Octamoda: An Integrated Online Education Approach to English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This paper assimilates the protocol of 'distanced learning through networking' as different from the Distance Education in the annals of Higher Education. The prevailing pandemic has greatly impacted the teaching-learning methods, mandating teachers towards a quick and effective delivery in virtual classrooms, in order to prevent time lapse at all levels of education. This article throws light on the specifications of a virtual language classroom in extending the needed thrust towards communication at varied levels in the English classroom. The paper outlines a unique eight-dimensional approach named Octamoda, which includes the teaching of LSRW skills that in turn rely on the C4 sub-skills, namely comprehension, contextualisation, composition, and communication that form the matrix for effective language learning and teaching in the online mode. Considerable emphasis is laid on the necessity of a credible language learning ambience that would instill fluency and ease in comprehending and communicating as students pursue higher and advanced education, and promote self-learning thereafter. A few suggestions on grading, evaluation, and setting aims and objectives of English language teaching, keeping things relevant towards a student-centred approach, have also been discussed.

Keywords: Online Teaching, Comprehension, Contextualization, Composition, Communication, Planned Interaction.

Introduction

It has been generally observed that education is the backbone of a society, and language and learning anchors the progress of every field that communicates knowledge and reason to the world. "Online Learning is not the next big thing, it is the now big thing" (Web), said Donna J. Abernathy. Online education is the watchword of today's generation, which has been forced indoors in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. It has greatly impacted the teachers and the students in dealing with the devices and tools designed by technology to provide education at individual doorsteps. The online teaching platform does attract a language learner, as the advanced audio-visual aids enhance listening and reading skills to a great extent, as the students listen without distractions, unless there is an issue with the network. Peer interference and other physical classroom diversions are minimal as the student is engrossed in the illustrated screen that displays the study material with the teacher's voice.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Octamoda is an eight-dimensional holistic framework that draws its inspiration from Bloom's Taxonomy. In 1956, Benjamin Bloom, with his collaborators Max Englehart, Edward Furst, Walter Hill, and David Krathwohl, introduced a framework to classify the various educational goals in his work 'Taxonomy of Educational Objectives'. According to Benjamin Bloom, the six major areas were knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Knowledge helps in remembering, comprehension helps in understanding, application helps in contextualising and communicating, analysis helps in breaking down the parts, synthesis helps in composing and putting the parts together, and evaluation helps in judging and assessing the reality. With Bloom's taxonomy as the theoretical background, the proposed paradigm seeks to synchronise language skills with educational goals. Hence, 'Octamoda' precisely adheres to the language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing, without which language acquisition, fluency, and proficiency would fail to grow. The title also threads four other sub-skills that entwine each of the LSRW skills, namely comprehension, contextualisation, communication, and the ability to 'compose' at an advanced level of language learning across genres. The proposed 'Octamoda' approach framework is represented in Fig. 1.
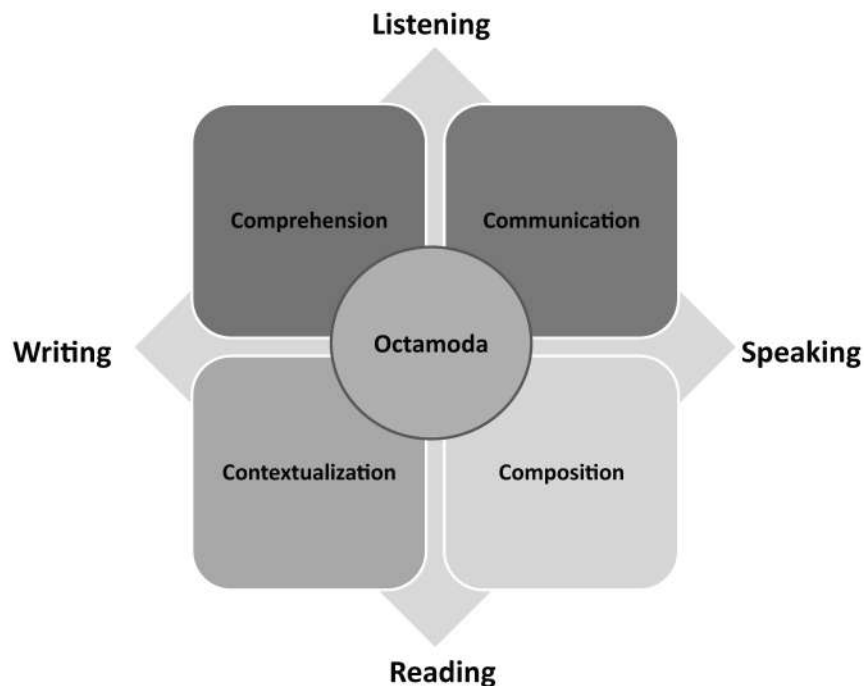
Fig. 1: The Octamoda Framework Visualised by the Researchers in this Study

