

Teaching English in Digital Era: Some Observances and Strategies

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Abstract

As teachers we have geared up to a challenge and managed to discharge our duties after being compelled to switch from physical to virtual mode, which was quite a learning and difficult experience for most of us who may not have been tech savvy. Added to it were the problems of recurrent power cuts, internet connectivity, and the difficulty of working from home. There was also the scrutiny of our teaching methodology and language by parents of our students on the other end who appointed themselves as regimental officers of not only their children but of their teachers too. We have also observed the dramatic transition from repudiating the use of mobile phones by our children to they being constantly on it for attending classes and otherwise. The smart phones have triggered the trajectory of evolving smart students and smart teachers.

Keywords: Online teaching, Digital classroom, English, Language teaching

INTRODUCTION

As teachers, we have all been caught in this quagmire of online teaching and are qualified to speak of our experiences which are without a doubt diverse and plenty. As teachers we realize each input is valuable and contributes to the repository of teaching online. We share our thoughts and experiences with the teaching fraternity in the hope that we may share and together combat this situation and work towards amplifying our objective to impart education for. We cannot visualize a disadvantaged generation of students because as teachers we have failed to rise up to

the challenge. You all will agree with us when we say that it is eye contact emphasized in our training as teachers which was considered as a vital barometer to assess the student comprehension or inattentiveness. As online teaching is taking over, there is definitely an urgent need to redefine this teaching methodology. Today, the teaching is plagued with invisibility and lack of visible body language. Introducing technology in classroom requires fundamental changes in the teaching practice from being teacher-centered to student-centered approaches (Zhao & Cziko).

TEACHING ENGLISH ONLINE

“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.” – Benjamin Franklin

Online learning was predicted to be the future of education. However, no one was prepared for a life changing natural crisis which forced the future to become the present overnight. Most of us were caught off guard and found ourselves struggling to cope with what was considered the new normal. Nevertheless, after the initial apprehensions and hiccups, teachers have managed to master technology and are back on track adapting to the changing scenario.

ICT in Teaching and Learning

The scenario of language teachers needing to use ICT in their classes is however compounded by the fact they are required to be on their toes, constantly engaged in acquiring, developing and updating their ICT skills, and simultaneously ensuring online teaching activities and individual pedagogy intertwine with each other, the outreach profits their students and enhances and improves their own teaching strategy. Teachers today are forced to augment their online teaching skills, either independently or with the assistance of peers and colleagues either by collaborating or exchange of experiences.

Moreover, they are to be sensitive to the resistance and difficulties students, especially in countries like India and other developing nation where mobile phones and laptop may not be affordable by all given their economic condition and inaccessibility of the internet in remote areas. Tanveer (2011) observes following challenges that hamper ICT success,

“marginally less technologically sophisticated faculty, unreliable technology, lack of confidence and experience of instructors and students with technology, substantial

amount of time required for lecturers to fine-tune their instructions for electronic transmission of knowledge, lack of e-learning resources to administer networked classes and electronic assessments, etc.”

What is noteworthy, however, is that the present pandemic has not only united humanity at the macro level but has contributed to bring teachers of primary secondary and higher levels to a common platform. There may be some unique issues at each level but the general loss of personal touch and interaction that we accord to our students at each level is no doubt a common problem experienced at every level. It has also helped to validate the adage that we often use: “You can take the horse to the water, you cannot make it drink.” If lockdown is preventing schools and colleges from disseminating learning, online teaching and learning is available at the click of our fingertips. Elliot Masie (2011) rightly observes, “We need to bring learning to people instead of people to learning.”

Being teachers at higher education level, we are qualified to speak on behalf of teachers of all levels. As an onlooker at the other end of the table in our role of parents, we observe secondary and primary teachers struggling to hold the attention of students while teaching online. This has helped us acquire a few tricks devised by students to beguile their teachers while attending online classes which have helped us to stay one step ahead of our students. It has also helped us to realize and appreciate the value of friendship as we witness the unity among students who call up their friend to warn him or her when the teacher call their name and he or she has joined online and gone back to sleep.

Certainly, the teachers have been plagued with doubts while teaching online about its reception at the other end. Not that we suffer from this doubt during our regular classes too but the virtual medium has amplified this doubt tenfold.

