

Teaching English Online: Challenges, Advantages and Possibilities

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Abstract

The closure of educational institutions and the lockdown to prevent the spread of Covid-19 has thrown up challenges for teaching and learning. The government and higher education institutions (HEIs) used online teaching and assessments instead of conventional teaching to ensure academic continuity. The paper, focusing on English language, discusses the challenges and opportunities in online teaching mainly highlighting the various initiatives taken by the Government of India. The conclusion briefly touches on the future of online English teaching.

Keywords: e-education, e-learning, digital age, digital tools, language pedagogy

Introduction

Language pervades individuals, societies, cultures, and every dimension of human endeavours. Language is a rule-governed communication system that affects meaning-making, structures our thought, and defines our social relationships regarding power and equality. Language pedagogy is a primary concern in education. In a multilingual, multicultural, and multi-ethnic country like India, language pedagogy affords multifarious challenges at the level of policy and praxis. To appreciate the role of language in education, we must have a holistic perspective on language. It is necessary to see language as a multi-dimensional space, giving importance to its structural, literary, sociological, cultural, psychological, and aesthetic aspects. Viewing language as a rule-governed system is true, but it gives us only one side

of the picture, even though the picture is universal. Language pedagogy offers a cohesive conceptualization of language consisting of the relation between linguistic elements, the teacher, the learner, the classroom, and the teaching context. The model of language pedagogy draws attention to the creation of learning communities in which knowledge is actively co-constructed and the focus of learning is sometimes learning itself.

English is the world's most popular language, the mother tongue for 400 million, and a second or foreign language for about two billion people (Demont-Heinrich, 2007). According to Kirkpatrick (2014), the move to internationalize higher education worldwide has encouraged using English as a common medium. Consequently, today English has become an essential language in multicultural and international business communications and the language of research (Rintaningrum et al., 2016). The English language, combined with globalization and technological advancements are principal means of mediation fuelling the use of English as a means of communication (Brown, 2015).

Effective online teaching emphasizes student-centred learning and the use of active learning activities. The teaching-learning schedule is flexible, learning is accessible to those living in remote areas, not limited to classrooms, the learning environment is interactive, and assessment is inclusive. Online teaching started even before the pandemic. Computer Assisted Language learning (CALL) and Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) are techniques that have been in existence for over 50 years (Brown, 2001; Butler, 2011). Online English teaching is time-intensive and requires different competencies than classroom teaching. Initially, teachers are uncomfortable with online teaching and feel classroom teaching is the best way to teach English. However, as they begin to learn to teach through digital means, they believe that online teaching creates an interactive learning environment between learners and facilitators. Due to its learner-centred approach, teachers and learners are accepting it.

Linguistics and Language Pedagogy

Linguistics plays a significant role in language pedagogy by describing languages. There are, however, certain aspects where the perspectives of linguistics and pedagogy differ. A major preoccupation of linguistics is developing a theory of language acquisition. Another is the creation of

conceptual tools for describing natural languages. Language pedagogy has the practical objective of effective language learning and is committed to teaching a target language. Therefore, there is a difference in purpose and function between the role of linguist and language educator; the practical needs of language teaching as an applied activity and the theoretical interests of linguistics as a science coincide only sometimes (Stern, 1983).

In the post-Covid scenario, the traditional approach to language teaching needs to be more adaptable. Language pedagogy must adopt new perspectives, approaches, methods, and techniques to make teaching-learning more effective. These perspectives must be evolved through research, experiments, discussions, deliberations, and the sharing of ideas. This paper highlights the challenges, opportunities, and future of online English language teaching.

National Education Policy 2020 and UGC's Norms on Online Teaching

Section 23 of the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 emphasizes technology integration in education, arguing for a bi-directional relationship between the two (Government of India, 2020a). The policy aims to create digital content, develop digital infrastructure, and build capacity to supervise e-learning needs. The policy has paved the way for creating the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF), a platform for the "free exchange of ideas on the use of technology to enhance learning, assessment, planning, administration, and so on, both for school and higher education" (Government of India, 2020a: 23.3). The policy has also been concerned with the practicalities of technology usage, its availability, issues faced by learners, and geographical conditions. It focuses on the equal distribution of digital infrastructure in rural and urban areas. The initiatives of NEP 2020 are expected to enhance the digital skills of teachers and learners.