According to Alan Clarke, "Traditional learning methods are generally tutor-centred in that they determine what, when and how you study. E-learning offers you more freedom to choose but in doing so you also have increased responsibility for your learning" (3). Unlike traditional learning, the Octamoda approach provides more freedom and autonomy to the learners to move between the language learning goals and objectives. As Dave Willis put it,

Language teaching and learning aim at practical outcomes in the real world, not simply at classroom outcomes. If we want to show that a feature of language has been taught or learned it is not enough to show that a learner can produce it under artificial conditions, in a grammar test for example, or as a controlled response to a teacher's question. We need to see that it has become a consistent part of the learner's language repertoire, that the learner can use it consistently as part of an act of communication. (Hunston & Oakey 6)

Hence, if the four language skills, LSRW, form the fundamental matrix of the framework, the four sub-skills, comprehension, contextualisation, communication, and composition (C4) represent the four windows through which the learners view their world.

Comprehending concepts and contexts is vital before communication, to fulfil need, purpose, and expression that would transmit messages and trigger thoughts and ideas in the learner, based on their perceptive abilities. Listening comprehension and reading comprehension lead to context-based writing and speaking, which in turn impacts listeners and readers. Contextualisation is the basis for a language to happen. Contexts demand the right use of vocabulary to express intended meaning through structured sentences that organise and arrange words to suit their purpose. Communication receives the right and immediate response when ideas, thoughts, information, and announcements made by verbal, as well as non-verbal, presentations are direct and simple. Learning begins generally with direct and simple words and expressions. Structures of sentences get complicated as per the requirement of conceptual learning, where language accommodates precision and substance that is layered and communicates in degrees with deeper understanding. Signs and symbols too fall under the category of communication necessitating language proficiency to infer and coordinate. Composition begins from the smallest message that is composed to an evolved genre that portrays language proficiency, involving language ethics, formats and contents, widening spheres to relate, analyse, share, and create avenues towards the growth of diction and language in the learner. Creative writing tasks based on a graded level would motivate learners to improve their writing skills. Simple exercises, like diary-writing, would inculcate the habit of writing, which would help produce works like travelogues that relate to real-life situations.

In the Octamoda approach, the students enhance their language skills through language-focused learning. Language-focused learning can have different effects on the learners: it can add directly to implicit knowledge; it can raise consciousness to help later learning; it can focus on systematic

aspects of the language; and it can be used to develop strategies (Nation I. S.P and J. Newton 8) The study throws light on the following questions: How does online learning enable the honing of language skills? What are the strengths and pitfalls of online learning in the area of language acquisition? Why do we need a holistic outlook towards language acquisition and skill building?

Enabling Listening Skills

The first skill, the art of listening, improves only when virtual presentations are made interesting with the needed materials and right language use. It is here that a teacher plays a vital role when they take great control over the right use of vocabulary and correct pronunciation even between the parts of speech, to render the intended meaning to the listener. The online approach accommodates screen displays, where the exact way of voicing a word or syllable can be heard independently by each of the students. However, it is a challenging task for the teachers who may be unable to test the performance of every student in a classroom that exceeds the strength of 40 or 50. In that case, dictation, dictocomp, and dictogloss are some of the tasks that can be explored in a larger class.

Listening skills are generally enhanced by way of listening to the news, dialogues, conversations, debates, group discussions, and narration of episodes and stories. Constant exposure to such activities with selected students participating while the others listen, or listening to poetry reading by native speakers or poets, would not only enhance listening skills, but also get the students to comprehend, contextualise,

communicate, and compose quality literature in the genre that interests them. Listening teaches listeners to pronounce, pause, intonate, infer, and correlate sounds with spelling.

They learn voicing interjections that mean a lot only when sounded correctly. The meaning of punctuation takes effect only when they are voiced during a listening session. At this juncture, the non-verbal communicative methods should also be given importance, as they include discourse markers, non-lexical fillers, gap fillers, gestures, and body language on the part of the communicator, and the screen display, which would involve encoding data in varied modes, like tables, graphs, bar diagrams, tree diagrams, flow charts, and so on. Decoding the non-verbal presentations is similar to comprehending a speaker in varied contexts; nevertheless, non-verbal presentations are much quicker and easier to decode than a verbal instruction in a given context.

