

The Predicament of Rural College Students during the Pandemic: An ELA Website for their Rescue

Roopna Ravindran

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to show how a website created by an English teacher helps rural college students to improve their proficiency in English. This customised website is a boon for the rural students during the pandemic, with its video lessons, extracts from the textbooks, and other exciting learning materials. Fiction, comics, poems, audiobooks, auto-updated short news clippings, dictionaries, reference books, verbal reasoning materials for competitive exams, and so on, are available on a single online platform. Students can make use of this simple and user-friendly website at their own pace.

Keywords: ELA and the Covid-19 Pandemic, Learning English by Rural College Students; Online Solution for ELA.

The revelations the Indian democratic society had during the COVID-19 pandemic are myriad. The pandemic has had its ghastly touch in every sector. In the field of Higher Education, we could observe a raging battle between the government, academicians, and students to ensure that India will not lose a generation to the pandemic commotion, making 2020 a zero academic year.

The pandemic brought out an abrupt shift in the mode of learning in the Higher Education sector. The government recommended a move to online learning to evade any disruptions. The urban population welcomed this move and the digital natives reaped the benefits. At the same time, rural colleges went through unique challenges. They did not have adequate online teaching-learning facilities, limited availability of digital devices, lack of proper Internet connections, or digital libraries. Also, the rural students are not familiar with digital technology. A majority of them are not

acquainted with browsing and online searching for learning resources. So, they need guidance from the teachers to make use of relevant online resources. Teachers were given the training to equip themselves with tech skills to face this new normal.

The government was heading towards a digitally equipped society before the pandemic. Free Online Tools and e-Learning have been in existence since the beginning of the 21st century. However, these tools were leveraged during the unprecedented Corona times more than ever. A majority of the students in rural India could not make use of virtual learning during the lockdown as many of them did not own a smartphone. They relied on their father's or brother's phone, with a limited Internet data package, which kept them away from attending zoom classes. The financial scenario was bleak during the lockdown and there were a few instances of generous people donating smartphones to the

students.

Many students in the rural colleges could not attend a single online class during the whole year of the pandemic. Though attendance was not made mandatory then, 70 per cent of the students had to write the semester exams with minimal support. The feeling of exclusion and loss in the marginalised students cannot be neglected. Discussions came up regarding the mammoth digital divide existing in Indian society. A combination of the rural-urban divide, gender divide, and digital divide contributed to pushing the marginalised sections of the society to the dark corners, with not much hope about continuing their education. Many brilliant students belonging to socially and economically backward communities committing suicide gave India a tremor.

The inequities in terms of access to academic content, affordability of digital devices, and availability of learning opportunities are stark realities. The rural students, who have faced inequality and inequity throughout, tend to be diffident while interacting with their peers in the urban areas, the reasons being numerous. They need continuous motivation. Hence, it is certainly the responsibility of society to try and make ways to bridge the gaps.

“In a year of severe disruption for schools caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, students in rural areas have received only marginal assistance in the form of structured learning materials from teachers, and have had to rely more on parents and siblings to study at home. This unsettling finding by the Annual Status of Education Report 2020, should prompt the Centre and the State governments to plan remedial measures for the future when it will be safe again for students to return to the

classroom.” mentions The Hindu Editorial dated 3 October 2020.

The situation of first-generation learners with none in the family to support their learning is too scary. Accessibility, Affordability, Flexibility, and Learning pedagogy inclusive of the local learners are to be brought forth. Not much qualitative research has been done in this area. College teachers had to conduct online classes every day to cater to the needs of 30 per cent digitally equipped students as per the instructions of the higher authorities. The Commissionerate of Collegiate Education, Telangana, in association with UGC-HRDC, Osmania University, and Dhyana hita Professional Studies has conducted Faculty Improvement Programme (FIP) for all the teachers of Government Degree Colleges on ICT Tools. Google Classrooms, Zoom, Google Meet, Google Forms, and WhatsApp have all become familiar to teachers and students as well during the COVID-19. Educators were instructed to use ICT tools beneficial to their students.

This resulted in teachers resorting to innovative alternative methods of teaching and learning catering to the current and local needs. Teachers conducted Zoom, Google Meet classes in which attendance of students hovered around 30 to 40 per cent in rural areas. Teachers recorded voice messages of important topics and sent them to the students via WhatsApp, especially to help those who did not have the network speed to watch YouTube video lessons created by their teachers. Images and data from the textbooks were shared via WhatsApp.

This is a paradigm shift, a kind of positive transformation at the tertiary level of education. Rural areas have begun to

transform traditional education into a digitally enhanced process. Educational institutions in Telangana have again shut down in response to the pandemic and there is a return to the online learning adaptations, recently. Virtual learning methods suitable to the local needs have become the need of the hour.

A website created by a teacher in a rural area helps the less privileged to gain proficiency in the English Language in a seemingly interesting way. The students who have minimal Internet access can utilise these resources on this website at their own pace, as there is no real-time involvement through zoom classes, games, activities, or quizzes here. The advantage of this website is that it is customised to be inclusive of the learning needs of the UG students in India. However, scaffolding is essential as one cannot expect the target rural UG students to be self-motivated to move towards self-learning. MOOCs, Courseera, Udemy, Dualingo, and so on are useful for learners who are familiar with technology. But, this simple and attractive website with a mobile view offers a convenient opportunity to the UG students.

