

A CHANGING EDUCATION IMPERATIVE IN RURAL INDIA DURING COVID-19

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ABSTRACT:

In order to reduce the spread of COVID-19, most countries across the world have decided to temporarily shut down educational institutions. This situation challenged the education system across the world and forced educators to shift to an online mode of teaching overnight. Many academic institutions that were earlier reluctant to change their traditional pedagogical approach had no option but to shift entirely to online teaching-learning. It is obvious that COVID-19 will not affect students equally, it will influence both positively and negatively the acquisition of English Language in rural India. This article attempts to gain a better understanding of how the COVID-19 crisis may affect underprivileged rural students' learning, to analyze the usage of technology like WhatsApp, YouTube, learning Apps, Education TV channel with limited resources in rural areas during COVID-19 and in future.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language defines us as human. To be human is to use language, and to talk is to be a person. Language is the medium of communication. English as a powerful vehicle of communication serves as a link language in a multicultural and multilingual society like India and also as a global linguistic mediator. Teaching students English has consistently emerged as one of the top expectations of parents from school. English has become the most widespread language in the world, used by more peoples for more purposes than any other language on Earth.

In most of the rural parts of India, learning-teaching process is done in the vernacular language. The students of rural and semi-urban areas in India face a lot of problems as English is not their mother tongue. As compared to the learners from urban areas, learners from rural areas face more difficulties during the process of language acquisition. In urban areas parents are mostly educated. So, the domestic environment helps the students from urban areas acquire the language quickly. Students do not get chance to speak or read in English in the rural parts of the country. In villages and small towns students mainly hail from rural areas.

A teacher's role is immense in rural areas as the student has only a teacher to imitate and learn from. Teachers' responsibility lies not only with the average and above average students but also with below average and slow learners. A good teacher has to handle classes for all the students in a classroom. Individual attention will solve many problems, which arise while taking class.

In a scenario where neither adequate resources nor tools are available, English teachers themselves have to devise innovative ways to make their students' climb the staircase easily.

This can be done with a resolve, as Patel says: “I have to create opportunities for the students to use English in meaningful, realistic and relevant situations”. (Patel, 2008, p.07)

COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON EDUCATION SYSTEM

Covid-19 pandemic, often referred to as the Coronavirus Disease, is also known as the Novel Coronavirus 2019 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). WHO reported COVID-19 as a dangerous and threatening disease on January 30, 2020. On March 1, 2020, it was declared as a pandemic (Cucinotta&Vanelli, 2020).

As the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated the closure of schools and universities across the globe, teaching has moved online (Kwatra, 2020). In India as effectively, the federal government as a facet of the nationwide lockdown has closed each academic institution, as a consequence of which, learners going from school-going kids to postgraduate college students, are affected and has forced more than 300 Million Indian students to stay at home.

As a result, education has changed dramatically, with the distinctive rise of e-learning, whereby teaching is undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. While countries are at different points in their COVID-19 infection rates, worldwide there are currently more than 1.2 billion children in 186 countries affected by school closures due to the pandemic.

SHIFT TO ONLINE-DISTANT LEARNING

Especially, to prevent the interruption of education during the COVID-19 pandemic, most of primary and secondary educational institutions around the world provided online courses (e.g., distance education, video education, open education; Tanhan, 2020).

COVID-19 did not only affect college students but also primary, middle and high school students, parents, teachers, academics, and especially people with special needs in different ways. Due to the transition to distance education, teachers and academicians could not determine the method they need to adopt, and limited one-on-one interaction with the students complicated education during pandemic (Tanhan, 2020). This process has been more difficult for people with socioeconomic disprivileged (Tanhan, 2020; Tanhan et al., 2020) because some researchers found that even during normal times people with disprivilege are not served well (Emir Öksüz& Brubaker, 2020; Tanhan& Francisco, 2019). On the one hand, online education (distance education, open education) is convenient for the students and academics (Allen et al., 2002; Tanhan, 2020), while leading to certain difficulties and disadvantages at the same time (Tanhan, 2020)

ONLINE LEARNING CHALLENGES

The spread of COVID-19 has forced millions of students and teachers to move their communication online. The schools are closed until further notice and we have to adapt to a new lifestyle. Teachers and administrators are working hard during lockdown trying to keep students on track, shifting to online learning within the shortest time. Although technology evolution now allows many things we haven't believed possible, the shift to e-learning doesn't go as smoothly as we want it to be. Facing the pitfalls of digital learning may be discouraging and frustrating both for teachers and students. To list a few:

A. Organization of work processes & time management - The teachers are supposed to move their classes online right away having no additional training and extra budget to use numerous digital tools to deliver e-learning. Unfortunately, many schools weren't prepared

for moving classes online. In this situation, the burden is put on teachers to adapt themselves and their students to a new way of learning.