Being human first and a teacher second, we have experienced guilt on scolding our students for either prolong absence, which we assume is due to indifference or for not submitting their assignments on time and later realize the reason was a medical crisis at home. Pragmatically, we learnt to accept and accord due priority to health over academia and altered our role from that of a teacher to a counselor. These are some hard lessons that the pandemic has taught us.

Teaching LSRW Online

“Teachers need to integrate technology seamlessly into the curriculum instead of viewing it as an add-on, an afterthought, or an event.” - Heidi-Hayes Jacobs

Any study of language acquisition will make clear the fact that language is best acquired through personal interaction. Be it the mother tongue or any foreign language. However, the present scenario of quarantining, social distancing and lockdowns has set challenges for both teachers and students. Among the four skills of communication, listening is the skill which can be developed adequately provided students are really paying attention. Speaking and reading to a certain extent can also be developed. Writing is a skill which is most difficult to teach online. It is difficult to keep classes interactive and the major challenge is involving the entire class and drawing out the diffident and slow learners to participate actively. Writing becomes possible only when reading is done and it is done intensively only when the students realize that a close reading of the prescribed text is essential to be able to write the assignments that are expected to be based on the text read.

It is important to make available samples of excellent writing assignments in order to provide an idea of the expectations and help students tailor their assignments accordingly. They must also be cautioned against blind imitation and the importance of being creative and developing an imitable writing style. Discussions can be held online and students encouraged to become involved in reviewing and analysing graded papers and offering the plus and minus points of the paper being reviewed. This activity will prepare students to write accordingly as they are made a part of writing analysis. Peer feedback will not only benefit the writer of the piece but also provide tips to the proof reader about the mechanics of effective writing. Encouraging students to edit and revise their work will ensure a relatively error free piece of writing and will also be of help to the teacher during evaluation. Purdue Online Writing Lab, Grammarly and The National Writing Project are some of the available online resources for teaching writing.

Teaching language online is a herculean task. In this regard, we feel the engineering students have suffered the most as access to language labs became impossible. A major shift which became apparent as a result of this transition from the physical to virtual mode is that classes which were either teacher centered or learner centered became techno- centered. Both teachers and students were forced to adjust to this new power center. Students and teachers

experienced newphobia and technophobia as they struggled to acclimatize themselves to this new mode of teaching and learning.

Techniques

Flipped classrooms, encouraging self and adaptive learning, mind mapping and instructional designing are some of the techniques that may be used to facilitate online teaching.

New vocabulary

The present pandemic has also witnessed several new coinages added to the English vocabulary. Similar to literature being representative of the social, political and economic condition of the times in which it is written, these coinages speak volumes about the situation in which they are created. This is also indicative of the dynamic and kinetic nature of language which evolves with the changing times as evident from the history of the English language. Words like coronaspeck, doomscrolling, spendemic, coronials, quarantini, zumped, covidiot, health warriors, corona survivors, social distancing, flattening the curve, zoombombing to name a few. It also enabled us to understand the finer differences between pandemic and epidemic, between quarantine and isolation, respirators and ventilators, contagious and infectious to name a few. English movies also helped to coin terms like *coronapocalypse* (*corona apocalypse*) or *coronageddon* (*corona armageddon*). This highlights the ability of language to adapt and resurrect itself in difficult times.

Teachers can make use of eVoc strategy, which is an electronic or technology-based strategy, to develop and enhance students' vocabulary. The term eVoc highlights the reliance on digital tools and resources and stirs learning aptitude resulting from blending technology and multimedia with teaching.

An example of integrating technology with teaching language is the use of free web *application* tools Wordle and Wordsift. Based on the frequency of a word usage in a text, word cloud is created to highlight key words to make the student infer the meaning in Wordle. Word Sift helps to understand the contextual meaning of the word and also arranges words in a hierarchy of complexity. Both applications are available for use in several languages.

The language translator is helpful for non-native speakers of English as it allows students to use the mother tongue to improvise and develop English vocabulary by providing bilingual texts. Examples of online translators are Babelfish, Google translator, and Bing Translator. The toolbar extension translates any webpage automatically.

