

Digitally Powered ELT in Isolation: A Judicious Approach?

Nitin Bhatnagar

*Professor, Department of English,
GLA University, Mathura, India
Email: bhatnagar1203@gmail.com*

Abstract

This is an era when the globe has shrunk and the people are trying to shrink it further. Web Communication Technology has a unique role to play to this effect and this is equally visible in education as well. Technology Enhanced Education is thriving in the market with surprisingly new endeavors. Unfortunately, it is more focused on the areas of science and engineering rather than on Arts and Humanities. Its approachability to the teaching of English Language, the lingua franca for global interaction and research, is still limited. From the Indian point of view, the required technical tools are not available to a large chunk of populace, and some are not even aware of its existence. However, the current scenario of the COVID 19 lockdown has opened up unlimited possibilities of technology in front of teachers and students of English Language and it has prompted many to think of this revolutionary use in isolation. In the wake of the recent lockdown and the resulting voluminous use of web teaching of English Language, the objective of the present paper is to explore the revolutionary openings of digitalized ELT, how it can be brought to its optimal use, and what its limitations are. The focus is also on the question: will it be right to have a complete switch to technology?

Key Words: *Web Communication Technology, ELT, Indian populace, COVID 19.*

1. Introduction

“COVID 19 has widely impacted the education sector in India. While the institutions are trying to maintain stability in the academic activities by introducing online learning, the looming challenges are from concerning,” The Times of India recently reported (Puniti Pandey “will corona virus pandemic ...”). The education segment of India was among the first to respond to the corona pandemic and its tool to meet out the challenge was technology. This is an era when the globe has shrunk and communication technology has shrunk it further. It will not be an exaggeration to say that technology is growing with such an incredible speed that one may find it difficult to keep pace with its escalation. The youth of the 21st century, rightly referred to as “digital natives” by Dudeney and Hockly (Quoted in Castañeda, Jairo Enrique & Ferney Cruz Arcila 78) has shown a surprising acceptability and an amazing skill to handle the fast growing technical options. The modern educators are aware of the fact and are, consequently, working in this direction. Digitalization is omnipresent and the education sector is no exception.

Education has been taking the help of technology since the days of radio broadcast, gramophone records, tape recorders, films and slide projectors as well as video tapes. The University Grants Commission, with a purpose to enhance quality in higher education in India, has been using electronic media quite proactively for its Distance Learning Education initiatives. The new multi-media devices are being incorporated in the education system. One can now read a complete book on a tablet and also experience page flipping through fingers. Mobile phones, powered by Android and IOS operating systems, can have an unlimited scope for its usage by teachers and students. Portals like ‘You Tube’ are already working in this direction. Social networking chat engines like ‘Telegram,’ ‘WeChat,’ ‘WhatsApp’ and many others are proving very effective in teacher-learner and peer learning communication for disseminating lessons, assignments, quizzes and responding to queries through text, audio and video modes. The new technique of ‘Cloud Computing’ has provided teachers with an opportunity to load video lessons for learners on websites.

2. Education Technology and Humanities

As per a survey, “the Global education technology market is expected to grow from USD 43.27 Billion in 2015 to USD 93.76 Billion to 2020” (“Education Technology...”). The projected growth is more than 100 percent. It has been noticed that the major focus of educational hi-tech is on the areas related to science and technology. Humanities, often, do not figure as a target for the technical tools available, may be because of a lack of its viable demand and marketability. As such, especially in India, the shape of Humanities education is not encouraging and its neglect on the part of tool developers is not going to support the ground further. But looking at the current scenario, where one finds among the fresh school pass outs a renewed trend of opting humanities as one of the majors due to numerous job opportunities, educational technology companies should come forward with updated means of their instructions.

