Coping with Covid-19: Prognosis for Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

For the past several months now, since March 2020 to be precise, the academic world has changed drastically in the mode of functioning. With physical classes almost non-existent and everything switching to the online mode because of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been an unprecedented situation prevailing in the educational sector. Now, though on-campus sessions are slowly beginning, it may never be the same again. This paper examines the various aspects of these forced changes and suggests methods to overcome challenges in the new circumstances. The areas dealt with are (i) the online mode of teaching-learning, (ii) the psychological effects on the learner, (iii) the shifts in the role of the teacher, and (iv) the problems faced in assessment.

Keywords: ICT, Online Learning, Engaged Learning, CMCL, Assessment.

Introduction

Online teaching and learning is nothing new to academia across the globe. It has been around since the time ICT tools became popular several years ago. What was new was the situation where education became limited to the online medium and there was a complete absence of direct physical instruction. This was where the challenges lay for both the educators and the learners.

Education was one of the worst affected sectors in the Covid pandemic. Being one of the oldest professions in the world, it had relied on time-tested methods of direct instruction for all its transactions. It is one of the professions where advancements in technology have been accommodated, but traditional instructional methods have not been replaced. However, the pandemic had forcefully eliminated, at least temporarily, the possibility of the use of any direct physical instructional methods.

All the stakeholders including teachers, students, and parents have striven their best to minimise the negative impacts of this extraordinary situation. The education sector has adapted to the new normal and adopted teaching-learning strategies according to the demands of the times. This spirit of enterprising educationists who are willing not just to accept change, but to embrace it with enthusiasm, should be appreciated.

Going Online

Online teaching-learning process is an evolved format of the distance education system, which has been in vogue for quite some time now. Such online environments have been running parallel to the traditional classroom learning for the past several years. It is important to understand how the teaching-learning process differs in these two

environments. Gudea and Ryan (2008) observe that with online systems, the changes have become just more massive and intensive. "The advent of the personal computer and the Internet brings a different set of challenges and promises. It is a process still in transition; yet, the versatility of the Internet to bridge information, geography, culture, and language surpasses everything else that has been tried in education before."

Language education is a unique sector. which has not done away with traditional teaching methods despite new technologies making fast inroads into it. Chalk-and-talk remains a major teaching strategy in educational institutions across the world. Information and communication technology (ICT) has not been successful in removing the blackboard (or the whiteboard) from the classrooms. Rather, it was never felt to be necessary to remove them. The new developments just serve as additional resources for the teachers and the students. Regarding the success of the endeavour to shift to an online mode, Yandell (2020) speaks from his experience: "Something else emerges from the experiences of the past two months: online teaching tends to be a poor substitute for the real thing. Teaching and learning are embodied, irreducibly social activities. Classrooms, even postgraduate seminar rooms, are extraordinarily complex, unpredictable and exciting places, precisely because they are places where myriads of interactions happen more or less simultaneously." A teacher or student could just make the best of the available conditions to create a virtual classroom atmosphere. He further observes that such online interactions could become meaningful to some extent,

only because they had built it "on a shared history of offline, embodied interactions, in school and in the seminar room" before the onset of the pandemic. Creating such a rapport among the teachers and students who have never met would take far too much effort, and therein lies one challenge.

Yet another challenge is when classes are broadcast through television or the Internet, creating a wide disparity in the way they are received by students, depending upon their social and economic situations. Yi and Jang (2020) observe from their South Korean experience: "one critique of the content of the English program is that it tends to be geared toward middle-class students in urban areas, and not well suited for students from other backgrounds." In the same school, the teacher would transact a lesson differently in different classes. Such a possibility is completely precluded in sessions that are broadcast. In India, where the rural-urban divide is acute, there is a wide disparity in the reach of such programmes.

Pedagogy and the Student Psyche

Teaching, especially for the language teacher, has never been considered to be just a transfer of knowledge and information from one brain to another. It is more of a heart-to-heart process, which is heavily impacted by the lack of physicality in the pandemic situation. Ko and Rossen (2010) observe that there are some negative psychological impacts of the online learning environment compared to the physical classroom ambience:

"Even though the requirements of the course are clearly outlined in the syllabus and in the class announcements, the effect isn't the same

as seeing an instructor glare severely at the class and announce that the essays are due the following week, without fail. Assignments are completed at home, often in solitude, and submitted through the click of a button, without that warm feeling students sometimes get when they pass in their exam papers or hand their essays over to their teacher in person. Indeed, without the discipline and structure imposed by the requirement of physically sitting in a classroom, students often feel cast adrift."

