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Transforming Lives: E-Learning and English Language Teaching¹

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ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that English has become a universal language. It has been the basic medium of communication in the academic world as well as in the professional arena. Particularly, the job scenario in this globalised world involves many dimensions of assessment in the form of competitive examinations and personal interviews; and, English serves as the medium of communication in these encounters. There need to be a change in the way of teaching and learning English language. And E-learning has initiated new possibilities into the classroom. The paper analyses the role of E-learning in English Language teaching and the various methods applied. E-learning is learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communication technology. The recent advances in multimedia technology offer E- Learning as an alternative to the traditional mode of the lecture method followed in the teaching/learning of English.

Keywords: E-learning, English Language teaching, Computer Assisted Language Learning, Virtual Learning Environment.

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Whatever the question of the moment in the ELT staffroom, one thing remains certain: the English Language continues to evolve in cyberspace, changing from something we might be familiar with to something that is clearly a new electronic form. - *David Eastment*

Language and communication play a vital role in today's world of globalization. There is no doubt that English has become a universal language. It has been the basic medium of communication in the academic world as well as in the professional arena. When it comes to having a lucrative career, English proficiency is regarded as the mandatory skill. It is taught all over the world. In the recent times, an individual's capability is assessed in terms of the communication skill in English which is treated on par with the subject expertise of that particular profession. This aspect throws light on the fact that an individual is expected to meet the challenges confronting the career aspects through a demonstration of strong English language skills.

Particularly, the job scenario in this globalised world involves many dimensions of assessment in the form of competitive examinations and personal interviews; and, English serves as the medium of

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communication in these encounters. Hence, the aspirants of progress in life in this technological era have to gear up with expected English language skills that cater to the various needs of their employment and advancement. The importance of English, with the global status it achieved, is witnessed in almost every field due to the recent information explosion. The language has not left any field untouched, bringing about tremendous changes in the social, cultural and educational contexts of the globe with sudden rush in the lives of people of almost all nations towards mastering the skills of this global language. Further, the research and development in all arenas is interwoven with new technologies for which English language serves as the medium, thus necessitating an inevitable need to be well versed in the English language skills. In addition, the need for English grew large with the advent of the Internet that epitomizes the information society and has facilitated easy access to world happenings, migration of people along cross-cultural boundaries and rapid transfer of information among one another, through the medium of English.

Even the system of modern education is emphasizing the vital role that English language plays in the technology era. So, the educational institutions are working in the direction of making it mandatory to impart strong English language skills to their students. To meet this challenging situation, where language skills have to be imparted to a vast number of learners, the traditional classrooms might cater to the diverse needs of ever-increasing number of learners. The implementation of technology in the field of education simplified the procedures of teaching to such massive strengths by providing alternative opportunities to the learners. With the help of these technologies, self-taught techniques have been developed. The benefits that the technologies offer are witnessed in the enthusiasm that the learners are showing to pursue the language skills with ease.

Proficiency in English language is not an embellishment as in the olden days; it has to be accepted that the education system of a country has the responsibility to train its clients in the needed skills to suit the changed scenario and send them out of the institutes fully equipped with the required skills. With regard to the Indian circumstances what is needed is a revamping of all the general English courses in the country and a highly graded and comprehensive syllabus from class one to the tertiary level. An outgoing graduate from the university shall be able to earn and retain a job that he aspires for. Hence, more and more individuals are found searching for avenues to master the skills of the language.

There need to be a change in the way of teaching and learning English language. And E-learning has initiated new possibilities into the classroom. E-learning is learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communication technology. It can cover a spectrum of activities from supported learning to blended learning (the combination of traditional and E-learning practices) to learning that is entirely online. According to Graham Stanley, "Technology can be a highly engaging and interactive tool, providing a source of real language, both written and spoken, in the classroom, and motivating learners to produce more language than they otherwise might have done" (p 2). It is time that India develops its own materials for online teaching and testing in English. The change of time has also brought a change in the basic concepts like teaching, the teacher and the learner. The language teachers have to accept the educational technology as a tool for language teaching.

The teachers of English in India have a twofold problem: while the learners come from varied backgrounds with different language proficiencies and attitudes, the other dimension is the influence of their respective mother tongues on learning English. The feature of Mother Tongue Influence (MTI) is considerably strong in India. Moreover the language learning habits get transferred from the mother tongue to the other tongue. So in the average Indian class, where most of the learners are still first generation scholars, teaching of English becomes a very challenging task. The course designers, material producers, methodology directors should help the English teacher by providing suitable system, keeping the relationship between the L1 and L2 (the Indian vernacular and English) in their view.