B. Gadgets shortage - Not every student & teacher has a personal gadget to use for online learning. Many of them are supposed to share the laptops and computers with their parents, sisters/ brothers to stay on track. Most of rural underprivileged have no access to gadgets at all.

C. Connectivity - Millions of people around the world are experiencing technical difficulties because of the high usage rate of online learning systems, video streaming software, & other digital tools. Internet connection is either unstable or the current data plan is not enough to cover the progressive e-learning needs.

D. Computer literacy - It's hard for teachers, students, and parents to start using a learning management system or any other digital tool out of nowhere without additional training. They could be overwhelmed by the amount of data they deal with trying to go digital, as well as frustrated facing the unknown.

E. Isolation - This rather psychological factor is still highly affecting students' motivation and learning progress. Being in the classroom, students got used to instant eye-to-eye communication with each other allowing reacting together, sharing the experience, joking, & making a non-verbal contact, strengthening the social skills. It's not a surprise most of them feel isolated, scared by the pandemic, parents' job loss, friends' disconnection.

F. Stress - Students who are confined at home with their parents due to COVID-19 may feel more stressed and anxious. Sprang and Silman (2013) show that children who were isolated or quarantined during pandemic diseases are more likely to suffer from acute stress disorder, adjustment disorder, and grief. Such adverse psychological factors may in turn have a detrimental effect on learning (Kuban and Steele 2011).

G. Lack of interaction - During the online lectures, it's hard to keep students engaged without a teacher's physical presence and face-to-face contact

2. DIGITAL LEARNING FOR RURAL UNDERPRIVILEGED CHILDREN

COVID-19 and the closure of schools may not affect students equally. Students from less advantaged backgrounds can experience more significant learning loss during this emergency period than their more advantaged counterparts. This may be due to differences in non-financial parental support, parental financial resources, schools attended and students' digital skills.

Another disadvantage suffered by parents from unprivileged families is that they may have lower non-cognitive or socio-emotional abilities. They may, for instance, not value education enough to encourage their children to study while at home (Anderson and Safar 1967; Hatcher 1998; Nash 2003).

A. Digital divide

In India, 320 million students have been affected by COVID-19 school closures, and though the government quickly recommended shifting to "online teaching," this ignores India's immense digital divide—with embedded gender and class divides. The 2017-18 National Sample Survey reported only 23.8 percent of Indian households had internet access. In rural households (66 percent of the population), only 14.9 percent had access, and in urban households only 42 percent had access. And males are the primary users: 16 percent of women had access to mobile internet, compared to 36 percent of men. Young people's access

is even less: A recent news report stated only 12.5 percent of students had access to smartphones. Furthermore, most teachers are ill-equipped for online teaching.

B. Bridging digital gap

When the country first went into lockdown, teachers connected with their students by every means possible. This was a challenging task for teachers whose students were on the wrong side of the digital divide, though teachers were able to connect with about half of their students' families via mobile phones. Teachers galvanized other teachers and students, alumni, and parents to help track down their remaining students, eventually managing to connect with nearly 70 percent of our student body.

After making contact, teachers then focused on fear management by spreading accurate information about the crisis, dispelling myths, urging caution, and diffusing panic. Then they found out what the students and families needed. Many students' families had lost livelihoods, had no savings, and needed food. Teachers created an e-flyer with government relief measures, helplines, and locations, and personally helped provide rations and cooked food for those families without documents to access relief services.

Once these basic needs were taken care of, teachers then used whatever digital means were available to teach their students. Teachers formed WhatsApp groups for students and parents class-wise. This made parents aware of lessons taught and sharing information. To reach those low-tech students, teachers used voice messages, text messages, and phone calls. For high-tech students (i.e. with smartphones), teachers sent longer videos and used WhatsApp groups for discussions.

For students with no access to phones, peer support groups were formed, with each group comprising of a student with phone and neighbouring students without any digital access. They met in their home environment and kept sharing information and lessons. Teachers prepared printed materials with mind mapping / lesson concepts, worksheets and activities and distributed to these students making sure everyone has access to education and no one is left behind.

