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**INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY
TOOLS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

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INTRODUCTION

For a long time, the teacher-centred approach has been more prominent than any other approach in teaching-learning process in Indian contexts. This process basically enhanced the memory power of the learners and did not enrich their knowledge, understanding and practical application of what they have learned. In this age of globalization, Indian institutions, organizations and individuals are forced to compete with the best in the world, and success is possible only if we modify our approach to education. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools offer us a powerful platform for better education. In this paper, we discuss how we could use ICT tools for English language teaching-learning.

THE NEED FOR THE USE OF ICT

The use of ICT furnishes a new platform in which learners build their knowledge and develop an understanding through the creation of links between the new and updated concepts and those that already exist. They help the learners in acquiring knowledge generated by experts, understand, discuss and further disseminate to others in comprehensible terms. ICT serves as a catalyst for all learners irrespective of their age who are in need of updated information. ICT tools, when used aptly, can also act as an efficient resource to augment language learning.

RELEVANCE OF ICT IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Generally speaking, the teaching of English in Indian schools is limited to structure/grammar and/or translation method. This is an inevitable consequence of several factors including teacher competence in English. At the school level, structures and vocabulary are taught through a structural syllabus and grammar translation method because we believe that it will help learners construct correct English sentences. At the tertiary level, these structures are modified and more exposure to English is provided with literary texts. Students who have received nearly twelve years of formal English teaching often remain deficient in the use of language, be it spoken or written.

For the present day world, the need is not communicating just by composing of sentences of different kinds but by using sentences to describe, classify, question, request, etc. Indian students from vernacular medium as well as English medium schools fail to communicate properly not because they lack ideas but because they have not been taught to perform communicative tasks. Our scientists and engineers may be technically brilliant and creative but if they cannot communicate effectively to the society for whom they are working, they become ineffective, and their talent goes untapped and unnoticed.

Many industries, for instance, have departments like design, production, marketing and management where people from different disciplines and different mother tongue backgrounds, with different skills and different specializations, work together. It becomes a difficult task to participate fully and meaningfully in all activities, and also to coordinate the work and responsibilities, if a person has poor knowledge of the language through which these activities are organized, communicated and reported to one another. Professionals need to talk in a group

setting, attend company meetings, undertake external negotiations, participate in conferences and help solve technical problems. In all these, English continues to be used significantly. Language learning has, thus, become a continuum providing opportunities for life long learning and hence cannot be confined to the traditional classroom.

The following sections deal with the different information and communication technology tools used in improving the quality of learning and teaching and the above concept is strengthened by a case study that we undertook.

ICTs AND THEIR POTENTIAL FOR EDUCATION



Language teaching has its own technology to support irrespective of the teaching-learning methodology adopted. As said earlier, the grammar translation method relies on the blackboard – a chalk and talk method, which is still considered to be the best one-way transformation of information. It is then followed by the OHP (Overhead Projector), used as an alternative for the blackboard in the teacher dominated classroom. The audio lab, which is added to these has proved its

usefulness for the audio lingual method in language learning. The computer software programmes known as drill and practice method are replacing this. Learners have already started reporting that this is also monotonous. In this context, communicative language teaching has become very popular with emphasis on learners engaging in authentic and meaningful interaction. This has paved the way for the use of the Internet as a means of learning and teaching languages.

It is always known that, to impart quality education, teachers must keep themselves abreast of the latest developments in their fields and this is made easy through technology. The Internet has numerous websites to help them enhance their regular lessons through animations and simulations. For instance, if the teacher wants to explain about the calamities of the earthquakes or tsunami, he/she can make the learners witness these through animations, explaining the relevant details associated with it. A tape recorder can enable the learners to learn a foreign language with proper accent, when they listen to the voice of the native speaker. Live video conferencing, an amalgam of telephony and computer-compressed technologies, will lead to the creation of a centralized pool of tutors for different subjects.

GATEKEEPERS' ROLE OF TEACHERS

Recent studies in language teaching and learning using advanced technologies reiterate one important feature that the teachers are the gatekeepers for students' access to educational opportunities afforded by technology because the learners will not use their technical intelligence beneficially, if teachers do not provide them with proper guidance.

Don Morrison in his book *E-learning Strategies* has said that the educational structure has to switch over from **push model** to **pull model** technology. Previously, the teacher remained the storehouse of knowledge and courses were pushed out to the learners, irrespective of their capability. Now the students can pull out their relevant resources from the Internet. So the centralized classroom teaching could now deliver the fast changing skills and knowledge to everyone according to their needs and demands.

To identify and describe the above factor, a case study was done with a diverse group of students from different disciplines in our University, VIT University, Vellore 632014, Tamilnadu, India.

CASE STUDY

A group of 15 students were selected from different disciplines (engineering stream and science and humanities streams) and they were briefed about the available software and the skills they can develop through it. The facilitator selected this heterogeneous group from her own classes and hence she knew about the strengths and weaknesses of each student.