Latest trends of technology in English language teaching have made language learning more easier. Today language teachers are frequently making use of technology. The technology not only helps in improving the basic skills but also positively contributes in the development of high thinking skills. Technology offers various powerful learning tools including multimedia and virtual learning environment to

involve the students for learning English language. The use of technologies such as PowerPoint and interactive white board is attracting the students in classroom.

The recent advances in multimedia technology offer E- Learning as an alternative to the traditional mode of the lecture method followed in the teaching/learning of English. Though the idea of replacing or substituting a teacher with a machine apparently appears absurd, there are many advantages of E- Learning. The E- Learning environment offers the learners, irrespective of their diversified needs, an opportunity to interact with the computer on one-to-one basis. This is advantageous to an average or a weak student; he feels attended to. The second important advantage is that it allows learner autonomy. The learners enjoy a certain amount of freedom as the teacher's role is confined to that of a facilitator. The onus of exposing the learner to both the major and ancillary skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing and Grammar and Vocabulary) remains with the teacher as they are essential for an individual to be considered as skilled and competent in the target language. A normal classroom curriculum might fail to offer an integrated syllabus dealing with all the skills; but E- Learning methodology has immense potential to operate in such complex situations by integrating all the language skills into one complete whole.

At a much deeper level, the technological impact is encompassing all fields of study with its computerization. The existing circumstances focus at the undeniable fact that the English language widely used in computer applications can as well be taught with the help of technology since a modern day learner is techno savvy and can effortlessly avail the benefits that accrue with E- Learning in order to be a skilled communicator in English language. Learning through CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) has certain advantages over the huge classroom, controlled by the teacher. Carol Chapelle in his "The Discourse of Computer-Assisted Language Learning: Toward a Context for Descriptive Research" contends, "More than other resources, CALL has the potential for individualizing instruction. Accordingly, a CALL research agenda should seek concrete results concerning successes and failures of individual students with a variety of CALL activities"(200).

There are certainly numerous productive benefits of E-learning. Some of them are:

- Technology provides one-to-one communication between the course material and the learner which allows the learner to have his or her own space and time and accommodates his or her pace of learning, slow or fast.
- With the machinery and software of the computer technology, the learner can always revert back for any reference or clarification.
- The material provided by technology is flexible so that the learner can select it according to his standard.
- Variety of exercises are available to the teacher to test the learners more frequently. Even evaluation can be done quickly with the help of the computer.
- Computer assisted learning helps the students who go for higher education where National and International entrance or qualifying tests are conducted.

There are several terms associated with e-learning, which are often used interchangeably.

Distance learning

The term *distance learning* originally applied to traditional paper-based distance courses delivered by mail nowadays distance learning includes learning via technology such as the Internet, CD-ROMs and mobile technologies hence the newer term e-learning.

Open learning: There is one aspect of distance learning and simply refers to how much independence the learner has. The more open a distance course is, the more autonomy the learner has in deciding what course content to cover, how to do so and when.

Online learning: This is learning which takes place via the Internet. As such, online learning is facet of e-learning.

Blended learning: This is a mixture of online and face-to-face course delivery. For example, learners might meet once a week with a teacher face-to-face for an hour, and do a further two hours' work weekly online. In some situations the digital elements is done offline with a CD-ROM. (Dudenev, 136-37)

Whatever the technology, however, learning is the vital element. The delivery of a learning, training or education program by electronic means. E-learning involves the use of a computer or electronic device (e.g. a mobile phone) in some way to provide training, educational or learning material. The advantages of integrating technology into English curriculum are:

- To expose learners to authentic use of language
- To consolidate learning (practice everything learnt)
- To motivate learning
- To prepare learners for the real world

Interactive whiteboards are good replacements for traditional whiteboards or flipcharts as they provide ways to show students everything which can be presented on a computer's desktop (educational software, web sites, and others). SMART boards help teachers use a student-centered approach to teach language arts. Language arts teachers can use SMART Boards to improve reading and comprehension, and teach grammar and writing. With a SMART Board, teachers can combine video, audio, Web browsing and word processing to teach students interactively.

