

Efficacy and challenges of Virtual mode of teaching /learning foreign language

Dr. Sumit Gupta

Assistant Professor of Spanish

Amity University

Haryana

Abstract

The present era of globalization is at its pinnacle. There is a constant flow and exchange of ideas, goods and things from one part of the world to another. With the invention of new technologies and tools, human life has become easy. Undoubtedly, internet has eliminated all the geographical barriers between countries and people. Now, sitting at home one can easily explore the whole world virtually using internet and online platforms like: Skype, Zoom, Go to Webinar, Webex Meetings, Microsoft Teams, e-mails, WhatsApp etc. The impact of these advancements in technology are also felt in the education sector. Today, almost each and every educational institution in the world is using technology in one or the other form. In other words, internet has eliminated all the barriers of teaching /learning by providing virtual environments. Until recent times, the focus was on blended learning i.e. the integration of both classroom as well as online sessions. But due to outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, there is a sudden shift from classroom teaching/learning to virtual mode of teaching /learning. Considering the current scenario, virtual learning environments have almost become indispensable. These unforeseen changes in the education system have also brought many challenges for the entire teaching fraternity as well as for the students. The present article will examine the challenges being faced by both faculty and students while teaching/learning language using virtual platforms. The researcher through the surveys, conducted by him on university students will also provide students' perspective of learning a foreign language virtually. In addition to this, the article will try to explore the possible solutions and suggestions to overcome these challenges.

Keywords: FLT, ICT tools, virtual learning, Covid-19 pandemic, lockdown.

Introduction

In the present times, integration of technology has become a vital part in the language teaching/learning process. With the wider availability of internet and rapid growth of new technologies, teaching and learning is no more restricted to the four walls of the classroom.

Therefore, today's learner is well informed due to the availability of abundance of information on internet. Today's generation is more technophile than ever. Today, even a 2-3 years old child can flawlessly operate smart phones. So, it may not be wrong to say that in the near future technology will reshape the future of higher education. Due to the constant evolution of technology, education sector is also undergoing significant changes. Today, teaching/learning a foreign language is no more restricted to the class room only. There is plethora of tools available like: smartphones, laptops, language learning apps etc. which make language teaching/learning swift and interesting. Considering these advances in teaching/learning techniques, educators are investing ample of time in developing learner-friendly methods and techniques to make learning process interesting and effective. Until recently, before the outbreak of Covid-19, almost all the institution in India were using blended learning i.e. a combination of online and face-to-face learning, especially in language classes. But the sudden outburst of Covid-19 forced both educators and educands to adopt completely online mode of teaching/learning. But the sudden shift from face-to-face to online teaching/ learning has also posed many problems. The common challenges faced by both teacher and students are: technical glitches, unavailability of internet and resources like gadgets, computers and laptops etc. In most of the cases, either a teacher is not tech savvy or the student is not acquainted with the latest technologies.

Until recent times, most of the educators were using mostly either Grammar-Translation method also called as classical method or other methods and approaches like Direct Method, Audio Lingual Method, Communicative approach and so on in tandem with technology i.e. blending learning. Face to face teaching was considered as one of the predominant modes of delivering lectures, exchanging thoughts, ideas and knowledge with the students. Kumar (2008) defines Face to Face learning as: "learning that occurs in a traditional classroom setting where a faculty member delivers instruction to a group of learners. This could include lectures, workshops, presentations, tutoring, conference and much more" (556).

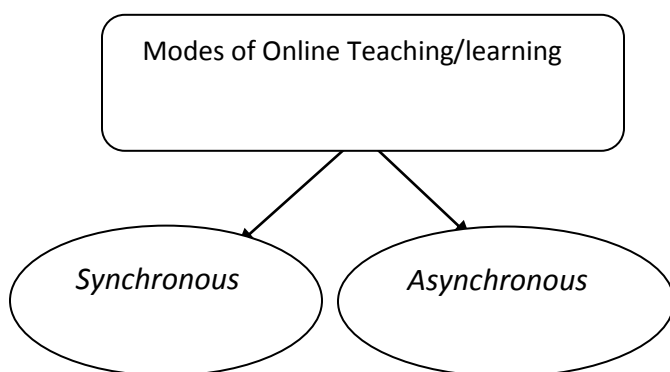
This mode of teaching generally involves a teacher or an instructor who imparts knowledge to the students using varieties of materials like: white boards, books, projectors etc. Face to face teaching in language classes is generally considered to be highly effective as it allows students to participate actively in the classroom activities and also helps teachers to provide immediate feedbacks to the students. This mode of teaching generally takes place in physical learning environments like classrooms, language labs etc. where both instructor and students meet face to face. But the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic has made the entire teaching fraternity ponder, how to teach a language virtually? Until recently, blended teaching was predominant. As, the Covid-19 pandemic has created physical distances between both teachers, as well as students. In order to carry out successfully academic as well as research endeavors, teachers and students are left with no alternatives, but to adapt online teaching/ learning methods.