Although, humanities encompass a range of fields, the focused area of the present paper is restricted to the use of technology in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). English Language, by far, is the lingua franca for global interaction and research. In spite of this well accepted fact, its teaching and learning does not get the required focus. It is just not a subject that needs memorization of a vast range of grammatical rules. In order to speak and write it in the globally accepted pattern, a learner has to go through the structured patterns of listening, speaking, reading and writing – outlines which have been a result of continuous research by experts. In addition to the customary methods of ELT, approachability to this language cannot be achieved without an enhancement in its accessibility to technology. Although the use of technology in this field has risen from the crudeness of the gramophone record to the uses of internet and pocket gadgets, technical tools like Computer Assisted Language Learning are not available to a large chunk of Indian rural populace. A report submitted by the British Council, India and Central Square Foundation revealed, “...there are a lot of enthusiastic teachers and organizations using technology to enhance learning, and aim to inspire further action from others working in similar contexts” (quoted in Zahoor Ahmad Lone 13954). However, due to a lack of technical infrastructure, inadequate internet connectivity and training, the desired results are not being received. The Central Square Foundation, in its advisory at the end of the report, writes, “There is limited access to technology in low-income schools with negligible internet penetration, both in rural and urban areas” (Gary Motteram 55). The Government of India, along with some NGOs, has already begun to take initiatives of digital transformation of education in rural India through programmes like “‘E-Kranti’, ‘eVidyaloka’, ‘Teach for India’ and ‘MOOCs’” (Rahul Jain).

3. Education Technology and ELT

David Thyberg asserted, “Learning English with books, tapes and videos is a mostly passive process, with limited involvement on the part of the student. Lessons can quickly become boring and discouraging. Make use of interactive multimedia software to solve this problem” (“Strategy ...”). Teachers of English language involved in the use of multimedia will surely support Thyberg’s view. Language teachers have been the enthusiastic users of technology for a very long time. The onset of multimedia computer in 1990, with high audiovisual quality along with enabled text, worked wonders in the development of four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Gaining more and more popularity amongst the non-native learners of ESL and EFL, digitalized learning has offered students those opportunities that no one had imagined before. Consequently, it has also resulted in marked changes in the curriculum as well as in the teaching techniques. The best part is that the digital tools are learner-centric, rather than teacher centric. While the multimedia tool offers many opportunities for English language learning, these have often not been fully utilized.

4. Computer Assisted Language Learning (Call)

Computer-assisted language learning has been defined by Michael Levy as “the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning” (1). CALL enables the teacher and the taught make use of a variety of applications from the “traditional” drill-and-practice programs of 1960s and 1970s to more recent materializations in the form of applications of multimedia computers and interactive digital whiteboards. Taking this fact into consideration, it would not be an exaggeration to modify the traditional CALL to Multimedia Assisted Language Learning (MALL). However, with the advent of multimedia technology systems in 1990s, CALL saw an

ultimate change. As Thyberg has pointed out, “Teachers have moved away from a cognitive view of communicative language teaching to a socio-cognitive view that emphasizes real language use in a meaningful, authentic context”. (“Strategy ...”). To this end, the multimedia-networked computer, with its highly interactive quality, provides an integrative approach to skills of language learning. The approach of the study material is student-centric and it is individualistic as well as interactive, at the same time. “The technology has a crucial role in developing learners’ creativity and provides them with interesting, enjoyable, and exciting alternatives to study the language” (Ahmadi, 122).

Recently, with the advancements in computer technology, numerous novel and interactive courseware have been introduced facilitating teachers to be programmers along with sophisticated computer networks offering learners the new ways of including vocabulary, grammar along with interactive sessions on live situations. Multimedia assisted learning environment provides an enjoyable atmosphere for the students to learn language through entertaining interactive tasks and projects. Moreover, the writing assistants help the pupils in writing compositions in English language by providing them guidelines of grammar, style and verb usage. Compact Disk Technology has proved quite instrumental in teaching of ESL and EFL. This includes information retrieval, interactive audio, video and other multimedia programmes. Students and teachers can use the information quickly and efficiently in and out of the classroom. They can go for self-learning or Integrated Group Learning or a combination of the two.