Free online dictionaries or thesauri such as Reference.com and Merriam-Webster could be of much help for learners. Some of the online tools designed primarily for students include American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Yahoo Kids! Back in School from Dictionary.com, and Word Central from Merriam-Webster. Apart from these there are several vocabulary games that are available free on the internet which students can be encouraged to engage in on their own to improve their vocabulary.

Grammar

For teaching English Grammar, Englicious is a free online library for English language teaching comprising of teaching aids like lesson plans, exercises, assessment sheets that can be availed by teachers to teach English online. TheUsingEnglish.com is also an interesting forum to teach English.

LS Skills

The facility to record your speech helps in developing the listening and speaking (LS) skills apart from helping to improve pronunciation. Students are able to listen to their speech repeatedly, listen to a native speaker, or listen to many different accents and compare. It can also serve as a record to mark improvement in pronunciation by comparing the recording of day one with the present. Teachers, because of this option can conveniently single out the problematic words in terms of pronunciation because of mother tongue influence and India being a linguistically diverse country, each student depending on his mother tongue will present unique set of problems for teachers to identify and resolve with practice sessions. *howjsay*, a pronunciation dictionary can also be referred for help. The pluralizing of the English language has however declared intelligibility to be given more importance over imitation. This trend has caught on in the post-colonial countries not only as a means to retain their identity and uniqueness that they bring to the English language but also as a protest against being compelled to speak with an accent which is used by just two percent of population in England.

Web Resources

In terms of teaching English, diverse and authentic learning resources like the radio broadcasts and TV shows on the Internet, YouTube, digital audio recorders, Podcasts and iPods, Interactive and collaborative tools such as chats, forums, blogs, wikis, videoconferencing and webcam tools, course management platforms, open source platform, Moodle, online quizzes, email, google classroom, WhatsApp have replaced the use of the black and white board, the

chalk, the duster and the markers . It has had its positive ramifications and has helped students to become autonomous learners, ponder on their learning, develop their critical thinking and computer literacy skills; develop good learning strategies and finally, enjoy learning a new language.

The use of ICTs can benefit both teachers in their teaching and their students: It is an approach which widens the scope of the classroom and provides an opportunity to relate with the world apart from flexibility in terms of when and where to study and interact within the class and outside it too. Class discussions can also become interesting with the opportunity to discuss topics beyond the subject and the invisibility of the screen helps draw out students who may be too shy or not confident to express their opinion in a physical classroom. The psychology of the student has to be sensitively handled in an online teaching classroom.

Teaching English Literature Online

Teaching English literature online is a difficult journey. Literature has also stood up to the challenges of life and the present is no different. As teachers of literature, we have an obligation to steer humanity in general and students in particular towards positivity and hope. How best it can be done online is a fresh challenge. While it may be possible to teach an essay, a short story or even a novel, it is teaching poetry and drama that has been proved to be more testing.

Poetry

Teaching Poetry, otherwise too in normal situations, teachers find challenging. In fact, poetry is considered a metaphorical writing whose sublimity lies in its bejeweling itself with various literary devices (Fasiullah 2019). It is just not the surface language but the imagery, the figurative language, rhythm, the tone, the Prosodic elements, the mood that has to be conveyed. How does one do it online? Added to it is the problem of ambience. Imagine asking our students to read and appreciate a poem 'Daffodils' by Wordsworth.

The teacher can inspire students to cast away their mood of dejection and fly on the wings of imagination taking recourse to poetry. The teacher needs to believe and feel motivated in order to do so. It is my experience that appreciation and enjoyment of poetry is contagious. Unless and until the teacher herself doesn't enjoy poetry, she may not be able to infuse the same love and pleasure for reading poetry in her students.

Poetry is a genre which has a detoxifying effect. It is a concoction of imagination emotion and intellect to aid, comprehend and empathize in the interpretation of human consciousness and existence. It is life, reflection and representation of life as it negotiates the dynamics of reality and its equation with the outside world. It is as if the poet is revealing his most intimate thoughts and feelings for scrutiny and is very personal. It requires a lot of courage to lay your feelings thread bare for inspection by strangers. Poetry is complicated by the fact that its language is different from that of prose as it is marked by brevity of thought and is more direct. It is also unique in that it provides aesthetic satisfaction while shaping minds of persons through critical appreciation. Yet, poetry teaching and learning experiences enormous problems.