Listening is associated with an art, as language is fathomless in lyrics and rhythms when it stimulates a listener to comprehend the world in multi-dimensional perspectives and paves the way towards internalising experiences and acquiring diction that would enrich the vocabulary kit. Long hours of listening to any genre of literature would radically improve creative expressions in the listener, which would impact personality development and contribute to behavioural ethics, thus getting them ready to compose, contextualise, and communicate to the world.

Developing Speaking Skills

Speaking, the second major skill in language

learning, involves a lot of listening, where a keen listener interprets sounds as meaningful or otherwise. Speaking develops with language use in the appropriate contexts. Exposure to the English language of the native speakers brings the needed ability to voice the words the way they are spelt, sometimes to notice the way certain vowels and consonants remain silent, the way the same vowel with a different consonant is sounded differently, and so on. The online platform distances the child from the teacher; moreover, the virtual classes are timed and each participant is unable to get the required attention from the teacher to enhance speaking skills as far as individual word-pronunciation is concerned. Practice alone does not make one perfect; it is said that perfect practice makes perfect.

Constant practice of speaking the language would improve the performance of the speaker, and they learn the tact of using the right word in the right context. Tone plays a vital role while speaking, thus impacting the listener. Intonations well adhered to while communicating brings the desired response and effect from the audience or the listeners. A word, a phrase, a clause, a sentence, or a quotation is significant only when used wisely, where communication becomes effective and receives the expected response. Online classes could provide help in playing audio-visuals that relate to the lessons to create a first-hand experience in witnessing contextual communication that would improve comprehending abilities and language learning. Speaking platforms for students include debates, story-telling, description, dialogues, conversation, elocution, recitation, prepared speeches of varied kinds, and group discussions. However, the testing part of a student's learning may not be one hundred per cent possible as all the students do not get to participate.

A virtual classroom is more equipped with tools and devices like microphones, mobiles, and recorders, which might help children who may record sessions, replay, listen, and speak. Social media is a standing example where so much is learnt off-hand and effortlessly reproduced to the same effect. So, educational channels too could enhance speaking skills, where performance and aptitude to learn the language increases in order to make good a conversation, instruction, request, or a command in day-to-day life possible, with ease, fluency, and perfect diction. Speaking makes a learner confident in the language of communication. Contextualisation, a sub-skill of speaking, is essential for any kind of speech to choose the right diction. Speakers must know the caliber of the audience, the purpose of the speech, and the nature of content to make their presentation good. Here, vocabulary, tone, body language, cohesion, coherence, and concord hold a significant place.

Enhancing Reading Skills

The third skill, namely reading, is one that enriches quick comprehension, spelling, word power, and contextual and semantic use of syntax. Grammar and vocabulary get their needed attention when structure and meaning evolve with reading unknown texts. Extensive reading abilities must be fostered at a very young age and age-appropriate books prescribed, to promote writing and memory. Online platforms do provide

immense quality audio visuals, which enable learners to read silently and listen carefully, to learn reading and pronunciation simultaneously. As foreign learners, students from varied linguistic backgrounds do find it difficult to read without their native accent that influences speaking abilities too. Reading does not stop with conventional or contemporary texts of varied genres. It involves the ability to decode information from signs and gestures that is to be translated into the needed language. The required language to interpret messages in varied forms is achieved only through regular exposure to the language in the verbal form. Reading for pronunciation, reading for vocabulary, reading to learn grammatical structures, reading for information, reading for spelling, and reading to acquire speed are some of the areas covered to build reading abilities in learners. The ability to read is one of the most essential skills that enable learners to lead independent lives and comprehend the world.

Reading has its significance only after its acquisition. It is much later in life that most of the non-native speakers of English desire to know much, but are unable to grow with the text due to their inability to infer texts which are beyond their comprehension abilities. E-reading has become a portal on the Internet, where e-books invite the attention of readers. Task-based learning could come a long way when students are made to read and relate facts from inference of texts read. Reading tasks not only help in acquiring information, they also help the learner to spell right, speak right, word right, and punctuate and pause correctly before they get ready to write. Mandatory reading helps

in the learner choosing the field of his choice to continue reading lifelong and enhance vocabulary to communicate well. Loud reading as beginners enables good spelling and syllabification that prompts better written communication skills. A constant watch on punctuation is necessary to include them at the appropriate place while they compose and communicate.

