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Impact of Digital Communication in Language Learning Skills

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Abstract:

The objective of this research paper is to find how the recent trends of digital learning have affected the learners and led to change their modes of learning and how the socio-economic and cultural vulnerabilities have affected the mass learners. Both during and after the COVID-19 phases, digital learning has extended its multifaceted learning opportunities to one and all. However the effects in the two phases have marked remarkable changes in its way of application, reception and inculcation. The online learning system transcended the limitation of the teacher's responsibility to organize the classroom as a setting for communication and communicative activities, especially more so during the COVID phase when people were bound to stay in closed quarters and maintain different sorts of imposed restrictions. A language teacher usually assumes a responsibility for determining and responding to the language needs of the learners. But during the COVID phase the learners themselves had to find strategies to mend them as a normal face-to-face classroom environment was unavailable. The economically weaker sections were hampered to a great extent during the pandemic and this also left its imprint in the field of education also. This paper seeks to find how the different sections of learners in varied socio-economic and socio-cultural set up were affected by the digital learning system and the online learning platforms. An attempt has been made to explore the extent to which the online digital learning system has been beneficial to the knowledge seekers of both recent advanced learners and the weaker learners.

Keywords: Digital platforms, Digital learning, Virocane Epoch, Advanced learning trends.

Introduction:

Communication is the life blood of the human race. Deriving from the Latin *communis* and meaning to share the term, 'communication' aptly implies the idea of imparting or interchange of thoughts, opinions or information among people by speech, writing or signs. The mode of communication acts like the nervous system of human society since it is the sum of all things one person does when he/she wants to create understanding in the minds of another person and it involves a systematic and continuous process of telling, listening and understanding.

A.W. Frisby in *Teaching English: Notes and Comments on Teaching English Overseas* has observed, "The language which a person originates...is always expressed for a purpose" (Frisby16). The need for improving one's communication skill is still essential among learners of language because the learners do have pretty good ideas about what they want to let others know, but most of them lack the right idea about how to do it.

Language learning theories and recent trends:

Though a close link can be perceived between theories of language and theories of learning, there is a marked difference in the requirements of the recent learners of language and communications. Behaviourist theories of learners (Pavlov, Skinner) are closely linked with structural linguistics (Bloomfield, Fries Lado) and with the audio-lingual method. Cognitive theories (Bruner, Miller) are the basis of transformational-generative grammar (as developed principally by Chomsky). The setting up of associations in order to categories and store new experiences form the basic process of memorization. The behaviourists would suggest that those associations can only be learnt after a period in which they are repeatedly paired and rehearsed with reinforcement following each trial. T-G linguists lay less emphasis on a repetition and more on a construction of a vivid association engaged with a simple trial which will ensure storage in the memory.

The need for communication has been relentless, leading to the emergence of the Communicative Language Teaching. Having defined and redefined the construct of communicative competence; having explored the vast array of functions of language that learners are supposed to be able to accomplish; and having probed the nature of styles and nonverbal communication, teachers and researchers are now better equipped to teach communication skills through actual communication, not merely theorizing about it. At this

juncture, one should say that Communicative Language Teaching is not a method; it is an approach, which transcends the boundaries of concrete methods and framed techniques. It is a theoretical position about the nature of language and language learning and teaching. Focus on all of the components of communicative competence, not only grammatical but also linguistic competence is essential. They may include engaging learners in the pragmatic, use functional language for meaningful purpose, view fluency and accuracy as complementary principles, underpinning communicative techniques or use the language in unrehearsed contexts.

In the Functional Communicative Approach, the teacher is a facilitator of learning. The teacher facilitates the communication process. He is also a co-communicator. He assumes a responsibility for determining and responding to the language needs of the learners. In the sense, the teacher is a “Need’s analyst”. He is expected to plan group and individualized instructions. The teacher here is a councillor. He is expected to exemplify an effective communicator through the use of paraphrase, confirmation and feedback. It is the teacher’s responsibility to organize the classroom as a setting for communication and communicative activities. During an activity, the teacher monitors, encourages and suppresses the inclination to supply gaps in lexis, grammar and strategy. The teacher or moderator notes such gaps for later commentary and communicative practice. At the conclusion of group activities, the teacher points out alternatives and assists groups in self-corrective discussion.

Communication Skills as the Need of the Hour:

Learning English as a communicative means has become an imperative in the recent days. The learners of English language who go in for higher education is likely to realize that although learning literature always enriches one emotionally and intellectually, it is the language and the teaching of the language which is of greater practical relevance. Therefore, many pragmatic students are increasingly opting for a vocational course in the language. Even, those who are not, are gradually coming to the conclusion that learning about the language would serve as complementary to the learning of literature. This is especially so, for aspiring teachers of English since the teaching of Milton and Shakespeare in schools and colleges are bound to be unrewarding in terms of students’ understanding of those cultures, and also ultimately fruitless. The general mass of students would never care to remember Milton, but would be extremely grateful if they could use the language with ease and fluency.

This in itself would be motivation enough for the advanced learners to learn the means of teaching communicative English.