This observation points at the lack of emotional fulfillment, which is a peculiarity of online sessions. The physical bonding with the teacher and the peer group undoubtedly has a great influence on the learners. This social distancing has an irremediable impact on the student psyche. While the instructor or peers may be accessible synchronously in the online environment, it is evident that the virtual presence does not compensate for the physical absence.

"The complicated mechanisms of human expression—facial expressions, voice intonation, body language, eye contact—are also no longer available…. Most of us rely on body language to deflect the impact of what we say; we convey our true intentions through gestures and vocal intonation. The absence of these conventions sometimes causes students real distress."

It is generally accepted that body language and non-verbal signals play a pivotal role in communication. With most of the learners muted and invisible in the online synchronous classes, the rapport built in a traditional classroom cannot be expected here. The teacher is left to speculate on whether the ideas are being properly conveyed to the listeners at the other end.

The shortcomings highlighted are not to reduce the efficacy of the online classes, but to understand and to discover remedies to overcome them. The learners probably sit at their homes or comfortable environments which could bring out the best in them to engage in the classes. Now as the campuses reopen, a combination of these environments could work well for everyone.

The Changing Role of the Teacher

As early as in 1993, King had forecast that the teachers of the contemporary times are becoming guides on the side, rather than sages on the stage. Traditionally, teachers were assumed to hold a very privileged position in the educational scenario. They would gracefully dole out knowledge to the students who would look upon the teacher as the sole possessor of the wealth of knowledge. King observes that the teacher would soon have to abandon such a patronising attitude:

"This model of the teaching learning process, called the transmittal model, assumes that the student's brain is like an empty container into which the professor pours knowledge. In this view of teaching and learning, students are passive learners rather than active ones. Such a view is outdated and will not be effective for the twenty-first century, when individuals will be expected to think for themselves, pose and solve complex problems, and generally produce knowledge rather than reproduce it."

Rather than becoming recipients of

knowledge, here, the learners become co-creators of knowledge. Learning thus becomes an active process, rather than a passive experience. A participative learning experience can create a deep impact on the students. The educators have an opportunity to choose from a plethora of activity tools which are available online. Here, it is not a question of lack of tools, but the difficulty in choosing the right ones from the sea of online activity tools and websites. The teacher has to select one from them and connect the students to it. However, such engaged learning is not automatic and requires some effort from the teacher, who functions as a facilitator in the online environment.

In an ideal learning situation, the students are not left to themselves with the online tools, but are guided from time to time by the teacher. The medium of the computer and the Internet are not a substitute for the teacher. Lamy and Hampel (2007) draw attention to the fact that computer-mediated communication for language learning (CMCL) is nothing new and had made its inroads into education a few decades ago.

"CMCL appeared in the mid-1990s, when institutions began to offer asynchronous text-based networking opportunities to their students. There has since been a gradual deployment of computer tools for synchronous communication, latterly including voice-based Internet telephony, across the different sectors of language education in developed countries, in distance as well as in co-located settings.…"

Even in the traditional classrooms, computers and projectors have been used in the presence of the teacher. They had served as teaching-learning aids and never foreseen as something that would completely overshadow the presence of the teacher. However, the observations of Bach, Haynes and Smith (2007) suggest that the prospects of online learning are not all that bleak and can even turn out to be positive in its effects.

"[O]nline learning methods can add value to traditional face-to-face methods and provide opportunities for reducing some of the weaknesses of traditional teaching methods.… What is fundamentally different is the nature of the medium and its added dimensions in time and place. The change of medium offers new opportunities to move some of the contemporary and the traditional approaches towards learning in more interesting and efficient ways."

Many avenues which were not available in the traditional classroom are opened in the online platforms. which serve to assist both the teacher and the learner. All the online tools available for language teaching could make engaged learning possible, unlike a face-to-face classroom, which is heavily dependent on the teacher.

