

USING DIGITAL PLATFORM FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN ONLINE MODE DURING PANDEMIC TIMES: AN ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

Shridhar Bhat

*Assistant Professor of English, Dr. G. Shankar Government Women's First Grade College & PG Study Centre, Udupi,
Karnataka, India*

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ABSTRACT

In the month of March 2020, the sudden, unprecedented outbreak of the COVID-19 forced colleges to close down all on-campus academic activities. In order to keep the process of learning going, English language teachers had to initiate online teaching using Applications like Microsoft Teams, Google Classrooms, WebEx, Zoom, YouTube Live etc. This paper focuses on online education ventures taken up by the ESL teachers of Government First Grade Colleges of Karnataka State. A few instructional strategies are presented to summarize the current online teaching practices of ESL teachers who have conducted online classes for undergraduate students. The study concludes with some implications for online teaching: (a) Online instructional design and learner participation (b) Delivery system of online instructional materials (c) Support system by faculty to assist students (d) Students' level of motivation in respect of online learning activities and feedback.

KEYWORDS: *ESL (English as Second Language), ICT (Information and Communication Technology), Learning Outcome, Pedagogy, Technology Integration*

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid of March 2020, due to the sudden outbreak of novel Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the country, strict lockdown measures were implemented which affected the academic activities in universities and colleges across India considerably. Higher education institutions had no option but to undergo a rapid, unexpected transformation from 'traditional classroom teaching' to 'online mode of teaching'. Teachers made all possible attempts to ensure that the teaching-learning process remains intact so as to keep the students engaged in academic activities. This led to massive online teaching-learning activities using modern ICT tools and web resources. In a very short span of time, teachers had to train themselves in the integration of ICT tools into pedagogical purposes and proper use of Application like Microsoft Teams, Google Classrooms, WebEx, Zoom and YouTube Live. Efforts were made to reach out to individual students through mobile, Email, and social media applications like WhatsApp. Students were asked to stay at home for safety and continue to learn through online teaching-learning activities. All these factors led to a significant shift in the teaching-learning process. This paper intends to give a glimpse of online teaching activities and experiences of English language teachers in a few Government First Grade Colleges situated in Karnataka selected for this study.

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Online education is not an altogether new concept. The potentialities of ICT in education have been utilized by developing countries through various online initiatives (Debande O, 2004). Online education is progressing rapidly in the modern times

(Aithal & Aithal, 2016). Over the past few years, many Indian universities have launched online education programmes. The objectives are to reach the unreached and to provide opportunities for those who want to learn while they are employed somewhere, at their own pace and convenience. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are presently being offered by NPTEL. Indira Gandhi National Open University, a leading Distance Education provider in India has also launched several distance education courses which are offered in online mode. But, when compared to the regular courses offered by various universities, the number of online courses offered is still insufficient to meet the requirements of the learners. Moreover, when compared to regular classroom-based courses of study, the students who prefer online mode of instruction are not very large in number.

The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 came as a bolt from the blue and it affected the traditional face-to-face instructional system to a large extent as strict lockdown measures were implemented in many states. This forced many institutions to launch online sessions to keep on track their ongoing educational programmes and to offer short-term courses online for constructive use of time by the students during the lockdown. This sudden, unexpected shift to online teaching and learning mode within a matter of a few days, has created some problems. Online teaching requires technical skills, an elaborate lesson plan design, teaching resources such as digital texts, audio and video contents, and technological tools to support online teaching. However, teachers need to be trained thoroughly to become competent online instructors to sustain the integration of new technologies into teaching-learning practices (Wilson & Stacey, 2004). The majority of faculty members faced difficulty as they did not have exposure to online teaching earlier and had not undergone any training in online teaching and hence found it difficult to adjust to the new normal.

In addition, students' responses to the sudden shift to online teaching have also not been encouraging due to many obstacles. Most of the students have no smartphones or laptops with good quality internet connection to access online content. Some have difficulties due to the lack of favourable learning attitude or good learning environments when they have self-isolated themselves at home for safety. Some have a sort of aversion to technology-based learning as they are comfortable with traditional classroom-based learning.

