

English Language Teaching During the Times of COVID-19- Challenges and Opportunities: A Brief Study of GFP Students in Muscat College

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a study on the effects of COVID-19 and the changes that crept into English Language Teaching of EFL learners of GFP program in Muscat College, Oman. The study illustrates that Language Teaching as we know underwent a dramatic change due to the unforeseen and unpredictable situation that presented in the form of COVID-19 and the changes that had to be made to curriculum, pedagogy, evaluation of students' performance while at the same time maintaining the quality of teaching and sustained enthusiasm of the learners. The analysis of students' summative evaluation results clearly show that a majority of students showed remarkable affinity to learning through the methods employed by teachers using online applications such as Microsoft Teams, Moodle, etc. However, the task at hand for both the teachers and students was not easy. Many students did not have a good WiFi connection, some had difficulty in accessing the network, while some did not have necessary equipment at home, so they were forced to adapt to a varied ways of learning and so on. Though it seems like problems galore, nevertheless almost all the students were able to take their final evaluation online, which proves that if implemented rightly and with little flexibility on the part of both the learner and the instructor, online learning of English Language during the initial part of lockdown proved to be a success in Muscat College.

Keywords: COVID-19, ELT, e-Learning, Pedagogy, Technological Tools

Introduction

Technology becomes a part of English Language Teaching-Learning during the 1900s. Since then, its use in ELT classrooms has undergone tremendous changes. Initially what started with the use of cassette-recorders and television has been replaced with a more sophisticated variety of audio-visual aids being used in ELT classes such as, projectors, laptops, interactive smart boards, smart phones, etc. Towards the end of 20th century and the beginning of 21st century, use of technological tools became synonymous with English Language Teaching. Any English Language teacher would identify various tools she would have to use in her teaching depending on the level of the students, learning outcomes and course outline. Technology and its varied tools were used to supplement teaching and provide a rich and enhanced learning experience to the language learner.

The year 2020 brought revolutionary changes in teaching learning as a consequence of the spread of corona virus in the form of COVID-19 which compelled the academicians, educators, teachers, and students to adapt themselves to a very new and highly innovative method of teaching learning in the form of e-learning or online learning. The educational world started looking at teaching itself in a different perspective. And especially with English Language Teaching, the changes and adaptations were profound for both the teachers and the students. Gone were the coziness and comfort of every day's face-to-face interaction, in-class clarification of doubts, formal and informal meetings and so on. All this was replaced by a more formal way of teaching-learning, dealing with student's queries and providing clarifications. Although online teaching brought its own benefits yet it was not without challenges which both the teachers and learners were exposed to.

Benefits and Opportunities by e-Learning

One of the most important aspects of online learning during the lockdown was that the teachers and students alike had to rely mostly on the independent learning by students. As teachers, we had to work on certain assumptions that students will attend an online session pre-prepared with the lesson or the language item to be taught. And after the lesson they will depend on themselves to practice and perfect that particular lesson or the language item. Consequently, it enhanced independent learning among those students who already were relying on themselves and also forced other to try to develop a habit themselves dependently to find solutions to their queries. Not only online learning promoted independence among the learners to take a certain measure of learning authority in their hands, but also it developed in them study skills such as the skill of note-taking based on reading and listening, time management skill, reading a variety of material provided, and also test preparation. The students became more self-motivated to do learn and do their work but also developed a measure of self-discipline towards their studies. It is needless to mention that study skills are a part and parcel of successful language acquisition and are traits that counted as the required ones for any job that the students opt in future. Plus, they look great on a résumé.

In addition, online learning developed a sense of conscientiousness among a selected group of students who maintained a sense of integrity related to their work and submission deadlines. It provided them with a platform to showcase their ability to depend on themselves and follow rules of teaching-learning with a high sense of integrity. This was clearly visible in the deadlines of online submission of assignments which was particularly adhered to by these students. Furthermore, this type of learning furnished a different level of help to slow learners by providing them enough time to cope with the pace of the lesson.

As the class conversations were recorded while the teacher was delivering the lesson, it gave slow learners an opportunity to go back to the recording and clarify any doubt they had during the lesson to better comprehend the lesson or language item taught. In this way, online learning greatly contributed to these students ability to cope with the subject matter taught and gave them a sense of achievement which would not have been possible in a regular face to face classroom due to various constraints such as, students being shy to ask any questions or restrictions due to time shortage. Some students even had their parents sitting with them during the lessons and constantly helping and encouraging them to understand the concepts being taught and be vocal and proactive in participating in class discussions and activities.

One more positive of online learning is that it gives a platform to greater flexibility in their study schedule in relation to other possible chores they had planned. Students could plan their course work around their schedule easily because the lessons did not require them to travel, which meant that students saved a lot of time spent on commuting and were able complete other planned or unplanned tasks. Online learning also results in cost reduction as a solid amount of budget is spent on transportation whether it is public or private. Flexibility also includes the learning environment that a student chooses in the comfort of his home, be it their bedroom, or the living room, their study area. It can also be done on a treadmill while walking and listening to the teacher's podcast.