What is online learning?

Online learning in education means, teaching/learning process that rather than taking place in traditional classrooms settings takes place virtually using internet. ICT tools like Computers and internet are the back bone of this mode of education.

Ritchie & Hoffman (1997) propose different terms for online learning. According to them:

There are numerous names for online learning activities including e-learning, web-based learning (WBL), web-based instruction (WBI), distributed learning, online learning (OL), mobile learning (ml) or nomadic learning, remote learning, off-site learning, a-learning (any time, any place and anywhere learning) and so on... (qtd. in Dastjerdi 13133).



Generally, e- learning takes place in two modes: Synchronous and Asynchronous. Synchronous teaching/learning takes place in real time, between teacher/instructor and group of online students. Whereas, asynchronous teaching/learning doesn't take place in real time. Audio/video conferencing, online lectures, live chat etc. are the examples of Synchronous teaching. Whereas, recorded lectures, assignments, emails etc. form part of Asynchronous teaching/learning process.

Khan (qtd. in Shahabadi & Uplane 132) provides a comprehensive definition of Synchronous and Asynchronous learning. He defines Synchronous e-learning as “Interact of participants with an instructor via the Web in real time” ... And “Asynchronous learning refers to instruction that is not constrained by geography or time”.

Like many other sectors, ICT has played significant role in the education sector also. And the tools like computers, mobile phones, TV, internet, software applications etc. have contributed tremendously during this challenging time. There are various online tools that are being used nowadays by most of the teaching fraternity to deliver lessons. To name few: Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, Skype, WhatsApp, Go to Webinar, Webex Meetings, e-mails, LMS etc. Mostly, all the educational institutions are using one of the above-mentioned tools to conduct online classes. For example, Zoom, is a very popular web-based video conferencing tool that is being deployed by many faculties to impart online classes. This tool provides an opportunity to teachers as well as students to meet virtually, teaching and learning takes place in real time. Most of the times teacher delivers his/her lecture using video conference feature allowing students to take part in the learning process. This tool allows teacher to share the content via

screen sharing application thus, providing both audio and video facilities. This is an example of synchronous online learning. Other platforms like: Microsoft Teams, Google meet, Skype, Go to Webinar and Webex Meetings etc. work on the similar lines.

Today, almost all the educational institutions have adapted online mode of teaching and learning. Although, online teaching has witnessed many positive outcomes but it has posed many obstacles and challenges for both teachers and students. In this section the researcher will be sharing his online teaching experiences, its merits as well as demerits. In this section, the researcher will also highlight the issues faced by students during online teaching. The facts will be presented in his section using the results obtained by conducting online survey on language students. While teaching online, the researcher uses MS Teams software, developed by Microsoft and Amizone Learning Management System (A-LMS), used at Amity University Haryana. MS Teams give option of video conferencing, where content can be delivered online and screen sharing option further improves the teaching/learning experience. In addition to this, teacher can upload study materials; notes, share video links and students can download it under the section files. This software allows audio-video class and maximum of 250 participants can join at a time. Another important feature of this software is: it allows teachers to schedule meeting well in advance by mentioning date, time and topic and students are notified by an e-mail. Another software that the researcher generally use for assignments and evaluations is Amizone Learning Management System (A-LMS) this software is used by Amity University and it is developed mainly for students and faculties of Amity University. Both the software functions well and helps in achieving the set targets. Apart from these software, the researcher uses: e-mail, WhatsApp, Google classroom etc. to facilitate and cater the needs of those students who face challenges while connecting online. During online classes, the researcher faced various challenges, but at the same time there were also some positive outcomes. The obstacles and challenges faced by him while teaching online are as follows:

- Complaints of poor internet connectivity from student's side.
- Students always use excuse of poor internet to abstain from the classes.
- Students disable the video while attending classes. As it slowdowns speed of internet in their mobiles. Under such circumstances, it becomes arduous to monitor the progress of the class.
- Impossible to involve everyone in the group activities.
- Some students never ask queries. They remain as passive learners.
- Some students don't have either internet facility or advanced mobiles that support online learning software.
- Some students are technologically challenged.
- Assessment is really a challenge as; it is difficult to monitor whether students are not using unethical means to complete their assignments.