The University Grants Commission (UGC), a statutory body of the Government of India responsible for coordinating, determining, and maintaining higher education standards, changes its norms occasionally. One of the recent changes due to the pandemic is the implementation of 'blended learning' in the new curriculum of schools and higher education. Blended learning is a mixture of physical classroom activities and learning activities supported by online technologies. Activities

in both modes are well planned and developed by considering the outcome of the course. In its concept note on 'Blended learning', UGC recommended online teaching of 40 per cent of a course and the remaining 60 per cent through offline methods. Blended learning provides greater flexibility to the learner-centred approach. It indicates that the inclusion of technology in education legitimizes and celebrates the use of technology in teaching.

Challenges in Online English Teaching

In online teaching, the technical glitch is an issue teachers cannot handle. Students often complain of technical difficulties and internet connectivity during lessons; teachers should be mentally prepared to handle such situations. Taking attendance is another issue. Exit cards are not a true reflection of attendance. The usefulness of exit cards can be enhanced when taken at varied times instead of taking them at the end of the class. Students of online English classes are from various countries. In such situations, time zones matter. The teachers and students may be operating in different time zones, and teachers must be aware of these situations in advance and be prepared to work at odd hours.

Teaching and assessing writing are more challenging online than the other three skills, listening, speaking, and reading. It is difficult to teach English online to non-native speakers as compared to native speakers because native speakers know both the denotative and connotative meanings of words; they also have a command of minimal pairs of their language, and they know their society well. Since non-native learners are unaware of these elements, online English teaching is a source of challenge. By using visual aids to clarify the concept, avoiding ambiguous sentences and long lectures, and incorporating language learning activities, one can manage both types of speakers in the same environment.

Advantages of Teaching English Online

Online teaching adds a new dimension to language pedagogy. Barring a few issues, online teaching English is quite an exciting endeavour, providing greater flexibility and helping maintain a work-life balance. The flexibility relates to when, where and how to take a course, and the classes are accessible to those living in remote areas. In schools with no

faculty to teach English, students can access freely available informative content developed by the Government of India for e-learning. Online Learning-enhances technological skills, and one can interact with more online teaching platforms. Handling big class sizes is a challenge in face-to-face classrooms that is effectively overcome by virtual classes. It is relatively easy for teachers to engage in a big class with less effort. The online approach and classes are interactive, and students feel motivated to ask questions. Teaching English online is beneficial for teachers as they can establish a good rapport with students and get maximum feedback, which they can use to enhance their teaching methods and materials. This approach reduces the class duration, and a teacher can spend more time addressing students' queries.

Teaching English through online mode involves several online platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, Google Classrooms, Microsoft Teams, and so on; several English as a second language (ESL) Apps, like, Cram, Babble, Flashcard, Duolingo, Talk English; and games like Virtual Trivia, Virtual Pictionary, Alphabet Chain, and Class Limericks, to mention a few. In online pedagogy, 'Digital reading' is one aspect which makes the reading skill more engaging. Hyperlinks in digital sources allow learners to reach the exact source and access additional readings related to relevant topics.

Technology also supports the differently abled to learn languages. Teaching English through forums like the Digital Accessible Information System (DAISY) for the visually challenged is an example. The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) offers content in sign languages for differently abled students and talking books enabled with Electronic Publications (EPUB).

Online Assessment

English classes are heterogeneous, with students from urban and rural areas and with different levels of competencies. Needs assessment is a systematic process for determining and addressing the gaps between current and desired outcomes and the gap between different levels of competencies. A needs assessment can be done in both online and offline modes of teaching.

Besides this, there are interesting ways of making formative and summative assessments. Teachers assess students in formative

assessment through quizzes, assignments, and in-class questions and discussions. Kahoot is an online formative assessment tool to assess English language competencies, track class progress and help to modify teaching. In summative assessment, final essays and tests are given at the end of a course or a semester and evaluated based on performance. In online teaching, collecting assessment data by administering a questionnaire through a Google Form and sharing the link with students is easy. NEP 2020 focuses on formative assessment but also considers summative assessment necessary.