The present study will focus on the problems discussed above, and throw light on how teachers can plan effective instructional strategies to motivate students and ensure the effectiveness of online teaching.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following are the objectives of this study:

- To study the impact of ICT on teaching-learning activities of the English language during pandemic times.
- To find out the problems faced by the learners as well as the teachers in relation to adoption of technology for teaching-learning purposes.
- To find out the responses of the teachers and learners regarding online teaching.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Online Instructional Design and Learner Participation

One of the major challenges faced by instructional designers in the online teaching context is the management of student engagement in the teaching-learning process. When designing quality online teaching sessions, a teacher needs to adopt

multiple approaches, methods and techniques. In the online context, instructional designers have to cautiously design, develop, implement and evaluate the whole instructional process. In addition, strategies for motivation, student participation and evaluation need to be adopted. All these need to be conducive to ensure high level of learner engagement.

Studies conducted by some researchers have revealed that learning effectiveness depends on the learner characteristics in online learning environments (Leeds et al., 2013). Nevertheless, instructional designers can ensure meaningful learning outcomes by constructing interactive course designs that encourage higher levels of learner participation and communication in the online learning environment (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). Web-based learning tools can influence the learning environments to a considerable extent, be it either regular campus-based, or technology-based online learning environments. In terms of student learning outcomes, online environments have the potential to match, and in some cases, considerably exceed traditional classroom based instruction (Bakia, Jones, Means, Murphy & Toyama, 2010; Lim, Morris & Kupritz, 2007).

In a survey-based study on student retention in online courses, Leeds et al. (2013) observed that many retention and engagement practices were ineffective. They suggest that better efforts must be directed towards setting course expectations and effective utilization of better communication processes such as web meetings. They opine that these strategies may help to achieve better learner engagement and interaction.

Delivery System of Online Instructional Materials

A learning delivery system is nothing but an arrangement to carry out teaching and learning activities with the help of technology to deliver content and instruction to learners. In the online teaching context, it is a challenging task as learners are not physically present with a teacher in the classroom. This is unlike lecturing face-to-face wherein the teacher delivers content and instruction orally to the learners who are physically present in the classroom. Many researchers have observed that students have a tendency to show weak persistence in online learning, a factor that seriously hampers their learning effectiveness (Li, Wu, Yao, & Zhu, 2013). In order to improve their span of attention, it is necessary to break down the content into sub-topics and adopt a modular teaching method. Teachers can divide the teaching content into several smaller modules and teach them for a brief time duration to enable students to focus upon them easily. It is also necessary to keep the pace of lecturing moderate to enable the students to capture the key points of the lecture. In traditional classrooms, the teacher's voice, body language, facial expressions etc. add to the overall effectiveness of the lesson delivery, whereas in online teaching, these factors have limited scope. However, voice modulations are needed even in online delivery of content for instruction.

Support System by Faculty to Assist Students

The technical requirements of online teaching are far greater than traditional classroom teaching. Most of the teachers are not trained sufficiently to operate in an online education environment. Faculty should be in a position to effectively communicate with the students before the commencement of online class through an appropriate channel such as WhatsApp, Google Meet, Zoom Meeting etc. It is also necessary that the students are aware of the lesson objectives, content, teaching-learning activities to be carried out online etc. Many students need technical support to solve log-in issues, upload or download content, work on assignments etc. In addition, guidance and support to slow-learners as well as gifted students is also necessary to ensure their active participation in the session. Students also need help to solve the technical issues which are likely to arise in an online environment.

Implementing Blended Learning

Traditional face-to-face teaching-learning methods normally used in traditional classrooms have certain severe drawbacks such as lack of motivation on the part of the learners and lack of adequate preparation for online learning, limited participation in discussions on the topic of teaching, lack of motivation and inadequate discussion etc. These issues are not uncommon in online teaching as well. In order to solve these problems in online teaching, teachers may consider adopting a blended learning model. Students can go through an offline self-learning phase wherein they are required to read the topic-related study material before the class. In the online teaching phase, the teacher may initiate a discussion for the students to test their prior understanding of the topic of learning. This will keep them active throughout the session and ensures participatory learning. They may be asked some questions to test their understanding at the end of the session and provide feedback on the students' responses.