Positive outcomes:

- Enhanced interaction: students who are introvert and shy are seen actively participating and interacting in online classes.
- Various students have shown improvement in oral as well as, listening skills.
- A large number of students have become technically sound.
- Learning by mobile apps has significantly improved the vocabulary of the students.

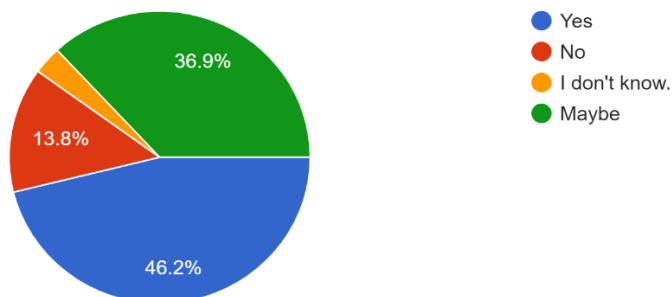
To know the students' perspective on online learning, the researcher conducted an online survey on university's students. In total 65 students of both UG and PG level, participated in the survey. In the survey, students were asked various questions related to online teaching/learning of foreign language. The detailed analysis of the data obtained from students is mentioned below:

Analysis of the data

Q.1

Do you think online teaching is beneficial?

65 responses

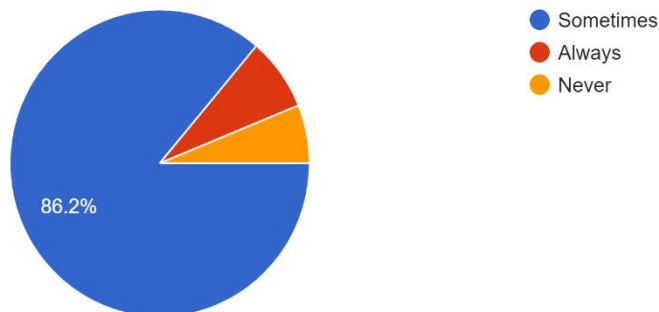


The above data suggest that around 46.2 percent students find online teaching beneficial. Whereas, 36.9 percent students are not sure about the same and 13.8 percent don't find it fruitful.

Q2.

How often do you face connectivity issues while attending online classes ?

65 responses

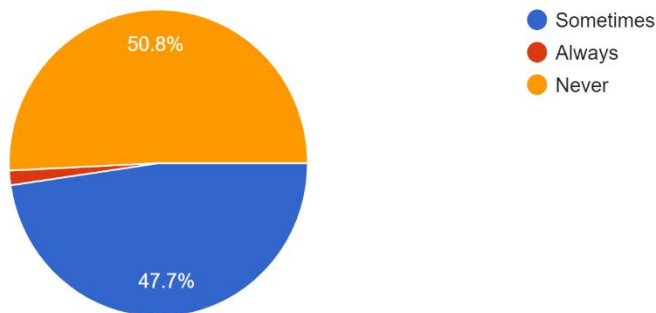


As per the above data 86.2 percent students sometimes face connectivity issues while attending online classes. Whereas, 7.7 percent students always face connectivity issues.

Q3

How often do you use excuse of poor internet to abstain from the classes ?

65 responses

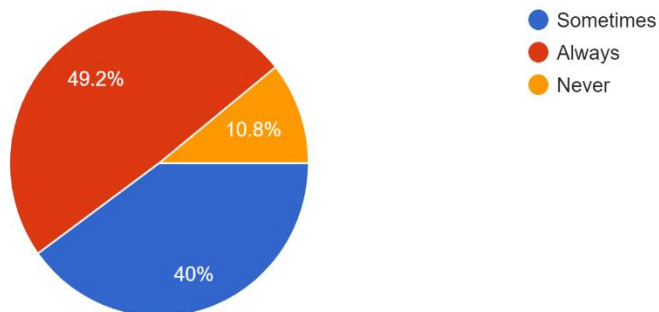


The above data suggests that around 47.7 percent students use excuse of poor internet to bunk classes. Although, 1.5 percent students admitted to use always this excuse as tool for not attending classes.