Honing Writing Skills

The fourth skill, namely writing, is an essential skill that enables a person to communicate to the world. All that has been read has been written already. Good reading skills enable better writing, with minimal errors, contextual and conceptual clarity, correct spelling, punctuation, and exactness of information. Writing skills can be examined online by prompting learners to complete phrases, proverbs, captions, and vocabulary-based exercises that would test various lexical items like compounds, phrasal verbs, clipped forms, abbreviations, acronyms, blended forms, and so on, to enable learners to understand effective language use. Writing for a purpose has its own hallmarks; good writing exhibits accuracy, brevity, and clarity for quick and immediate communication. This is where word power plays a vital role. Good writing skills are not taught. Learners were only led to practise writing in conventional methods by way of transcriptions, in order to improve on spelling, structure of sentences, and punctuation, and to learn organisation of paragraphs and essays. This was basically done decades back to help learners acquire good handwriting too. Writing aids memory to a great extent.

Composition plays a vital role in teaching and academic writing, where format and content have their own significance towards communication and comprehension. Based on the context of the written material, the reader understands the accumulated words in memory and grasps the content. Writing skills can be displayed in formats to teach learners online, according to their intended purpose. Some of the written exercises that English language teaching comprises are composition/letter writing, note making, summarising, article writing, advertising, précis writing, paraphrasing, and notice writing. Some of these demand precision, while others need elaboration. Planned editing exercises could be designed in such a way that learners spot errors and learn effective language use, along with correctness.

Paragraph or essay writing must be taught with a purpose, be it expository, argumentative, descriptive, or narrative, so that learners acquire writing skills with good grammar, observing cohesion and coherence, sequencing by way of introducing the title, paragraphing the content with an idea each and a topic sentence, and a final conclusion that sums up the paragraphs and justifies the title. Language structures and formats are interlinked to create a meaningful performance from the learner's end. Establishing basic writing skills at the elementary stage would ensure better performance by way of encouragement and guidance from the teachers who learn along with the learners so as to evolve new and interesting techniques of language acquisition. To enhance such skills, long years of exposure to the English language

should be made mandatory; further, the methodologies and strategies adopted must be age-appropriate, attractive, interesting, and fulfilling to the learner. Developing a good rapport with the learners becomes essential.

Experiment and Observations

An experiment on C4 aspects in relation to LSRW skills was carried out in the English classroom and the observations were recorded.

Experiment Level 1 LC4: A short story on the importance of sharing during the pandemic was narrated by the teacher with the help of some images on the screen. The students listened to the story attentively. The teacher did not disclose the ending of the story. Instead, she asked the students to suggest an ending to the tale. In this way the learners comprehended, contextualised, composed, and communicated the different endings using their creativity and imagination.

Experiment Level 2 SC4: The teacher shared a TED Talk video on global warming with the students. The students watched and listened with interest. Then the teacher asked them to simulate a speech on the same topic. The learners were both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated, as they were aware of the different levels of comprehending, contextualising, composing, and communicating to the audience.

Experiment Level 3 RC4: The learners got an opportunity to read out a story on the lockdown situation. The reading session was followed by tasks to test their memory, understanding, application, analysis,

evaluation, and creativity that contributed to better comprehension, contextualisation, composition, and communication.

Experiment Level 4 WC4: Based on the other three interrelated tasks, the students were given an opportunity to write a poem/a short passage or a story in relation to the contemporary times. Students wrote on different themes, such as home, family, relationships, frontline workers, loneliness, despair, suffering, hope, and travel.

Conclusion

Through this experiment we argue for, and try to demonstrate, a holistic approach to the teaching-learning process through online mode in the pandemic times. The experiment helped the learners to understand the reality and respond to them in a creative and critical manner. The experiment also had a therapeutic effect on the learners who were anxious about their friends and relatives affected by Covid-19 and who had also lost their near and dear ones to this deadly disease. Octamoda as an integrated approach to learning helped them to view the pandemic and its effects with objectivity.

Octamoda integrates LSRW skills with comprehension, contextualisation, composition, and communication that threads activities and encourages participation based on the interests of the learner and the genres that suit their aptitude. However, all the four skills form the framework of language learning and the sub-skills listed interweave the logic of use for a purpose and the less the use the more we lose. This helps the learners gain knowledge through understanding and

in turn guides them to put theory into practice, and vice versa. Hence, as far as language learning is concerned, it is not the virtual or the physical classroom that matters; the individual's aptitude towards language learning is absolutely important to develop a flair to listen, speak, read, and write by way of regular practice, in order to evolve into good listeners, better speakers, wide readers, and effective writers.

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