizzes on grammar and vocabulary. The class can be divided into smaller sections and debates may be conducted which helps in strengthening the students' communicative skills and also in encouraging them to be open to others point of views and perspectives which is an important life skill. Flash cards can also be used for enhancing the vocabulary of the learners and this activity can be repeated periodically for a better learning experience.

Conclusion

Major part of operating in the shadow of a global pandemic is addressing that it is disorienting, limiting and work as usual is unrealistic. Even after the educational institutions resume their regular classes; it is not going to be the same as the pre-pandemic period. So being open-minded and flexible is the key as everything is going to be new normal. Teachers and learners should begin with resetting their baselines and understand the prevalent issue. Experimenting comes with trial and errors and hence patience is to be embraced by both the teachers and learners. Online teaching has become a part of the education system and it is indispensable to keep updating and adapting to the changes. The growth of E-Commerce after SARS claims that major world events are often an emphasis for swift innovation. In the post COVID period, the education field may find a rise in E-learning and it is inevitable for the teachers and learners to accept the changes and make the best use of the ICT Tools.

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