Communication Skills and Role of Online Learning Platforms:

The four types of communication skills namely- reading skill, listening skill, speaking skill and writing skill can be developed with the aid of online learning platforms where the deficiency of availability of a language laboratory is reduced to a greater extent with the providing of the audio-visual mode of digital learning. Teaching language skills outside the setup of the first hand utilization of a language laboratory makes the traditional classroom teaching tedious. In this respect the use of ICT in online learning platforms for the teaching of developing language proficiency becomes beneficial to a greater extent. A communicative competence is only achieved with a good mastering of those four types of skills. The use of technology-based online courses for learning has been playing a major role to cope up with the difficulties of language learning with the objective of developing communication skills since 2008. The use of technology based language learning for the development of communication skills has increased significantly across the globe. The fact that more than 700 universities with an approximation of 7000 courses are being run successfully also evinces its immense popularity. ACTFL asserts that, “The use of technology is not a goal in and of itself; rather technology is one tool that supports language learners as they use the target language in culturally appropriate ways to accomplish authentic tasks.” (ACTFL | The Role of Technology in Language Learning)

The skills in the use of English language are the passport to global success since this is an international language and the online learning platforms have been giving greater impetus to the learners of the language for bringing about greater proficiency for their benefit in the global arena. UNESCO supported the positive sides of digital learning stating, “Digital innovation has demonstrated powers to complement, enrich and transform education, and has the potential to speed up progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) for education and transform modes of provision of universal access to learning.” (UNESCO)

Role of Different Online Learning Platforms in Fostering Sustainable Development:

NPTEL (National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning), a project initiated in 2003 and funded by MHRD besides being specialized in engineering courses, has been conducting online courses in humanities also in a rampant manner where the open-source

technology offers course content mainly in video lectures prepared in a conventional classroom environment. It also provides the additional facility of the scope of sharing the content of slides with others. NPTEL, the largest single repository of technical courses in the world has been providing the course learners with the mode of streaming video format along with the text meta -data for videos, text transcription and subtitling. It provides additional facility of conversion of the course content to many of the Indian languages. The Governor's Office of Student Achievement has unequivocally admitted that, "Learning is no longer restricted within the walls of a classroom. The Internet and a proliferation of Internet access devices have given students the ability to learn anywhere and everywhere." ("What Is Digital Learning?")

SWAYAM (Study Webs of Active Learning for Young Aspiring Minds), a MOOC platform launched by Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), government of India has become commonly used resource reservoir among the E-learners of different communication skills since the option for getting credit for the MOOC courses is available here. SWAYAM courses can attract the interest of a wide-range of participants since courses are conducted for school, undergraduate and postgraduate level learners and the certificate and diploma courses are also conducted by SWAYAM platform. The SWAYAM platform is such an online platform that it strives to provide the best course structure and functional utilities to the learners. The courses are delivered by the best institutes on the basis of the type of their expertise. To cite a few examples- NCERT and NIOS are held with the responsibility of supporting school education, IGNOU for out of school learners of education, CEC for under-graduate education, UGC for post-graduation education, NPTEL for engineering courses and IIMB for management studies. ("NPTEL IITm") Besides, all the learners-centered course contents like videos and text-materials are reserved for further use in a platform named e- Acharya.

Strengths:

A wide range of merits and strengths of the online generated e-content used for language learning can be cited in a close study. The open platform and the open access to the resources available here ensure a huge participation of the learners. The online mode of operation widens and enriches the scope for distance learning. Dissemination and transmission of e-content through the digital mode has been benefitting the curious learners with the scope of flexibility of time for its conduction at one's own will as because those who

are engaged in some active occupation or professional set up can utilize it as per their own disposal of time for pursuing of the course. The online mode of learning extends the scope of formal education further for all individuals irrespective of their ages and former certificates of learning. This serves well as a forum for real knowledge seekers and not only for students. It promotes a life-long learning environment for every individual. It becomes easier for the learners to understand the e-content since the stream-lining of the course material is carried out with greater care and cognitive recognition. E-learning enables online collaboration across the globe and enables working together on common goals without having to meet one another physically i.e. it promotes global learning and connects learners irrespective of geographical boundary considerations. The learners can transcend the time and place barriers in a very effective manner since the course contents in SWAYAM can be accessed even in mobile devices and tabs.

Weaknesses:

However, it goes without saying that the demerits also trail behind the merits. The user generated course content can create a diffused and confused learning environment for the new learners. Above all other parameters of digital literacy are sought for in order to pursue the online materials. The weak learners may require background knowledge of the course before starting the course for gaining maximum utility. Sometimes the time required for the pursuance of the course does not quite conform to the pace provided by the learners. The learners can fall short of the interest for continuing the course because external motivation is not received from external agencies for carrying out the course. Besides facing the chances of jargon and register- language problems, the learners may face translational barriers since the electronic translation mode does not trans-create but only brings up a mechanical translation.

Possible upgradation of resources:

Proper means for tests of various kinds should be introduced and upgraded as a prerequisite requirement for entering into the online language learning courses because until and unless the learners undergo through the proper testing processes they will never get to know their own limitations and where do they lack and where should they focus on for further improvements.

Although the digital mode of language learning saves the learners from the tedium of learning the language by following the Grammar-Translation Method, Audio-lingual Approach or Behavioural Approach and induces the learners more towards the Communicative approach of language learning, the digital mode should provide the flexibility to choose the best possible combinations of all the available methods and approaches of language learning to the learners depending upon the different levels or current status of the learners at any given point of time. The earned credits and certificates from the learning of the course should find adequate recognition in the mainstream of educational systems and professional organizations.

Conclusion:

La Forge urges “language is people; language is person in contact; language is person in response” (9). In the field of communicative English teaching, therefore, one must make a new beginning. Instead of overdoing with the theories on language teaching and learning, one should start prioritizing the needs of our post-colonial learners and accordingly design curriculum, frame syllabus, evolve teaching materials and organize proper testing procedures.

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