The teacher is without doubt the role model. Unless he or she is passionate about it, it is almost impossible to incite the same fervor in students. The teacher can show clips of poetry rendition which are exemplary in terms of enunciation, voice, tone and style. A poet invokes the muse of poetry to help him in the task of writing poetry. Milton thus invokes: "Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top".

Today it is the teacher who has donned the mantle of a muse for students and attempting like Milton to accomplish things un-attempted before i.e. of teaching poetry online. This inspiration will result in a deluge of creative writing and some may come out with it and share with others while some others may choose to be closet poets which we must admit is true for most of us.

Drama

My sympathies are with teachers teaching Drama online because it is one genre which involves group activity. Students can be made to get involved in discussions concerning technicalities of transforming script into a lived performance. In a physical class, students usually take on a character and read out the dialogues. The virtual classroom can be used to share videos of students enacting the role during online classes. The control of the screen can be passed to students who then share their presentations and videos with the rest of the class. There is scope for improvisations and discussions and comments on chat box while rehearsing and engaging in group activities online.

Performing literature online and transfer of medium from script to screen provides a platform to experiment and explore their latent talents apart from fulfilling the goal of instruction and familiarity with the text which will no doubt be the primary course objective. Interestingly,

this exercise will allow students to go beyond the text and contribute their subjective and diverse understanding of the character they may be enacting apart from providing an opportunity to record the enactment and upload for mass consumption and preserving it for posterity.

A student's temperament can also best be understood by the teacher and surprisingly by the student concerned when they enact a role. It may also allow a student to experiment with a persona which is diametrically opposite to them in real life and comprehend the perspective of the 'other'. Our unfulfilled dreams are translated temporarily to reality through these enactments. A meek person gets to play a heroic figure and a gentle student may get a chance to kill his demons. Each student brings his or her own schemata to the role and you have a whole panorama of diverse enactment and performance of the same character to compare and invite discussions of the pros and cons of each performance. It can provide valuable information about the student beyond the classroom and reveal a part of him which he himself may not have been aware of enabling teachers to deal with the student effectively in their regular interactions.

Teachers get a chance to intervene and inform a student to observe another student and pick certain tips from him or her or may ask them to look up movie or play and observe the role played by a celebrity. But the crucial point is to emphasize not to copy or imitate but add their personal touch to make it unique and individualistic. Stage shy students realize there is no real audience and the privacy of enacting the role in the comfort of their personal space will help to better their performance by relaxing their inhibitions. The mic can be used to make yourself audible and can be muted for students who are not participating. It is not just an opportunity to practice voice modulation but also provides a chance for expression through body and facial means.

The entire class however cannot be engaged in acting. The rest can be engaged in discussions about the tropes used in the original play, its bearing to the contemporary times and the alterations and modifications to be made to make it relevant to the present and arrive at a better understanding of how narratives work. How does the story connect to our lives? How can we take those questions and insights and use them to make our play even stronger? Some others may be assigned to take care of sound effects, the background music, providing cues, technical help, prompts, costume, make-up, direction etc.

The virtual sessions may open doors for students they may not have thought of before career wise. Direction, acting, make-up artistry, music composing, costume designing, dialogue

writing, script writing, choreography to name a few apart from the expected dramatist, creative artist and critic. The creative empowerment will ensure an interactive class and shift the focus to the stakeholders ensuring active involvement of the entire class. This ensemble and group activity will enable students to work as a group and engage in team work apart from learning to be tolerant and empathetic towards others. Students realize that each of them is crucial for the success of the play and no one is singularly responsible for its failure. It may provide an opportunity to a student to enact a character which is personally and ideologically contradictory to his or her own ideology and help to understand if not accept the other perspective.

As a teacher, the objective of teaching a play and its theatrical adaptation is not profit making. It is to ensure that students understand the various nuances of the play and get involved. This gives autonomy to experiment and not limit to stereotypes. The most unsuitable or unexpected student can be given a chance to perform the best role knowing there is nothing to lose but only to benefit if your risk works out and a dark horse may reach the finishing line. You will have contributed to discover an unpolished diamond and enabled a successful career and source of livelihood to student for life.