RESPONSES OF THE TEACHERS AND LEARNERS REGARDING ONLINE TEACHING

Responses of Teachers Regarding Online Teaching

The recent developments in modes of teaching and the emergence of new content delivery models placed teachers in a challenging situation. In this regard, the researcher interviewed a few teachers and collected their opinion regarding the effectiveness of online teaching and learning.

A faculty member teaching English in a reputed college in the city says:

“The pleasure of learning in online teaching is less when compared to traditional teaching situations. The teacher cannot judge whether the learners are seriously listening to online lectures or not. The learners just log in most of the times without active involvement in the learning process.”

Another faculty member teaching English in a rural college says:

“Online teaching can never provide the quality of face-to-face teaching in the classroom. In traditional methods of teaching, learner interactions with the teacher and peer group ensure pleasant learning experience. Proper feedback is also a missing element in online environment. Lot of preparation is required to teach online. For a teacher who is not technology-friendly, it is embarrassing.”

Another faculty member teaching English in a semi-urban college says:

We are accustomed to teach in physical classrooms and most of us had no experience of teaching online when we were urged by the college authorities to teach online during the pandemic to complete the remaining portion of study. So we were not comfortable with online environment. But now we have learnt how to use new tools and techniques and adjusted to online teaching in the last one year. We now feel the tremendous power of digital technology to enrich the learning experience of the students by motivating them to a great extent.”

Responses of the Students Regarding Online Teaching

The researcher interviewed a few students and collected their opinion regarding the online learning experience.

A student who is learning English as a second language in a reputed institution in the city says:

“As learners of English language, we are used to traditional face-to-face methods of teaching. Online teaching was suddenly introduced by our college to cover up the remaining portions. We found it difficult to adjust to the new mode

of teaching as many of us had no such digital devices to access content online. Low bandwidth of internet was also a serious concern. However, after a few days of initial hiccups, we found online teaching somewhat interesting.”

Another student who is learning English as a second language in a rural college says:

“Professors may use innovative tools and techniques for teaching English. But as students, we have affordability and connectivity issues and most of us are suffering from stress and anxiety during the pandemic times. We need proper training with regard to the use of technology for English learning. Though we find online learning interesting in the beginning, frequent interruptions and lack of peer-group presence and face-to-face interaction drains away our interest over time. But compared to earlier times, we now have a positive orientation towards technology and its impact on English language learning.”

DISCUSSION

This paper throws light on certain significant aspects of technology integration into the teaching-learning practices of English language. From the study, it emerges that the technology of teaching and the content to be delivered to the students should match the readiness and online learning capabilities of the students. Apart from the domain knowledge and excellent communication skills, sound technical knowledge is required to meet the demands of the online teaching. Effective delivery of the instructional material should be taken care of by the teachers to retain the interest and motivational level of the learners. It is also necessary to ensure active student engagement in the online teaching-learning environment (Martin, 2018). As the students normally tend to have low concentration in online learning mode, it becomes necessary to employ strategies to ensure interaction in order to ensure the effective delivery of the content. Teachers need to provide students with various activities online to strengthen learning and provide adequate feedback on their performances after the online class. Appropriate measures should be adopted to mitigate students' anxiety through various support systems to ensure that they actively and effectively engage in online learning.

CONCLUSION

As stated by Nguyen (2015), the Internet has opened up immense possibilities for online learning and this has compelled many researchers and educators to look into the possibilities of enhancing the quality of student learning outcomes while combating the scarcity of resources, particularly in higher education institutions. However, online teaching involves various elements such as technical skills, proper use of authentic teaching resources such as digital texts, audio and video contents, and digital tools. Many teachers face difficulty as they neither have proper exposure to online teaching environment, nor have the right inclination towards adopting technology in teaching. So there is a need for quality training in online teaching so that teachers can adjust to the new normal. Even, students' responses to sudden shift to online teaching have also not been very encouraging due to many hindrances. Most of the students have no smartphones or laptops with good quality internet connection to access online content. Some have difficulties due to the lack of favourable learning attitude or good learning environments when they have self-isolated themselves at home for safety. However, there is a need for technology integration in the teaching-learning process since there are innumerable benefits. Technology also changes the way we think and work radically. Since online teaching is likely to gather great deal of momentum as time progresses, it is necessary to view the situation from a wider pre service as it has many pedagogical implications for quality learning outcome.

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