Resources and Tools

Teaching English online is different from classroom teaching. Teaching with technology is time intensive. Unlike face-to-face teaching, where teachers use verbal and non-verbal gestures, its absence in online pedagogy is a matter of concern since teachers find it difficult to know whether students understand what is taught. This challenge necessitates several content-based tools, but 'material construction' is challenging in online environments. Mishra (2015) emphasized the role of technology in teaching English in the following words:

One cannot guarantee a hundred per cent success in teaching English through technology, yet one can create awareness among students and teachers through technology. While the most common technology in urban areas, like internet facilities, may appear difficult, some easily available technological resources like radio, TV, computer, mobile phones, etc., can facilitate teaching English in rural areas. Now the efficacy of these devices depends upon the creativity and desire of teachers. (p. 40)

YouTube videos, blogs, and online ESL language apps and games are a few resources available online even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the Google play store shows a mushrooming of virtual meeting platforms during the pandemic. A few of these are Zoom, Google Classrooms, and Microsoft Teams. Recognizing the ability of digital education to ensure the continuity of school education, the Government of India (2020b) has developed guidelines to enhance the quality of digital education. PRAGYATA is an eight-step guideline for implementing digital education. These steps comprise Plan, Review, Arrange, Guide, Yak (Talk), Assign, Track, and Appreciate; introduction

of e-Vidya to unify all digital/online/on-air education efforts. This initiative includes:

- DIKSHA (one nation-one digital platform) is a digital infrastructure for QR-coded textbooks. The extensive usage of the platform has resulted in the DIKSHA App emerging as one of the top education apps on Google's app store in India.
- SWAYAM- Online courses in MOOCS format for Open School
- Air Radio programmes like Community Radio and Siksha Vani podcast
- SWAYAM PRABHA with one TV channel per class from Classes 1 to 12.
- IITPAL, online coaching for exam preparation
- Digitally Accessible Information System (DAISY), e-content for visually and hearing impaired and in sign language on the National Institute for Open Schooling website.

Aileen Ng (2008) observes that implementing online forums provides reinforcement tasks to enable students to practise their writing and facilitates collaborations to produce better quality writing. Studies also suggest online forums help to improve communication skills (Abrams, 2003; Blake, 2009; Peterson & Caverly, 2006).

Future Possibilities of Online English Teaching

The results of Covid-19 have drawn the attention of policymakers towards the digitalization of education. The government is taking several initiatives to continue online teaching in the post-Covid-19 scenario. Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) is an internationally recognised certificate that uses online teaching. This certification is varied according to the domain of teaching, such as TEFL, TESL (Teaching English as Second Language), TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), and CELTA (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). It covers teaching fundamentals, creating lesson plans, and instructing students in English grammar, reading, speaking, and writing. These certificates are famous for their value in teaching English through online mode. TEFL teachers may be native or non-native speakers of English and aim to make learners understand the basic concept of the English language. Many online courses have

been developed to teach English. Engineering English, Business English, Medical English, and Aviation English are emerging branches in which English communication skills are essential. Most engineering colleges have started teaching English from the first year to enhance students' communication skills. Considering the increasing demand for English, we must think of new online teaching strategies and methodologies to expand the online mode of teaching English on a larger scale.

The NETF is an online platform to facilitate decision-making on the staff's induction, deployment, and training. It provides leadership to state and central governments, and other stakeholders, with the latest knowledge and research and the opportunity to consult and share best practices. NETF plans to improve teaching-learning and evaluation processes, support teacher preparation and professional development, enhance educational access, and streamline educational planning, management, and administration, including admissions, attendance, and assessments. Developing educational software and making these available to students and teachers at all levels of education and in major Indian languages should be the next step to meet the NETF plans.

Finally, online teaching should be considered an innovative value-add to traditional English teaching; it will increase learning skills and provide more freely accessible information and results. English language curriculum should be adapted for online teaching soon. In addition, necessary infrastructure, Wi-fi facilities, language labs equipped with language-related software, and free access to skill-oriented content and teaching materials are a few administrative changes that would help English teachers navigate online English teaching.

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