Online English Language Teaching at the Government Schools in India: Problems and Issues

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Abstract

The paper critically examines the emergence of online English language teaching as a consequence of Covid-19 pandemic at government schools in India. There are numerous theories on second language acquisition which state that there are certain principles which are to be followed while teaching or learning a second language i.e. English in this case. Rod Ellis also suggested such principles which are to be used in instructed second language learning. These principles along with what they imply for Indian classrooms have been assessed thoroughly and visualized how these principles are applied in online English language teaching in Indian classrooms. The whole analysis is based on teachers' experience of teaching English language online. After thorough investigation, it becomes important to bring certain important changes in online English language teaching.

Keywords: online English language teaching, Covid-19 and online education, students and online education, SLA, English as a second language

Introduction

Online English language teaching nowadays is not new concepts but such new changes were apparently new in the fabric of Indian classroom when they were introduced for the first time. There have been numerous hurdles in this too as there happen to be in bringing out any new changes. Leaving apart the administrative hurdles regarding the implementation of online English language teaching the focus of the paper is on the academic (contemporary) implications of the implementation of online English language teaching. Online English

language teaching has different issues to be examined as both are different in their fundamental objectives assigned for them. The introduction of such changes has its advantages and disadvantages both.

Methodology

The paper focuses on the teaching-learning aspects of online English language teaching. The current researcher was involved in online English language teaching and evaluated it thoroughly. She also interacted with a number of English language teachers who were involved in online English language teaching at various government schools in India. While evaluating the scripts of the students the current researcher focussed on the content which was taught to the students through online teaching and also on the content which the students produced in their answer scripts.

Online English Language Teaching at Government Schools in India

Realizing the importance of English language it has become a lingua franca in India and with this more and more people are using English language day by day in our country. Apart from it, India is a multilingual country and English language can play a key role in such a multilingual state for preserving its 'unity in diversity'. Therefore, English has become an important component of Indian life and hence, the teaching-learning process should be improved in such a way that learners could learn English language easily and smoothly. Referring to this scenario various state governments introduced English language from first standard in government schools in order to compete with private schools. Along with it, under new circumstances online English language teaching has also been given emphasis which is not possible without handling the challenges arising out of this new beginning on

such a massive scale. Online English language teaching has its advantages as well as disadvantages as is the case of actual offline teaching.

While teaching English as a second language as English is more a second language in India various principles which are the outcomes of various theories of second language acquisition should be followed. Rod Ellis also gave such principles which are to be used in instructed second language learning. These principles are to be used in providing instructions to the learners in instructed language teaching.

There are numerous challenges in online English language teaching but the focus of the researcher here is in context of Rod Ellis's principles of second language teaching in Indian classroom while teaching through online mode. The fundamental problem in online language teaching is that it is not possible to ascertain whether the learners are attentive or not. Sometimes it happens the teacher is teaching in full flow and the students are not giving attention or the internet connection has been broken and it appears that the teachers are speaking to a wall. Ignoring all other challenges it is important to proceed towards the relevance of these principles in a critical manner while teaching English language through online mode.

Relevance of Rod Ellis's Principles in Online English Language Teaching

There are twelve or more principles given by Rod Ellis which are independent of each other. Rod Ellis suggested that instruction should look in to the development of a rich repertoire of second language which should contain formulaic expressions and rules both. If one sees the language curriculum implemented in Delhi University it emerges that enough space has been devoted to formulaic expressions as well as to the rules to enhance competence of students. Such formulaic expressions are provided in the textbooks. Simultaneously rules are also taught in the classroom. But while giving instruction in online language teaching it becomes

problematic to take care of such expressions and rule based competence because there is no system of immediate evaluation to ensure whether it is being done or not. It is again problematic whether learners are giving attention or not.

According to Rod Ellis the focus of the learners should be primarily on meaning. It implies that the focus should be more on the pragmatic meaning as there are two types of meanings: semantic and pragmatic. In Indian classroom the focus is primarily on semantic meaning and pragmatic meaning is ignored where long running discourses are required to be taught to the learners, which is again a difficult task while teaching English through online mode. The issue is same with the offline classroom teaching as well. There are certain constraints in online teaching where actual conversation is not involved as is possible in offline classroom settings. Therefore learners are not able to develop full competence in English language and it results into certain negative comments by the community people that the leaners only know the particular English used in some particular school where the learner study.

He further emphasized that the teaching should ensure that learners gives attention to form. In Indian classrooms or more precisely in the government schools traditional method of English language teaching i.e. grammar translation method is the most commonly used method by the teachers where the focus is always on the form of language used in the textbooks. But the problem in online language teaching is that more tasks could not be given to the learners to identify the form and hence to give attention to the form while following the principle of learning by doing. It is very easy to convey the rules to the learners while teaching through online mode but it is somewhat complex to give materials to help them identify the forms of the language given to them as it is difficult to keep the record of each and every learner.

While focusing on instruction the objective should be directed to develop implicit knowledge of the L2 without neglecting explicit knowledge. Differentiating between learning and acquisition as stated by Stephen Krashen ii could be suggested that in Indian classrooms the

focus of teaching is always on explicit knowledge as traditional methods of English language teaching are used in Indian classrooms where the focus is only on the analysis of form. Although there are methods of providing more and more input to the learners through online English language teaching but it becomes a tiring exercise for the learners to acquire the implicit knowledge as it could not be learned deliberately. The conversation in online language teaching is not so lively as is in the actual offline classroom hence in online teaching the conversation is somewhat impaired which creates problems for both teachers and learners.

