

Applying available and accessible technology for enhancing oral communication

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ABSTRACT

This article is about a challenge of using technology in education: the struggle of a teacher to be effective in the regular use of technology. The field of education advocates the use of technology, and teachers are trained for this through various programmes. Educational institutions are well advanced in the adoption of technology. The young learner is often adept in the understanding and use of technology and its gadgets. One obstacle in the effective use of technology is the difficulty of knowing what is to be done, and how it is to be done. The time taken for preparation, and the possible failure to make the sessions effective and interesting for the learner often discourage the teachers. When it comes to using technology for enhancing oral communication skills, an instance of simple success is suggested – the use of WhatsApp groups. A tool that can be practised both inside the class and outside, this can be well used for small groups, and can be delivered within a period of eight weeks.

Keywords: Technology in English language teaching; Use of WhatsApp groups.

Exclamation marks and question marks punctuate every doctrine that advocates the use of technology in education. Orientation courses, refresher courses and any in-service programmes for teachers will have sessions on educational technology. Definitions on 'technology' have changed with time – or rather, the images that come to us when we use the word vary with time. Almost gone are the days of overhead projectors, desktop computers, instructional CDs and the like. Internet connectivity was a luxury in institutions a few years ago, but not now. Smart classrooms have lost their sanctity of uniqueness of being the single sacred niche for the whole institution.

An instance from the recent past: a college teacher was invited to take a class for school students. With all preparation she reached the institution; she was armed with a packet of experiences from her earlier visit to the same school – a government-aided school in Kerala. In the earlier instance too (which was six years ago), she had brought in her laptop, and had checked earlier on the availability of sound system and projector. When she had reached the school, the teacher in charge welcomed her, and introduced her to the teacher who was managing the Smart classroom. She got all help from this teacher to fix the computer, to manage the projector, and to run the

sound devices. It was a success. Whenever there was a glitch, she had the teacher's help and assistance. The session was a success. And, she could read on the students' faces the excitement and thrill of being introduced to computers and gadgets. And now to her recent visit: the sessions were almost the same, and so were the team of teachers.

The differences: there was no special Smart classroom. When ushered into a regular classroom, she was interested to note that this class – and most of the classrooms around – were designed to be Smart classrooms. And, more to her surprise: no teacher with the 'IT Expert' stamp! Instead, two students of the class were skilfully manning the gadgets.

Yes, the growth and spread of educational technology calls for exclamation marks. But question marks remain.

With all the gadgets around, with near-latest technology at your hand's reach, why is there still the cry that we are not using technology well in our systems of education? "What to do, how to do" are among the questions demanding answers.

Problems are many. The time a teacher has to invest for preparing a session using technology takes away much of the time that can be well devoted for other ways of meaningful teaching. For a 20-minute session using computers, preparation time can take more than two hours. Readymade stuff either bought or downloaded may not often suit the needs and tastes of our institution or students. And gone is the time when students were captivated by the
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computers or projector displays. More updated and with better mental proximity to technology, a student may be ahead of the teacher in such matters, and it needs much more than mere knowledge and skill to have the child enchanted, enthralled and all the more educated through technology.

Enhancement of language and communication skills has always been considering the use of technology in available ways. The once-upon-a-time popularity of language labs in colleges and schools testifies to this; and sorry is the state that many language labs lie dormant or obsolete due to outdated devices, lack of funds for maintenance, non-availability of materials, problems of regular training of resource persons and the discouragement due to the fact that the time invested does not match the progress achieved.

When academic social conventions call for adequate use of technology in education, and when the teacher finds it hard to locate or develop resources on a regular basis, one solution is to use what is at hand for most of the teachers and students. And the most basic yet most powerful tool of technology for a student or teacher is undoubtedly the mobile phone: specially the Smart Phone.

This article will now describe an experiment conducted among a group of students in a college in Kerala. The purpose of the experiment was to enhance oral communication skills using WhatsApp as a tool. The students participating in this study were undergraduates from various disciplines.

The programme was conducted under the responsibility of a teacher-facilitator. To conduct this experiment, the interest and willingness to involve were sought of the prospective participants. They were required to be in possession of a Smart Phone, and a WhatsApp account. Further, they would need to devote time for this: one hour of contact session a week, and three hours of online presence. Of the three hours, it was also set that they all would need to be online for two sessions of 30 minutes each, at a stipulated time.

For the first contact session, the following activities were practised:

- Brief, personal introduction
- Setting of policies and guidelines
- Formation of a WhatsApp group, with the facilitator as admin
- Exchange of personal information over the WhatsApp group
- Exchange of voice messages over the WhatsApp group
- Setting up of group and individual tasks

Posting of messages in the WhatsApp group would be initially limited to the admin. The admin would also design a WhatsApp broadcast, through which members could be contacted individually. For this, the members were to be placed in the Contacts list in the admin's phone.

To start with, the admin sent voice messages via broadcast to the participants, introducing himself in detail, using short

sentences. The participants were then directed to send back to the admin similar audio descriptions about themselves. The admin would then give a brief feedback on this, with points for modification. The participants were asked to resend the audio with those points in mind. At this point (and in some cases, a few more chances of revision might be required), the admin could forward the audio messages to the main group, with his own one-sentence note on the person. Those notes of introduction were not to be critical on the person's performance.

After all the participants got to listen to audio introductions of the members, the admin could place his general observations in the group. A time was fixed for all the participants to come together in the group. Posting in the group would be made open to all members. The admin could post audios on the exercise conducted, and members could respond or interact using audio or text messages.

In the second contact session, the participants were paired. The admin could be part of a pair if needed. Now the participants were given a list of questions which they could ask their partner. This was to be done with the participants sitting together, but using WhatsApp audio messaging feature. Participant 1 asked a question via audio. After listening to this, Participant 2 responded. Once all the questions were answered by one participant, the roles were switched. To make this activity more interesting, two sets of questions

could be given to a pair, so as to avoid the monotony of repetition.

Further sessions could cater to different elements such as descriptions, short speeches, impromptu conversations, reading and the like. Short videos, with no more than 20 minutes of duration, could be helpful in various levels.

Each contact session should be planned in such a way that one activity or element is introduced, and a short practice is given. The online activity can be a follow-up on this, which should involve exchange of audio between the member and the admin, or between paired members. The common online time should cater to exchange of ideas, tips and suggestions and general evaluation.

A group can be active for a period of eight weeks.

This method can be practised with the willingness and availability of a teacher-facilitator. The willingness of the student is a matter of crucial concern. The challenges include the presence of all

members for the common online time, and the time taken by the facilitator to evaluate individual students. The reward is the improvement seen in the oral performance of the participants, which can be constantly monitored through the audio messages available with the facilitator.

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