4.1 Self-Learning

The basic hardware requirement for this type of learning is a multi-media computer, a good quality web camera, a head-phone and the study material in the form of software of an interactive language learning programme or the similar type of programmes on compact discs. The selection of a courseware should be done carefully according to the competency level of the learner. It should be interactive, activity based and should particularly cover the development of all the required skills. At the same time, it should be a reputed or a tested product. The equipment should be ideally set in a sound proof and echoless location. Good interactive programmes should be used to provide the facility of audio and video feed-back which can be used for self-assessment as feed-back of one’s own performance – an essential part of self-learning. It indicates how fast or slow one has to proceed, which items need more practice and so on. Self-learning through the use of technology has its own advantages as it

- enables the learners to choose a convenient time and space for use;
- provides privacy of learning, hence, it is ideal for removing initial hesitation of beginners;
- offers self-assessment (oral and non-verbal) through audio and video recordings;
- instills motivation due to stimulating features of courseware.

4.2 Integrated Group Learning Using a Multi-Media Language Lab

Introduced in 1960s and 70s, Language Labs have gained acceptance as they provide English language teachers with a novel tool for training the learners. However, with the introduction of multimedia, language labs have revived their popularity as now they are able to utilize the main promise of multimedia CALL that is the integration of individualized learning with group learning. Jayachandran’s comment is worth quoting, “Computers are useful in group activities as well as in imparting individualized instruction, which is rarely possible in a traditional classroom” (4).

There may be different versions of language labs that cater to the various requirements of the learners, the one that is currently gaining acceptance is a fully computerized, software based and interactive laboratory used for gaining competency in a targeted language area. A good language lab has features like text messaging, audio broadcast, video transfer, recording and speech recognition, and group formation. For learners who would like to develop their English skills in privacy have options of learner-centric virtual language labs. They are also available as mobile apps that nearly bring the lab to students’ pockets.

5. Sixth Sense Technology

With the growing pace of technology, a lot of research is being put into the amalgamation of technical know-how with education. Sixth Sense Technology, a forthcoming field of Artificial Intelligence (AI), offers innovative options for educationists. One such attempt is in the field of 'Sixth Sense Technology,' which is a sign based system developed by Steve Mann in 1994 and later advanced by Pranav Mistry in 2009. Sixth Sense bridges the divide between imperceptible digital information and the perceptible world as well as assists us in responding to this material through hand gestures. Even the shrinking of a computer device to a pocket source limits us to the digital world. Manan Shah, et al, have visualized that Sixth Sense can metamorphose a conventional class set-up where students need not "restrict themselves to traditional norms of learning. Sixth Sense can give learning a whole new meaning with a virtual classroom" (734). In addition, there are again immense possibilities in the area of machine learning. "The synergism of AI and the Sixth Sense Technology can create something like the real intuition of gesture and machine human reaction" (Suruchi Kangutkar & Anushree Goud 1680). The 'Alexa' device of Amazon is a recent example. The patterns of voice recognition can be a boon for ESL oral skills learners who want to work from a private or a remote space or are unable to do group learning in a COVID 19 like situation. Moreover, the technology is highly cost and space effective. Although, the Sixth Sense is still in research mode and developing stage, educators of English Language can exercise their imagination and explore it for more effective and futuristic applications.