The instruction should also consider the learner's 'built-in syllabus' while learning a second language. As there is a natural order of learning language structures as is suggested by Stephen Krashen, learner's built in syllabus should be taken into consideration while imparting instructions to learners but there are no tools for evaluating it. Since there are no tools to ascertain the developmental readiness of learners, it is quite impossible to take learner's built in syllabus into consideration while teaching English online. This is quite difficult. The built in syllabus is somewhat like implicit knowledge which is difficult to ascertain and along with it the focus in the classroom is on explicit learning.

Rod Ellis also claimed that extensive L2 input is provided to the learners. Looking at the research conducted on second language acquisition all over the world it is clear that extensive L2 input is required for learners for successful instructed language learning. According to Rod Ellis there are two ways of doing it:

a.   Maximum use of L2 in classrooms

Now the question which arises is: Does English teachers in Indian classroom make maximum use of English language in the classroom? The answer to this question is no. This is also clear that English is not used by English teachers as a medium of instruction in most of the schools in India and hence it is quite difficult to maximize the use of L2 in classrooms. If it is not

being done in offline classrooms, could it be done through online mode? Since the level of interaction in online teaching is quite different hence to maximize the use of L2 in classrooms will be a far reality. Learners coming out of various native languages cannot tolerate the use of English for long through online mode of language teaching. It becomes boring for them.

b. Provide opportunities for students to get input outside the classroom.

Neither teachers nor parents are responsible for providing input outside the classroom for learners. Teachers are concerned about what they are teaching in the classroom only. They can guide the learners to go and interact with people outside the classroom but it solely depends on learners to go for it. It is again more difficult in online language teaching where teachers are interacting with learners only on virtual platforms. Parents of most of the learners are not proficient in English language. Therefore it is quite impossible for them to provide input for their children outside the classroom.

According to one of the principles stated by Rod Ellis it is suggested that Successful instructed language learning would happen if learners get opportunities for output. Only providing maximum output in target language is not enough despite the fact that it is quite complicated task in online language teaching. There should also be enough space for learners where they can produce output. As English language teaching in Indian classroom is highly context-based. A few lessons are taught to learners and they are evaluated on the questions out of these lessons. There is no space of creativity and critical thinking in such classroom settings. It is quite difficult to provide ample opportunities for learners to express the output they have learned so far. Learning in online teaching will be highly contextualized and limited in scope.

Interaction is also important for acquiring L2 proficiency or one can say it is the center of developing L2 proficiency. Indian classroom is a different classroom where the focus is only on syllabus completion and there is no space of interaction for undertaking various contexts

of use of English language. Space for live interaction in online mode of teaching will also be limited. The actual social conversation which is possible in open community is never possible through online mode of language teaching. There are always limitations and challenges which could not be accomplished through online mode.

It is also important that Individual differences in learners should be taken into consideration while imparting instruction in L2. Indian classrooms find learners from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and there are individual differences in learners in Indian classrooms. Rod Ellis talks about two conditions in acquiring second language efficiently:

a)   The instruction should match to the particular attitude of the students towards learning.

b)   The students should be motivated properly.

How many teachers used to prepare lesson plans before taking their classes? But with the imposition of online teaching it has become essential to prepare lesson plans to be presented in the classroom. It is again a challenge to differentiate learners in online teaching as there are numerous influences on them. There are chances that some family members are guiding the learners and hence it is quite impossible to ascertain the actual performance of the learners. Similarly individual differences are quite difficult to ascertain in such online language teaching. If one motivates the learners to respond to questions asked during online class the learners can't respond what are the possible solutions? The online classroom is governed by only a few focused learners and others are left out. In online teaching teachers cannot wait for everyone to respond.

In case of proper assessment of L2 proficiency of learners the free as well as controlled production should be considered. In Indian classroom whatever is taught is also assessed through formative and summative assessments but the ways through which it is done it provides a little scope for critical inquiry. This entails in online as well as offline language

teaching the focus is only on controlled production. Free production is ignored in both the cases. These challenges need to be handled effectively.

It is also mentioned by Rod Ellis that opportunities should be provided for learners to collaborate in order to talk about linguistic problems and try to find out some common solutions to those problems. In Indian classroom the stakeholders involved in second language acquisition are not aware of various aspects of second language acquisition and hence they cannot talk about their linguistic problems. Learners never talk about their linguistic problems and hence the scope for them to find out solutions for such problems is very limited.

Finally it is also worthwhile to express from that the subjective aspect of learning a new language should also be considered while providing instructor in L2 learning. If one considers this aspect of L2 learning then the question arises: how could emotional bond of learners be established by teaching them through online mode? This is a great question. The type of interaction which is provided in our classroom settings is not of that level which could develop that personal bond of learners with English language. The focus of learners is on getting through the examination and the focus of teachers is to complete the syllabus. Indian is a multilingual country and learners of diverse social and linguistic backgrounds come to study English who consider English language more a foreign language as compared to a second language. Therefore it is difficult to develop a personal bond for them with English language. This is more difficult in online teaching as online teaching is cruel and doesn't have human touch.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it could be stated that there are numerous challenges in online mode of English language teaching. The problems of offline language teaching get strengthened in case of

online English language teaching. Again there is a wide gap between what has been suggested by Rod Ellis and how these principles have been used in online mode of English language teaching. There is less scope for pragmatic meaning in online English language teaching. There is limited number of tasks which could be provided to learners to identify the forms existing in English language and understand them. Implicit knowledge of language is somewhat underrated in online mode of teaching. Individual differences are ignored along with the built in syllabus of learners. Opportunities for maximum input and output in L2 are also not ample to ensure proper instructed second language learning through online mode.

Following the above discussion it could be concluded that online education create more harm to the students as compared to offline education. Therefore online language teaching could be integrated with offline classroom teaching. It could enhance teaching-learning process in general.

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