Recorded video lessons and PDFs of lessons based on the curriculum of Osmania University are made available on the first two main pages of the website for the comfort of students. Many of the students in the rural areas do not generally buy English textbooks. And a few of the rural colleges do not even have a good library with new textbooks stacked on their shelves. So, these extracts from textbooks will be a boon to the students who do not have any other means to read textbooks. The extracts also have a set of pre-reading questions to prepare the students to read, understand the lesson and connect it to

their real life. The set of post-reading activities make students enthusiastically relate to the lessons. Video lessons are added unit wise and it is easy for students to watch, take screenshots, and prepare notes on their own. The curriculum-based learning materials and video lessons constitute only a quarter of the resources offered on this free Google site. The remaining three quarters contain exciting learning materials, activities, games, films, stories, songs, speeches, and other similar materials beneficial for any ESL Learner in India. Activities and games are structured to have the desired outcome. Regional, Indian English, and Hollywood films (with and without subtitles) are added, with an option to select what is interesting to the learners. The website intends to make the learning process enjoyable. Stories and songs promote a love for the language.

A majority of the UG students are habituated to reading only subject-related books. But, no one can love a language by reading grammar books and reference books written in it. “Learn English” page on this website is to introduce learning materials that create interest in the target learners. In this way, language acquisition becomes a subconscious process. A survey conducted among 170 UG students from varied backgrounds revealed that 60 per cent of them preferred the “Learn English” section of the website, which had exciting learning materials in it. Fiction, comics, poems, audio books, and so on are inserted for a wide choice. Auto-updated short news clippings, dictionaries, reference books, and verbal reasoning materials for competitive exams are also included to help students who otherwise do not have the access to good libraries. Many of the strategies followed

while developing the Google site may apply to several other institutions, not restricted to rural students.

WhatsApp groups have been created on an experimental basis to generate structured discussions among students visiting the website. A teacher monitors the WhatsApp groups. Communicative Language Teaching activities are posted to the groups daily. Content-based on the real-life experiences of students are used on WhatsApp. Students are given time to work on these activities. They are encouraged to take the help of family members, friends, or others, if necessary. The students post their findings and give answers to the reasoning questions asked by the monitor. The WhatsApp group is kept open daily for an hour for lively discussions related to the given activities. These kinds of interactive and collaborative activities help the students to improve their language skills. There are plans to move to a Kaizala discussion group to accommodate a large number of pan-Indian participants interested in utilising the website. At present, the WhatsApp group contains a mix of UG students from Puducherry, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra, Manipur, and Telangana. The survey also validates that the parents of 70 per cent of the students completed only High School education. The language activities discussed in the WhatsApp groups are updated on a separate page on the website regularly. A feeling of togetherness and interactions through the WhatsApp group is intended to reinforce a kind of community feeling in students. This will give a sense of confidence to the marginalised students.

A majority of the English Language Learning

websites found all over the world is mostly developed by a centralised body and not an individual teacher. For instance, Japan, France, Austria, Costa Rica, Guyana, and India have used educational websites during the pandemic. For instance, The National Repository of Open Educational Resources or the DIKSHA portal for school students is managed by the MHRD. The problem here is that a student with minimum technical skills will find it difficult to identify the relevant information. Most of the educational websites are bombarded with learning resources and it gives a complex look to the students. As many of them will be accessing the website from their phone, it is better to keep the structure and content simple and student-friendly.

The benefits of learning from this website are manifold. A lot of brainstorming and redoing of lesson plans have gone into the creation of this website. Pandemic will slowly fade, but blended learning is here to stay. So, this website aims at the transmission of learning materials virtually to the less privileged in a user-friendly, simple, and easy to understand way. Now that it is not a complete lockdown, students can share and access these resources at their convenience from their friend's/relative's phone. Students have an option to take screenshots or download the activities and learn offline at their convenience.

The use of appropriate methods based on local readiness and flexibility of the online platform highlights the purpose of this website. The vision is to place maximally useful student-oriented resources on a user-friendly platform. Compilation of resources and their presentation in a student-friendly manner by an adept educator who is deeply involved in the field is the uniqueness of this website.

This website saves the precious time of students who otherwise have to surf among numerous English learning websites and YouTube videos. An online search for quality content is a cumbersome task for a digital alien. Real-time face-to-face learning cannot be replaced by online learning. Blended learning is the key. Learning English using the Grammar-Translation method, which is widely used by teachers of rural colleges, needs to take a back seat. Judicial interference of the mother language is suggested.

The video lessons are presented with an acceptable Indian accent without marked regional flavour, so that it is intelligible to students and they feel connected to the speaker. This is a first of its kind in Higher Education in Telangana. There are numerous ways to build English Language Skills interestingly and excitingly. This is just the beginning and the website will be continuously updated. Google's site is free to use, anyone with basic computer and internet knowledge can create it. With the right knowledge, teachers can embrace various alternative possibilities. Text is only a pretext. Also, there is no performance assessment on the website and one can find only entertaining pedagogy with songs, films, activities, and so on. The intention is to love the language and learn it naturally. They can listen to the speeches/playlists, listen to songs, sing them, record, and playback again. Play snake and ladder games involving their friends, family members. Learning becomes enjoyable.

Still, there is a large population who lack access to smartphones and electricity, to charge phones. Alternative ways need to be found to minimise the Digital Divide, which

otherwise makes students not valued, scared, less confident, and difficult to learn and grow. If necessary measures are not taken, the existing socio-economic gap will keep widening. In the contemporary scenario, the ease of using technology and the Internet is of considerable importance to students.

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Ms. Roopna Ravindran, Assistant Professor of English, Government Degree College, Chevella, Telangana, India.

Email: roopna.ravi@gmail.com