Not Just a Change in Medium

The physical classroom could not just be recast into the online mode by use of a camera. That would be reducing the effectiveness of an already handicapped scenario of the absence of physicality. The lecture had to evolve and grow into something that is totally different from that perceived in the physical learning environment.

"Much more likely is a coterminous evolution whereby the lecture evolves around

both its synchronous and asynchronous forms. Thus the technologies used to capture the lecture (so as to offer it as an asynchronous experience in the future) are also used live – to present digital video clips and website searching of related literature – within the real live lecture theatre. This seems to fit the 'market model' of higher education now so common, where there is more emphasis on choice, flexibility and diversity. This is against the backdrop of students' part-time working lives and the related stress. Students will increasingly find that they can choose how they experience a lecture from one week to another. Either they take part in the lecture theatre or they receive the material later in their own time."

It becomes a very personal experience when the student decides how to listen to the lecture, whether in a synchronous way or in an asynchronous way watching the recorded version. Further, it renders a flexibility which the rigid traditional classroom space does not provide. The lecture becomes a pointer to the sources of learning and serves as a guide for the students in the vast online space. Such a flexibility in approach caters to the diversity of the learner community as they belong to different socio-economic backgrounds.

Online teaching could also generate embarrassing experiences, as narrated by Turchi, Bondar and Aguilar (2020): "Because the students were at home, the online emergency classroom was sometimes strangely public. University students sometimes inadvertently revealed more of their homes than they intended, especially when their realities now included children suddenly at home and other family

obligations. One student who contacted the first author for help on assignments described how she and her husband were housing elderly cousins who had been kicked out by other family members." Such situations prevent the teacher from taking an active interest in the learning process of the student because the students are themselves in a state where they require assistance at a different level.

The Assessment Hurdle

When the whole world of education is already several months into the pandemic-academic adjustment, there is one aspect which still remains a hard nut to crack. It is the method of assessment that educationists the world over are still perplexed about. While a complete shift to online teaching-learning process is itself quite demanding, the greatest challenge lies in assessment. The traditional three-hour examination in a proctored environment does not seem to be possible in the virtual world. Among the online assessments, quizzes have emerged as the most popular ones, and there are several portals which provide online quizzes. Yandell (2020) observes how language assessment is seriously crippled by depending on such quizzes. Such assessments presuppose that "English is about knowledge – the kind of knowledge that is testable through a series of questions with right (and wrong) answers."

Assessing students is also sometimes frowned upon as a cruel activity in the difficult times of the pandemic. Teachers are requested to show "more grace" towards the students who were not performing to the expected levels (Turchi, Bondar and Aguilar, 2020). When assessment was part of the

regular classroom activity, perhaps it was not so obvious. "Because teachers engage in student assessment as part of their instructional routine, student assessment and evaluation is always present, irrespective of the teaching modality, and is one of the teaching demands that is typical of this profession."

"In general, it is more difficult for teachers to keep track of students' progress online than it is in the traditional, on-ground classroom. The limitations of the technology employed make it more difficult for teachers to monitor students" (Gudea and Ryan, 2008).

It remains a fact that the traditional on-ground classrooms are more reliable because there is less possibility of deceit on the part of the candidates. In the online environment, the examiners are left to guess whether the students are honest in their approach to exams. While there have been a lot of online exam tools that have emerged recently, most of them deal with multiple choice type questions. Questions that require descriptive and detailed answers still remain a challenge for setting up, and even more, for evaluation.

Conclusion

Shifting to the online mode may appear very easy, given the present technological advancements. However, delivering quality education requires paradigm shifts in the areas of course design, content delivery, and assessment. While academia progresses with the reversal to on-campus sessions after the sudden forced shift in mode, agencies responsible for maintaining quality education should urgently focus and address these issues. It has to be mentioned to the credit of

the frontline educators that they have tried to innovate in these difficult times and not waited for the policymakers to evolve solutions. Yet, it is necessary and possible to find out and implement new methods in all these areas so that a combination of online-offline education systems can be streamlined and firmly established in place. As it was said of the dogs and the caravan, pandemics may come and go, but academics have to go on.

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The ELT Practitioner
(The journal that values classroom practices over theories)

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