6. The Virtual Classroom

The COVID 19 virus has caused a global human disaster which does not seem to end even today in many countries. Nevertheless, the virus has imparted to the human race several valuable lessons and opportunities even during the lockdown era. One of them is the growth of virtual classrooms to carry on with students' education process. They are virtual spaces "in which students can take classes synchronically through the use of certain software that allows them to interact as they do in a classroom built with bricks, as well as asynchronously" (Castañeda & Ferney 78). In this environment, the participants can connect with one another, view and discuss lecture contents presented via web connectivity even globally. A virtual classroom is the growing need and has become a preferred learning solution in the present circumstances. Many organizations have provided portals for online virtual interactions that are being vastly used in various fields. 'Virtual Classroom,' 'Virtual Blackboard,' 'Google Classroom,' 'ZOOM,' 'GoToMeeting' and 'Webex Virtual Classroom' are a few to name. These platforms are being used not only for teaching but also for organizing conferences, Webinars, placement activities, training sessions, distant learning programmes and many other feats. They offer countless opportunities for adaptive learning to the learners and the facilitators. GLA University at Mathura, India, on account of discontinuing regular face to face classes during COVID 19 closedown, conducted online classes for its more than 12,000 students who attended them from various places in India. This massive virtual programme was steered through the Zoom Platform by delivering almost 10,000 lectures to remotely placed students in April and May 2020. The author of the present paper personally delivered interactive English Language lessons in a virtual classroom for more than 72 hours. The university faculty could easily reach a large number of remote audiences within seconds without time and space constraints. In short, it provided a flexible, affordable and non-restricting learning environment.

Although the classes were successfully conducted, one cannot undermine the challenges. These classrooms were devoid of the involved natural face to face verbal interactions, the eye contact and the resulting response which is necessary to make any communication cycle efficaciously complete. On the spot peer learning, a significant feature of a physical classroom, was marginal. In addition, there were issues related to internet connectivity and availability of proper hardware with students. As a result the students' response was mixed. The limitations experienced are in line with the findings of an earlier research that says, "...personal contact and interaction, which characterizes face-to-face dialogue and occurs in traditional lectures, is still lacking in most e-learning settings (Ramsey, Evans, & Levy, 2016). This is an important factor because learners attach great value to personal contact, both with the teacher and with their fellow students (Marshall, 2018)" (Annelies Raes et al). Another study conducted with the students of Nigerian universities concluded that virtual

classrooms have positive as well as adverse effects on learning. The positive impacts revealed “that students learn collaboratively, they have opportunity of interacting with other experts and they learn at their own pace” (Anekwe 32), while the flip side of the same study was “the serious demand of VCs (virtual classrooms) on their (student) time, and that online studies did not offer them the opportunity to have their hands on experience ... and lack of face-to-face interactions with other peers and the instructors” (33).

7. Limitations

Besides the challenges of a virtual classroom as mentioned above, the use of technology in educational has been found to have its own limitations:

- A computer system is a link between the programmer and the learner. In this analogy lies the main limitation of multimedia CALL. While the author of a language learning programme is the subject expert whereas the programmer is normally a software professional. This usually results in inappropriate lesson content.
- Non-availability of subject-specific trained programmers.
- A dearth of required will in some institutions to integrate language labs into their regular curriculum.
- A multimedia language lab may not provide opportunity for real life face to face interactions.
- Technology may become an end in itself especially for tech-savvy learners and this may beat the ultimate purpose of education.
- Regular sessions may lead to too much dependence upon technology.
- The software is the instructor that lacks the natural versatility and originality of a teacher. The auxiliary computer sound in place of teacher’s voice and analysis by visual images take the system away from the human touch and empathy.