To reach girls, most of whom had no access to phones, teachers even called parents to ask how they were doing and to enlist their support for their daughters' education. So far, the majority of parents have responded positively, demonstrating how this crisis might be a great opportunity to develop positive relationships with fathers that improve their daughters' education and well-being.

C. WhatsApp classes

Over the past year, the high infiltration of Smartphones into the market has initiated growing use of WhatsApp as a communication digital platform for families, friends, various groups, and more recently for groups of teachers and their students as well, prior to COVID-19 pandemic. Though Online education has shifted to interactive Google classrooms, Google meet and Zoom App for urban and privileged students, WhatsApp was the only common digital platform known to most of the rural under-privileged students'. Teachers for such children have no other choice than to utilize WhatsApp as their digital media for teaching and learning. Teachers can create a group for their students that constitute a type of "simple social network" for the class. As of today, it seems that WhatsApp has advantages over other technological tools employed by the education system, such as low cost, simplicity,

accessibility, efficiency, and natural language. Until recently there was no technological tool which was used naturally by adults and students alike. Combination of medium like videos, pictures and voice notes along with constant availability of facilitator and learning anytime anywhere, has made WhatsApp a new and convenient tool for teaching learning activity.

Instant messaging for academic purposes using WhatsApp provides students with opportunities to interact and construct and share knowledge (Chan, 2005). Instant messaging is considered an effective tool for learning and teaching through social interactions (Gillingham & Topper, 1999). WhatsApp learning technologies can help students integrate videos, podcasts, messages, texts, images and audio files in the blended mobile learning process.

TECHNOLOGY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

In language teaching and learning, there are a lot of technological options in use: Radio, TV, CD Rom, Computers, C.A.L.L, the Internet, Electronic Dictionary, Email, Blogs and Audio Cassettes, Power Point, Videos, DVDs, and VCDs. The traditional teaching methods are getting unpopular whereas teaching methods featuring multimedia technology such as audio-visual, animation effects makes us accessible to more information naturally. It provides abundant information and crosses time and space. Hence, multimedia technology offers students a realistic sense and works well to cultivate interest and motivation in students to study and participate in class activities. According to David Graddol, “it is the language at the leading edge of scientific and technological development, new thinking in economics and management, new literatures and entertainment genre.” (David Graddol, Pg 2).

Studies (e.g. Volery and Lord 2000) have shown that students' prior knowledge in the usage of technology may affect the success factor in E-Learning environment. The technological competencies can also be referred to as skills in using computers and the Internet. These skills are needed in order for students to be able to use online learning to its maximum capacity and create a platform for their language learning while using E-Learning. Another possible factor is that all the features in E-Learning are in English and for some students this may be a barrier. For example, students who have problem understanding the language tend to avoid using E-Learning. On the contrary, students learn to use new technologies to learn independently and wisely. They will also be exposed to more learning of English language as Internet is loaded with English vocabulary. Internet provides a tremendous wealth of teaching resources. It is easy to find the text information, pictures and audio data on almost any topic of interest. Powerful tools, such as Google, Bing and other search engines, can find a huge amount of information in any subject for us. Usage of e-dictionary is trouble-free rather than the printed version. It is very convenient and most of these information can be obtained free of charge.

KALVI - TV

Graddol: (1997:16) states that, “technology lies at the heart of the globalization process; affecting education work and culture. Authentic materials such as films, radio, and TV have been around for a long time. These materials have successfully replaced traditional teaching. The new era has brought with it new challenges and duties for the modern teacher. Traditional English teaching methods have changed staggeringly due to the introduction of technology. There are now a greater number of options to make teaching more interesting and productive and technology is responsible for this improvement. It plays an essential role in bringing about social and linguistic change.

In a bid to ensure continuous education to all students despite socio-economic backgrounds amid COVID-19 pandemic, Tamil Nadu Government launched televised lessons in July 2020 for Grade 1 to Grade 12 students through KalviTholaikatchi, the state-run education channel. The lessons would be broadcast on the channel for two-and-a-half hours every day, from Monday to Friday. Experts at Tamil Nadu Text Book Corporation (TNTBC) and Higher Secondary school teachers were tasked with creating video lessons for the students. Teachers inform their students about the broadcasting time for their respective classes and ensure that this facility is being utilized properly by checking with the students, assigning homework's related to the content and getting feedback from the parents. This makes education more inclusive, accessible to wider population even without access to phone and students of Tamil Nadu would greatly benefit from it.