Other genres

As mentioned earlier, the teaching of the novel, short story or the essay online is relatively better when compared to teaching other genres. Our surmise naturally is based on the fact that students come prepared to class after reading the prescribed novel short story or essay. This goes without saying for offline classes too. But then, as we keep telling students that the lockdown has provided an opportunity to catch up on our reading list. The world outside has come to a halt and each one of us have had ample time to engage in activities which we may have been postponing citing the excuse of lack of time. In this scenario if students, unless of course there is a medical reason don't read up and come it is unpardonable. Based on this assurance that all students present online have already read the text, discussions regarding the text in question are expected to be more vibrant and participatory. There is also scope for extra reading and critical analysis of the thematic aspects and characterization apart from viewing its reviews and adaptations. Interested students may also read up the other writings of the writer in question and familiarize him or herself with their distinctive style and compare and contrast with contemporary or earlier writers across the global literary sphere. Some students may also rise up to the challenge and delve into trying to engage in creative writing, reviewing, critical analysis or

blogging, extending their bonding and literary interactions with authors, bloggers, peers, or with academia around the globe. The assignments submitted on these texts are also well researched and well written with the added advantage of personal insight touch and style. It is the evaluation of the soft copies of assignments which is proving to be hazardous and a cumbersome task for teachers. Though the use of track changes option is helpful, it is the long hours in front of the computers that is proving detrimental to teacher's eyesight and overall health given the large strength of our Indian classrooms.

Evaluation

Testing is still a gray area in online teaching as has been realized by teachers to the delight of truant students. It emphasizes the inherent conflict faced by several instructors as they grapple with their desire to integrate innovative teaching practices at one hand, and the reality of their students being assessed typically by the traditional means. The apprehension of copying and malpractices engaged in by the few because of the lack of a proper mechanism to supervise online examination is forcing teachers to be cynical of those who have been honest. A few stray sheep increases the teachers' hackles forcing them to be suspicious of the deserving few. It is understandable that a few students are able to make hay while the sun shines but they must remember the sun does not shine always. What are they going to do when things get back to normal and they don't perform up to their and others expectation apart from living with it on their conscience forever?

Classroom discipline

Maintaining discipline and time management is relatively easier in an online classroom as it is possible to mute or un-admit the troublemakers. Since you plan a class and create a meeting id and fix the time before hand there is less danger of extending it beyond the classroom time unless required otherwise.

Some questions to ponder

The questions that comes to our mind are: Have teachers become defunct as knowledge is available on the internet? Has the internet taken over the role of the teacher and has made the teacher obsolete? What is the role of the teacher in online teaching? Does it mean that the teacher is dead and long live the internet?

Barthes had also raised similar questions regarding the presence and role of the author in his seminal essay "The Death of the Author". Taking recourse from this essay, one can also try

to reposition the role of the teacher in the present situation. The death of the author actually may be perceived as the author's subsuming of his self into the writing of the text to birth the reader. It is akin to the phoenix which legends say conflagrate or decomposes itself and out of its ashes arises a new life. It can also be equated to the mother giving birth to a new life parting with her flesh and blood. But in each of these cases, it is the product be it the reader or the new life which is in the spot light. So also is the case of the teacher and student. The teacher cannot be separated from his or her art. While teaching, a teacher imparts her knowledge to the students thereby creating future teachers and knowledge bearers. The teacher though apparently viewed as a reservoir of knowledge shares much more than just knowledge. They are considered ideals by students and learn lessons in humanity, morality, independent thought, tolerance, patience and societal values from them. Do we really think the internet can be elevated to this status and fill the gap left by the teacher?

These are serious questions to muse over. However, we feel unless technology becomes advanced enough to humanize the internet we can safely say, the teacher is dead, long live the teacher.

Conclusion

The use of ICTs can benefit both teachers in their teaching and their students: It is an approach which widens the scope of the classroom and provides an opportunity to relate with the world apart from flexibility in terms of when and where to study and interact within the class and outside it too. Class discussions can also become interesting with the opportunity to discuss topics beyond the subject and the invisibility of the screen helps draw out students who may be too shy or not confident to express their opinion in a physical classroom. The psychology of the student has to be sensitively handled in an online teaching class. At the same time, maintaining discipline and time management is relatively easier in an online classroom as it is possible to mute or un-admit the troublemakers.

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