PARTICIPANTS

MS Software Engineering	- 5
B.Tech	- 5
B.Sc/BBA	- 5

IMPLEMENTATION

The students worked regularly for 2 hours for about a month in the language lab after their class hours. The choice of the software was left to their discretion so as to promote learner autonomy. The majority of the students, who were from the Tamil, Telugu and Hindi medium schools, preferred to work initially on spelling and grammar and then they switched over to English Master, which has various components like grammar, audio lab, word lab, crossword puzzle, and audio write and sound sort. They were very enthusiastic in using the Sky Pronunciation Suite because it would help improve their pronunciation skill. The students, who were good in English and who were from English medium schools, opted to work on Network Language Learning, the British Movie talk and the TOEFL practice tests.

FEEDBACK

LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVE

1. The learners with less proficiency in the language were highly motivated to use the software, English Master because they felt that repeated practice gave them ample confidence to comprehend the words and use them appropriately in their communication.
2. The learners who watched the movie talk expressed their opinion that it was a different experience for them to watch a movie and answer the questions. They felt that the Movie Quiz was very simple and the vocabulary interesting because they could visualize the unknown words and get a clue. The component, 'What's

the next line?’ was a little difficult item for them to answer, but they felt that it engaged them to think coherently about what could be the next item.

3. The learners who were proficient in the language did not go for the regular study zone but directly attempted the quiz and the games, and they showed keen interest in taking TOEFL practice tests.

TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVE

1. The learners were more comfortable and relaxed in using the language lab because they had no time constraint and the process was completely autonomous.
2. They were able to practice innumerable times till they gained confidence. One of the students from the Hindi medium school, who was a passive listener in the class, showed gradual progress and he started taking part in the interactive sessions in the class.
3. The immediate feedback was a motivating factor and it helped the students concentrate on the needed skill.
4. As the majority of the learning components is through visualization and games, they leave a strong impact on learners which cannot that easily be obtained through classroom lectures.

Hence, with the use of technology, the educational structure can move on from the centralized control to autonomy with accountability, and the single communication can develop to networking, thus enabling collaborative learning. The occasional use of technology or language lab will not meet wholly the existing demands. The students need to be interested and motivated in using the computers, however. Many students who are in their first or third semesters, as of now, use the Internet either to send mail or watch a movie or read the news. This attitude need to be changed and the abundant resources available can be best used only if technology is integrated into the curriculum. The task based activities and project based learning will surely enhance their language skills needed for the real life situations.

ICT IN CURRICULUM

ICT-enabled learning has become more popular only during the last two decades. In the present Indian scenario, it has developed in leaps and bounds due to the standardization and global spread of the Internet-based applications and communication support. Integrated packages exclusively for educational purposes

keep multiplying. Many publishers have converted their textbooks into packages of printed text, audiocassettes and compact discs so as to serve the different practices in the curriculum with flexible teaching styles and learning needs. They have the options such as matching the correct object, crossword puzzle, jumbled sentences, etc. It has also got numerous motivating factors both for teachers and students and it also offers a wide range of multimedia resources, which instigate the interest in the students to learn or develop their skills in language learning.

ICTs IN PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY AND LEARNER INTERACTION

Constructivist theory stresses that interaction among learners enhances their learning skill and so for meaningful learning to occur, students need to explore the subject matter in a wider context than what is prescribed in their reading materials by sharing experiences and interacting. As many new technologies are interactive, it is now easy to create environments in which a student can learn by doing, receiving feedback, refining their understanding and thus maximizing their exposure to the real-world environment. The availability of multiple websites with different exercises on grammar, vocabulary and listening skills enable them to learn the proper use of language at their own pace, without any impulse or time constraint, thus facilitating independent learning and contributing to learner autonomy.

ICTs IN SELF-ASSESSMENT

The examinations generally test the reading and writing skills of the students, totally neglecting the listening and speaking skills, which are indispensable skills for the learners in their future career. The listening capacity can be tested through computer-assisted packages like listening to a dialogue/passage and answering the questions or listening to lectures and then answering short questions or true or false statements. It will enhance their talents for taking international tests because many competitive exams follow such a pattern to test the grasping ability of the students. As the feedback is immediate, the learners can identify their strengths and weaknesses and improve on them. As learner autonomy gets momentum, they facilitate individualizing curriculum, permitting them to dictate the pace of learning and widen the sources of information in the required area.

SUMMATION



The use of technology in language teaching has innumerable benefits, though it cannot be termed as a panacea for language teaching. The stage-by-stage development in the use of ICT, like language lab, videos, satellite broadcast, videoconferencing and web seminars have strengthened the following features:

1. Enhance the richness and quality of education both on and off campus.
2. Distribute the above knowledge through distributed learning with more flexibility, thus highlighting the statement, "Any space is a learning space."

So ICT tools are not just tools to learn a language but they contribute to different facets of educational development and effective learning.

The challenges facing Indian education in general, and language teaching in particular, will become harder and harder if we do not embrace ICTs in a

meaningful manner. The answer to the question "Where we are?" will raise another question "Where we want to be?"



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