SOLUTIONS

It is clear that this pandemic has utterly disrupted an education system that many assert was already losing its relevance. We need a high level of preparedness so that we can quickly adapt to the changes in the environment and can adjust ourselves to different delivery modes, for instance, remote learning or online learning in situations of pandemics such as Covid-19. Institutions and organizations should prepare contingency plans to deal with challenges such as pandemics and natural disasters (Seville et al., 2012).

Reliability and sufficient availability of Information Communication Technology infrastructure, learning tools, digital learning resources in the form of Massive Open Online Courses, e-books, e-notes, and so on are of utmost importance in such severe situations (Huang et al., 2020).

There are a few things to maintain the classroom dynamic and keep things personable in a digital environment.

- **Coordinate virtual group activities** using chats, WhatsApp groups, discussion boards or cloud tools for collaboration.
- **Show your face and let students hear your voice**, using video or audio recordings besides communicating via text.
- **Schedule regular check-ins with students** via email or chat
- Using gamified apps and programs as another way to increase motivation, particularly in the younger years. These are explicitly designed for student engagement in independent environments, so it removes a lot of the hassle.
- Involving parents and getting their cooperation and feedback can be a big asset to maintain student motivation at home.
- Teachers and students have been mostly given a smartphone or laptop to use during the quarantine, and no strict time frames are defined for having the assignments done (in case the families should share the gadgets).
- Education is not only about gaining knowledge, it's also about the interaction between students and teachers. In today's world, teacher responsibility is not only to provide e-learning but support the students, stay connected, and keep the integrity within the classroom as well. Teachers should be open to communication with the students, keeping the lessons simple, flexible time to complete the assignments and be kind

grading assignments. Find time to discuss students' concerns about the current world situation during the lesson.

- There are many ways to engage students during the online lessons: PowerPoint presentations, short videos, quizzes, voice recordings, gamification, bite-size learning, ELT apps, etc.
- Ensuring constant contact: tracking the progress and giving feedback is another step to keeping each student engaged.
- To ensure equal opportunity in distance/online education, different socioeconomic levels of the students should also be taken into account. Blended learning with both online and offline teaching can be improvised to bridge the digital gap.

If the education will not be conducted in a face-to-face physical environment, care should be taken to ensure that the courses are conducted online (live, online) by providing an adequate technological infrastructure, free internet access, and technological knowledge and competence for the students and instructors. Online (live, online) course videos and other documents should be uploaded to the system for students to watch/view later. With the onset of technology, there has been a revolution spanning the past two decades, which has led to a change in dynamics of various industries and interaction amongst people and society. Information technology developments have led to an exploration in better teaching models. Hence, technology is important in its role in English teaching.

CONCLUSION

“Ideally, the purpose of both the tradition and computer assisted cooperative language learning classrooms is to provide a space in which the facilitation of learning, and learning itself, can take place” (Shi, 2008: 76).

As per the World Economic Forum, the Covid-19 pandemic also has changed the way how several people receive and impart education. To find new solutions for such problems, much-needed innovations and changes are the need of the hour. Teachers have become habitual to traditional methods of teaching in the form of face-to-face lectures, and therefore, they hesitate in accepting any change. But amidst this crisis, there is no other alternative left other than adapting to the dynamic situation and accepting the change. The students who do not have access to all online technology cannot be ignored or forgotten. These students are less affluent and belong to less tech-savvy families with financial resources restrictions; therefore, they may lose out when classes occur online. They may lose out because of the heavy costs associated with digital devices and internet data plans. This digital divide may widen the gaps of inequality. This terrible time of fate has taught us that everything is unpredictable and we need to be ready to face challenges. Although this outbreak did not give us much time to plan, we should take a lesson from this that planning is the key. There is a need to prioritize all the critical and challenging situations which may occur and plan accordingly. This pandemic has also taught us that students must possess certain skills such as skills of problem-solving, critical thinking, and most importantly adaptability to survive the crisis. Educational institutions must build resilience in their systems to ensure and prioritize the presence of these skills in their students.

“The key lesson for others may be to embrace e-learning technology before disaster strikes!” (Todorova & Bjorn-Andersen, 2011). Today, we are forced to practice online learning, things would have been different if we have already mastered it. The time we lost in learning the modes could have been spent on creating more content. But it is better late than never. This virus surely has accelerated the process of digital learning.

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