

Using Technology to Support English Language Learners in Higher Education

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It is not denied that English has become an international language in the globe today and is also increasingly developing as a famous lingua franca, i.e. a communicative language, of global communication (Ananiadou et al., 2011). The former prime minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, acknowledged in Indian parliament that English is ‘the major window for us to the outside world. We dare not close that window, and if we do, it will spell peril for the future!’(*cited in Somathasan, 2019*). Thus, the knowledge of English seems to be crucial and its usage is indispensable in our everyday life, especially in a student’s life.

It is obvious that there is an increasing presence of the English language learners (ELLs) in postsecondary education, but their unique needs, especially the application of learning and teaching methods, are often unmet by the institutions of higher education (Kanno and Varghese, 2010; Sheppard et al., 2015).

Students vary in their educational backgrounds, English proficiency levels, career goals, and reasons for learning English (Kanno and Varghese, 2010; Sheppard et al., 2015). Yet, many higher educational institutes are unable to offer courses in English as a Second Language (ESL) that take into account this heterogeneity. As a result, many ELLs spend valuable time and money on remedial courses that do not meet their educational needs, which makes them less likely to persist in their coursework or enter a degree track (Mamiseishvili, 2012).

Considering the broad range of backgrounds and experiences of ELLs in higher education, it is a challenging task for programmes and lecturers to provide the differentiated and apt support that are required to address their needs. When ELLs’ needs are not adequately addressed, ELLs show lower rates of persistence and progress in their higher education. As far as the solutions for this situation are

concerned, the technology-incorporated methods in English language learning and teaching may be a solid solution to the pressing challenges that postsecondary institutions face in promoting an individual's English proficiency.

The use of modern technology like computer technology, multimedia technology, and internet; and its attraction and influence on both students and teachers in English language learning and teaching has become indispensable. The technology is now generally accepted as an important educational tool and it has delved into the domain of learning and teaching of English. That is, the technology encompasses an innovative application of methods, tools, materials, devices, systems, and strategies which are directly relevant to English language learning and teaching and lead to the achievement of the desired goals. Chapelle (2009) confidently says that technologies can enhance language teaching and learning. Students can learn to interact effectively in English across vast global digital networks (Lotherington and Jenson, 2011). Huber et al. (2015) state that technologies also contribute to language learning when they are used to encourage the development of 'new' or 'multi' literacies that are needed to meet the demands of twenty-first century living. Deborah et al. (2008) say that the students are surrounded by technology and this technology can provide interesting and new approaches to language teaching because 'the use of technology for teaching and learning is moving their institution in the right direction'.

The following are some of the advantages of using technology in English language learning and teaching:

1. Technology motivates students to learn English.

In the current technology-based teaching and learning environment, there is less room in the English language classroom for the traditional teaching and learning methods. Now, the traditional classroom is being increasingly replaced by the modern technological features like audio, video, computer, Multimedia, and animation effects which motivate the students to learn English quickly and effectively; and further, the students make an easy access to information regarding the target language, i.e. English. With such features as abundant-information and crossing time and space, the technology creates a real-life context for English language teaching, which greatly cultivates the students' interest and motivation in learning the language.

2. Technology develops students' communicative competence.

Traditional teaching methods hardly help the learners of English achieve their goal because these methods mostly hamper the students' capacity to understand the structure, meaning, and function of the language. Further, such teaching methods make the students the passive recipients of knowledge. At this junction, the technology plays a vital role in integrating teaching and learning of English and provides the students greater incentives, carrying for "students' future competitiveness at the workplace" (Deborah et al., 2008). Moreover, the utilization of technology in a lecture breaks the monotony of the students, made by the traditional lecture method; and it makes the students enjoyable and stimulating in their learning process. That is, the technology encourages the students' positive thinking and communication skills in learning the language. For example, the use of a PowerPoint presentation of a language component in a lecture activates the students' thinking and the capacity to comprehend the language easily. Its audio and visual effects help them transform the English learning into capacity cultivation. It creates a positive environment for the classroom activities such as group discussion, subject discussion, and debates, which can offer more opportunities for communication among the students and between the teachers and the students.

3. Technology widens the students' knowledge about the culture of English.

The use of technology that is now-a-days mostly connected to English language offers the students with more information than textbooks; and helps them be familiar with cultural backgrounds and real-life language materials, which can attract the students to learning. Having the plethora of information through the use of technology, the students can be equipped with the knowledge about the target language. This brings about an information-sharing opportunity among the students and makes them actively participate in the class activities which help the students learn the language more quickly and effectively.