8. Conclusion

Digitally powered education is growing at a rapid pace and it is currently exhibiting its usefulness very well during COVID 19 lockdowns. The technology and the virtual classrooms have been magnificent so far, but they do have their short-comings as discussed above. However, a study believes, “In traditional classrooms, teachers stand in front of learners and give lecture ... using blackboard or whiteboard. These methods must be changed concerning the development of technology” (Ahmadi 118). As indicated in the limitations of technology, a pure dependence upon technical tools for teaching-learning of ESL or otherwise, would not be advisable neither from the learners’ point of view, nor from the facilitators’ stand point as it will be at the cost of the human touch. No doubt, the use of technology in pedagogy is gradually becoming omnipresent; let us not make it omnipotent, at least for language learning. Some researches in the unified learning system have suggested the use of “hybrid virtual classrooms” (Annelies Raes et al 14) in which some “students can choose to come to the campus or to attend the lecture from a location of their own choice” (14). However, the adoption of this strategy would be selective as it may not be feasible for some universities and institutions. Therefore, educationists have to look further into the areas of blended learning - the confluence of conventional pedagogy and modern technology. In fact, the technical tools are ought to be integrated to strengthen the traditional chalk and talk method of education. These findings favour the safeguarding of educational establishments as junctures where pupils and teachers interact face to face with one another. There should not be any blind pursuit of technology which may keep students bereft from the advantages of the blended learning. Moreover, appropriate changes should be made in ELT course contents in a way that technology is modeled to suit the curriculum and not the otherwise. English language Teachers will remain very much on the scene but their training has to be ensured in the right direction. They will have a big responsibility as their level of participation will change with the changed tools. The best synergy can be achieved if ELT facilitators walk an extra mile to gain software programming skills and themselves develop academically appropriate content and student-friendly programmes. They will no longer be just sources of information, but as Dole comments, they will act “as facilitators so that students can actively interpret and organize the information they are given ...” (Quoted in Lee).

Works Cited

1. Ahmadi, Mohammad Reza. "The Use Technology in English language Learning". *International Journal of Research in English Education*, 3:2, June 2018. DOI: 10.29252/ijree.3.2.115. Pp 115-125.
2. Anekwe, Josephine Uzoamaka. "Impacts of Virtual Classroom Learning on Students' of Nigerian Federal and State Universities". *European Journal of Research and Reflection in Educational Sciences*, Vol 5, No 3, 2019. Pp 21-36.
3. Castañeda, Jairo Enrique & Ferney Cruz Arcila. "Through Teachers' Eyes: The Use of Virtual Classrooms in ELT". *HOW*, December 2012. pp 76-92.
4. Jain, Rahul. "Noteworthy Digital Initiatives that Are Redefining Rural Education in India". *asma*. <https://www.asmaindia.in/blog/noteworthy-digital-initiatives-that-are-redefining-rural-education-in-india/>, 2020.
5. Jayachandran, J. "Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) as a Method to Develop Study Skills in Students of Engineering Technology at the Tertiary Level". *The Indian Review of World Literature in English*, Vol. 3, No. II, 2007. Pp 1-6.
6. Kangutkar, Suruchi Deepak & Anushree Gaud. "Intuition Synergism: A Literature Survey." *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development*. Vol 2, 4, May-June 2018. pp 1679-81.
7. Lee, Kuang-wu. "English Teachers' Barriers to the Use of Computer-Assisted Language Learning." *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol.VI, No. 12, December 2000.
8. Levy, Michael. *Computer Assisted Language Learning: Context and Conceptualization*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
9. Lone, Zahoor Ahmad. "Technology in Education in Rural India". *International Journal of Engineering Science and Computing*, vol. 7, no. 7. July 2017. Pp 13953-55.
10. "Education Technology (Ed Tech) and Smart Classrooms Market worth 93.76 Billion USD by 2020". <https://www.marketsandmarkets.com/PressReleases/educational-technology-ed-tech.asp>, 2020.
11. Motteram, Gary Ed. "Teaching and Technology: Case Studies from India". *British Council & Central Square Foundation*. New Delhi: British Council, 2017.
12. Pandey, Puniti. "Will corona virus pandemic change the face on education sector?"
13. *timesofindia.indiatimes.com*. http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/75007732.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst. 6 April 2020.
14. Raes, Annelies. "Learning and instruction in the hybrid virtual classroom: An investigation of students' engagement and the effect of quizzes". *Computer and Education*, 143(2020) 103682. (Elsevier). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2019.103682>. September 2019. pp 1-16.
15. Shah, Manan, et al. "Empowering the Education Sector with Sixth Sense". *International Journal of Science and Research*. Vol. 5. 10, October 2016. Pp 733-36.
16. Thyberg, David. "Strategy Using Interactive Multimedia in Learning English". *eHow*. Demand Media, 2010.