Drawbacks and Challenges

E-learning though has been fairly popular for the past few decades yet its widespread use and an increased dependency on it was largely visible since the beginning of 2020 due to the unprecedented situation faced by the world in the form of COVID-19. From being a supplemental tool used occasionally and as per the demands of the learning outcomes, e-learning overnight became an essential entity of language teaching learning which not only brought forth its numerous benefits but also exposed the challenges faced by teachers and students alike while using it. One of the foremost challenges faced is adaptability to the computer based instruction in a virtual classroom. It is not easy for some students to make a switch from traditional face to face instruction to online learning and it may result in students being resistant to adapt to this new learning experience. However, as online learning is here to stay, it is imperative that teachers create a positive impression about virtual learning on students mind. Such students need to be made comfortable to the fact that online learning is far more interesting and provides a different learning experience altogether. Training should be provided before actually delivery of the lessons. Students should also be given ample time to have discussions with their peers, so that they can approach online learning with more affinity and involve themselves in virtual learning with an open mind.

Another challenge posed by online learning is computer literacy with regard to some students. It has been established that most of the students of present age are techno savvy, yet for some students, use of computers to attend a virtual class or learning a new concept can be a real nightmare. This lack of basic computer skills makes it very difficult for these students not only to manage their but also to show minimum interest in teaching going on. In order for this problem to be solved, it is essential that before teaching is taken on a virtual level, these students must be given courses and training to develop their basic computer skills, like Microsoft Word (creating folders and saving files), making Power Point presentations, how to access and upload files if a software like Moodle is being used, etc. Once students are armed with these skills, they will find it easier to manage themselves to go online and take part in learning going on. The more they learn virtually, they will adapt themselves more and more to new and exciting ways of learning that virtual language teaching creates.

One more area where the students find difficulty is the problem of technical issues. This problem is a big monkey on the back of online teaching learning process. A large number of students face the problem of poor network connection. This problem gets compounded because most of the students live in towns away from the cities where the bandwidth is low. And as such, it is difficult for these students to be online for classes. In order to overcome this problem, many students use their mobile phones to gain access to their online classes, which is financially not viable at all. There's no easy answer to this issue except that students may be asked to move to places where they can find good network at least for the purposes for their classes.

Additionally, some more difficulties were detected while doing online teaching. One of it is that motivation was an issue for some students. For a variety of reasons ranging from personal to financial to professional, some students did not show enough self-motivation, which is the basic ingredient for the successful learning to take place- be it traditional classroom or online. Lack of self-motivation resulted in students not being able to learn through this advance technological medium of instruction. They could not develop positive attitude to motivate themselves to catch up with teaching-learning taking place online. Consequently, they fell behind in all areas of learning and could not reap the positive outcomes that online learning has to offer. Another challenge was that the students were not able to manage their time. Online learning requires a lot of post session activities if one wants to comprehend the concepts better. It was difficult to sustain students' interest for the duration of the online session. Based on this, it was least expected that students will use time post online session.

Suggestions to Overcome the Challenges for Effective Teaching-Learning

Even though e-learning has become a part and parcel of 21st century with its plethora of benefits to both the teacher and the student, yet the language faculties everywhere need to have viable solutions to overcome the challenges posed by it. A change in attitude and technological literacy should be encouraged among the students in order for e-learning to work effectively. This will help students gain confidence to accept the switch from traditional face-to-face interaction to online learning in a smooth manner. An extra hour or half an hour can be assigned as an office hour every week exclusively to try to clarify any doubts and queries that students have. This should not be treated as a formal interaction. Teachers can provide supplementary resources and activities to make students aware of the expectations of weekly class. Lecture slides with audio recording can be made available to the students, so that they can access and use them as per their convenient time. If online resources are used, it should be made certain that these materials are in line with the learning outcomes and match the abilities of the students. Also students must be made to feel that they belong to a group or a community. Therefore, it is imperative that even if teaching is online, group or pair activities can be assigned, so that students feel comfortable working in sets. Research has established that students learn better when they work with their peers. Peer tutoring can be adopted as means of help that can be provided to slow performers. While these activities and materials can be used as supplements, the main online class should focus on the key concepts of language learning and the development of language skills along with strategies involved in developing these skills.

Conclusion

Though online learning has come into sharp focus due to COVID-19, yet it was in vogue as a supplementary part of traditional learning for years. With mask wearing and social distancing measures still in force in many countries, online learning or some form of blended learning offers the only viable answer. With a number of technological apps like, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, Moodle, and so on, a new form of blended teaching-learning will evolve which will combine the features of online learning with face to face interaction. This type of teaching will offer numerous opportunities to the students to play a major part in the process of learning and also gives them ample time to reflect on the learning. Be it fully online leaning or a blended one, both the students and the teachers acquire greater importance and significance. They are the ones who start the process right from planning the curriculum, designing activities based on the curriculum and learning outcomes to the delivery of lesson. This is the theatrical stage for learners and teachers. They need to play their part to truest extent for the successful teaching learning to take place.

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