The entry of technology into the field of education has altered the role of a teacher. As the technology can do most of the duties of a teacher, the present day teacher has to act like a coordinator between the students and the technology. The traditional role of a teacher has altered to that of a facilitator. David Eastment defines it as: "Our role as teachers in the technological age is not only to impart new knowledge, but to give students the tools to acquire knowledge, to recognize the value of what they see in books and software as well as on Internet"(8). According to Gavin Dudeney, the following scenarios are examples of learning situations which make use of the computer, but they are not necessarily all examples of online learning.

- Learners in a self-study centre, or at home, use a CD-ROM which provides them with extra practice of what they have done in class.
- During class, learners are taken to a computer room, and do exercise on a language website on the Internet, in pairs.
- Learners use an ICT tool, such as blogs, wikis, chat or podcasts, for project work either inside or outside the classroom.
- Learners email their homework or class assignment to the teacher, who marks it and emails it back to learners.
- The teacher uses a blog to provide learners with online links for reading and listening, homework assignments, and summaries of class work for learners who miss class. (137)

Online learning is often delivered via a learning 'platform' or Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Also known as Learner Management System (LMS), or a virtual classroom, a VLE is a web-based platform on which course content can be stored. It is accessed by learners on the Internet, and they can not only see course content, such as documents, audio and video lectures, but also do activities such as quizzes, questionnaires and tests, or use communication tools like discussion forums or text and audio chat.

The Computer is the leading technological tool in the recent years. The more sophisticated microcomputers of the modern era, often used in educational institutions, are interconnected and serve as tools for communication among the users. This facility makes the system the natural choice for the acquisition of the language skills. Microcomputers can be used in language classroom as they help in creating authentic material for language learning.

As a consequence of this innovation in teaching/learning of English language, today a remarkable number of enthusiastic learners sit before the computer in the language lab setting to imbibe language skills. Since language acquisition through multimedia language labs has become a part of the day, the CALL activities too expanded their purview by enhancing research on material design, instruction methods and pedagogical theories. The effect of CALL was immediate on the professional educationists as teaching/learning of language skills in such an innovative environment could expedite the process of cultivating communication skills to the large number of young aspirants. The CALL mechanism with a number of advantages made these

institutions of higher learning to overhaul their language teaching/learning curriculum by focusing on technology-oriented pedagogy. Especially, the technical education and other allied fields are availing the benefit of teaching language with CALL pedagogy almost completely. Thus, modern students can be imparted language teaching at a faster pace as majority of them are techno savvy learners. Mike Levy in “Technologies in Use for Second Language Learning” contends:

Vocabulary, alongside grammar, has been one of the traditional areas of focus in CALL. Vocabulary continues to attract attention because of the sheer size of the task for the learner, it's obvious importance for students with varying goals and proficiency levels, and the inherent capabilities of the computer that are more attuned to dealing with the more discrete aspects of language learning. (771)

Use of CD-ROMs (Compact Disc Read-Only Memory) in language learning software is indispensable. These CD-ROMs are primarily designed for learners to work on alone as follow-up to a lesson, either in a school self-access centre or at home. They can include features such as allowing learners to choose their own path through the CD-ROM materials by making their own ‘lesson-plans’ – choosing which activities to do and in what order to do them. Many course book CD-ROMs also have testing materials incorporated, so that learners can check their own progress, as well as a grammar reference section and mini-dictionary. As well as the CD-ROMs accompanying language course books, there are standalone CD-ROMs aimed at different groups of learners which cover different groups of learners which cover different language areas and skills, such as examination preparation and practice, grammar and vocabulary and pronunciation. Pronunciation practice usually involves a learner listening to a word or short sentence, and then recording themselves while repeating the word or sentence. The learner’s output is then compared to a ‘model’ of correct pronunciation and the results displayed to the learner.

E-learning and ELT improves students’ listening and speaking skills in English in both familiar and unfamiliar situations. It increases their reading comprehension and basic writing skills. It also enhances their confidence to speak in English, both within and outside the classroom. E-learning builds confidence in speaking and understanding English. It improves higher education performance, increases employment prospects and job performance, and better life chances. Thus, the technology has come to be a resourceful tool for multimedia presentations, communications at chat rooms and video conferences. The future predicts that a home tutor mechanism which facilitates learning involving interface and tasks through machines. The artificial intelligence is going to invade virtually every field, bringing with it innovations in the teaching of English.

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