4. Technology improves the teaching efficiency.

It is obvious that the technology is a boon for lecturers as it amply provides the lecturers the contents for classroom activities and improves their teaching; and as a result, it makes the best of class time. Further, the students are given the focus and they become the active participants in the classroom, and moreover using student-friendly technology breaks the teacher-centred traditional teaching methods and fundamentally improves the teachers' teaching efficiency and has become 'central to language practice' (Gary, 2013). In a traditional large language

class, it is somewhat difficult for the students to speak or communicate with the teachers and their peers as the traditional teaching methods only emphasize on teachers' instruction and provide the limited information to the students. Further, the class will be a time consuming one. But the utilization of technology-based language laboratory will sort out this problem and materializes the face-to-face teaching and communication effectively as the technology goes beyond time and space and creates more real-life environment for English learning and teaching; and further economizes the class time, but providing more language information to the students.

5. Technology enhances the interaction among the students and between teachers and students.

Gary Motteram (2013) is one the efficient scholars to work on the effectiveness of technological use in the language classrooms. He says that it is still 'the case that most teachers work in physical classrooms and looking at ways that these spaces can be augmented with digital technologies is a very good starting point'. In fact, the technology in teaching focuses on the active participation of students, and enhances the importance of interaction among the students and between teachers and students. One of the main uses of technology in the classrooms is to improve students' ability to listen and speak, and thereby develop their communicative competence. In this process, the teacher's role as a facilitator is particularly important. The utilization of technology can create a context for the exchange of information among students and between teachers and students, emphasizing "the students' engagement in authentic meaningful interaction" (Warschauer et al., 2000). This opportunity improves the traditional classroom teaching model, as well. In doing so, the teachers in the classrooms no longer force the students to receive the information passively.

6. Technology gives the students the real time feedback.

The technology in the English language classroom can offer real-time feedback, which can be used to personalize instruction for each student's English proficiency level, academic needs, and personal interests, with little burden on the teacher. Though a typical curriculum or textbook offers a uniform approach for all students, the technology can improve learning by offering the access to a broad array of authentic real-world content and engaging materials. Further, technology gives students an opportunity to access high-quality reliable learning materials freely and sometimes with some restrictions, thus offering greater flexibility for ELLs with competing priorities. Currently, the studies show the ways in which the

technology can be effectively used to meet the diverse needs of ELLs in higher education, particularly the ways to increase their English language proficiency and academic skills. Al-Jarf (2004) in an experimental study of a web-based supplemental writing programme for postsecondary ELLs finds that those who received the intervention improved their writing abilities more than those who did not; specifically, ELLs with access to the online writing programme made fewer errors and produced writing samples that were more fluid and proficient compared with peers who did not receive the intervention. Moreover, more researches have been done and now also going on to understand how technology can be further used to develop ELLs' language skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Finally, it is strongly accepted that the higher educational institutions must harness the cutting edge technology to engage and inspire the next generation. As a result, the student beings are becoming the very visual beings.

Some disadvantages of using technology in English Language Learning

Though there are ample benefits for ELLs and teachers in using the modern technology in higher educational institutes, there are many disadvantages of using technology, as well. Three of them are pointed out below:

1. Technology is a supplementary tool for learning and teaching of English

If the ELLs are totally dependent on modern technological devices during their learning process, they may turn into slaves to technology and cannot play the key role as an individual learner by lacking logical and critical thinking which are indispensable for higher educational students to develop themselves. Further, as far as the technological knowledge of most of the teachers is concerned, they are active in using technology, but they are not proficient enough to handle it properly. Moreover, if the teachers stand by the computer all the time and students are just concentrating on the screen, the teachers cannot have the direct eye contact with the students. That is why, Warschauer et al. (2000) state that 'electronic communication within a single class might be viewed as an artificial substitute for face-to-face communication and it should be considered and used as a tool for effective teaching and learning'.

2. Technology gives lack of communication between students and teachers

The communication between the learners and teachers in a language class makes the teaching-learning process alive. Though the use of modern technology in the language classrooms raises the interest of the students through audio, visual, and

textual effects upon the students, it lacks interaction among the students and between teachers and students. That's why, Deborah et al. (2008) cleverly claim that 'teachers have to use pen pals before they access to keypals; print magazines and newspapers before they have online news; and work in groups face to face before they collaborate in virtual worlds'.

3. Technology gives lack of real-time teaching

Warschauer et al. (2000) express that 'students need to be given maximum opportunity for authentic social interaction'. But when the technology is used in the class, the opportunity shrinks without providing lots of discussion formed through questions and answers between teachers and students. Further, the technology minimizes the teachers' real-time questions and their guidance for the students to make them think, and to build up their capacity to give the answers.

In conclusion, the prime purpose of using the modern technology in English language learning in higher education is not only to promote the students' motivation and learning interest in the English language, but also to fully improve their critical, logical, and practical language skills. It is clear that the modern technology plays a vital role to achieve and fulfill the said things firmly. Despite some disadvantages of using modern technology in learning English in the classroom, it can be effectively used by a lecturer as a supporting or supplementary tool for English language learners' language development in the classroom to great extent.

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