Q.4

How often do you disable video while attending online classes ?

65 responses

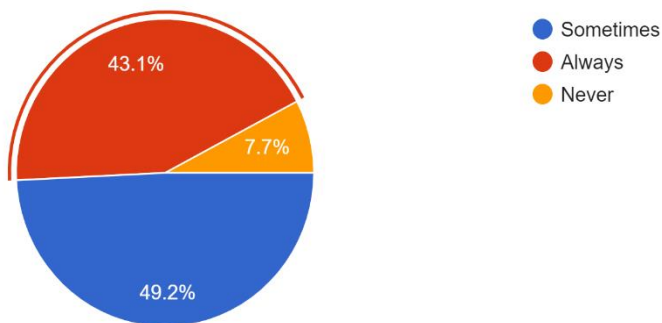


The above data suggests that around 49.2 percent students always disable their video while attending classes. Also, 40 percent students admitted to have sometimes their cameras turned off during online classes. Around 10.8percent students never turns it off.

Q5.

How often do you ask questions or clear your doubts while attending online classes?

65 responses

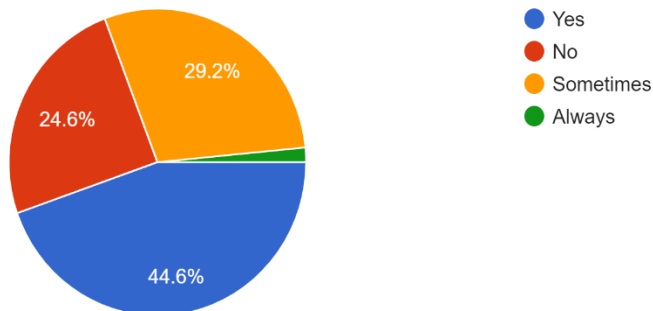


The above data suggest, 43.1 percent students always clear their doubts. Whereas, 49.2 percent students sometimes participate and 7.7percent remain silent.

Q.6

Do you think online teaching has reduced your level of hesitation or do you feel more comfortable in asking questions online ?

65 responses

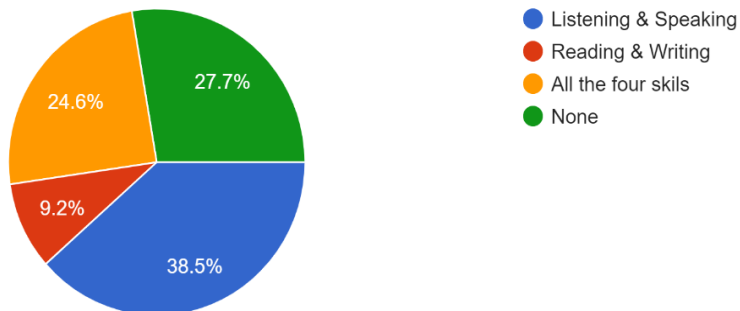


As per the above data around 44.6 percent students feel that online teaching has made them more confident. Whereas, 29.2 percent students sometimes feel comfortable in asking question and 24.6 percent doesn't agree with the same.

Q7.

Which of the following Skill/s of yours, do you think have improved the most while taking online language classes?

65 responses



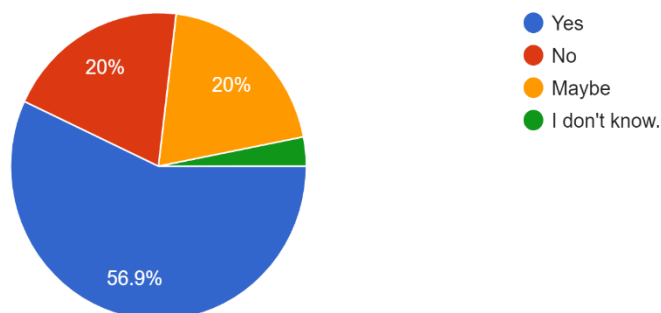
The above data suggests that 38.5 percent students' listening and speaking skills have improved. On the other side, 24.6 percent have improved all the four language skills and 9.2

percent improved their reading and writing skills respectively. For 27.7 percent students it didn't help.

Q.8

Do you feel comfortable while attending online classes?

65 responses



The above data reveals that 56.9 percent students feel comfortable while attending online classes. On the other hand, 20 percent students don't feel comfortable and another 20 percent are not sure about the same.

The analysis of the above data reveals the students' perspective on online teaching/learning. The researcher got mixed results from the analysis of the data. For example, approximately 47 percent students, which are 30 students out of 65 find online teaching beneficial. Whereas, rest of the students either don't find it beneficial or they are not sure about the same. The analysis of the data also reveals that around fifty percent students, sometimes face internet connectivity issues and another around 48 percent students, use it as an excuse for not attending classes. Also, around 50 percent students disable their video while taking online classes. Under such circumstances, where either students face internet issues or find excuses for not attending classes, it becomes a challenging task for a teacher to achieve set goals. Also, many students don't find online teaching/ learning as beneficial as face-to- face learning and many students don't feel comfortable while attending classes online. These are the few impediments in online teaching/learning. Although, the data revealed some positive sides also: the students have shown improvements in their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, they have become more confident in asking questions and their level of hesitation has reduced significantly.

In order to minimize the barriers of online teaching/ learning, students should be counseled and given formal training on the benefits of virtual teaching/learning during the current pandemic situation. Also, there must be workshops and online-sessions designed especially, for the students on the use of different online platforms, which will make them more comfortable and confident in using the same. For teachers also, before adopting any

online teaching tools or methods they must ensure that are they equipped with the latest technological advancements taking place in the education sector? And carefully consider and contemplate on the questions like: if he or she is equipped with the necessary tools and aware of the latest technologies used in the teaching/learning process? How virtual learning is different from face to face learning? If the target group i.e. students are computer literate and have access to the gadgets required for the virtual learning? If the curriculum is designed aptly considering the mode of teaching? Hampel and Stickler (2005) also suggested a "pyramid" of seven interdependent competencies that online language teachers require.

1) basic ICT skills such as keyboarding, 2) the basics of teaching software such as course management systems, 3) the barriers and advantages inherent in specific teaching applications, 4) how to foster community through such techniques as netiquette and discipline, 5) how to promote online communication through tasks and interactions, 6) how to creatively integrate tools and resources into complex language activities, and 7) one's own unique teaching style.(qtd. in Oliver et al. 270)

Considering the current situation, where face to face teaching is difficult due to Covid-19 pandemic, online teaching/learning is the only possibility left to continue progressing academically. But whenever any change happens, it also brings new challenges with it. Before Covid-19 pandemic, teacher and students were accustomed to the face-to-face mode of teaching/learning. Now, the sudden shift from offline to online teaching/learning, without any formal training left both students and teacher baffled. As most teachers and students were not prepared to handle online classes. But keeping in mind the current scenario, it has become indispensable. For educators also, it has become imperative to be acquainted with the latest teaching technologies, in order to ensure that learning continues in an effective and interesting way. In the present article, the researcher reviewed the important issues related to the virtual language teaching/ learning. After having firsthand experience of virtual teaching, it has been examined that the vast availability of online platforms and internet has made virtual teaching/learning possible and has evolved as a boon for both teachers and students especially, during the current Covid-19 pandemic. Although, it poses many above-mentioned challenges. Also, there are still many students, who don't have good internet access. Many teachers as well as students are not accustomed to the virtual mode of teaching/learning. But these drawbacks may be eliminated, if wider people get the good internet facility and by the mutual cooperation of both the teachers and students.

References

- Dastjerdi, Negin Barat. "Design a Pedagogical Model for Virtual Education: A Comparative Study in Iran and India." *Learning Community: An International Journal of Education & Social Development* 1.1 (2010): 1-14.
- Kumar, Raju. "Convergence of ICT and Education." *World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology* 40.2008 (2008): 556-559.

- Oliver, Kevin, et al. "An Investigation into Reported Differences Between Online Foreign Language Instruction and Other Subject Areas in a Virtual School." *CALICO Journal*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2012, pp. 269–296. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/calicojournal.29.2.269. Accessed 19 Apr. 2021.
- Shahabadi, Mehdi Mehri, and Megha Uplane. "Synchronous and asynchronous e-learning styles and academic performance of e-learners." *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 176 (2015): 129-138.

Author's Bio: Dr. Sumit Gupta is an Assistant Professor and Coordinator of Spanish Language at Amity University Haryana. He is a PhD in Spanish Literature from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.