The pragmatic use of English Language portals in imparting Communication skills

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Abstract

Teachers of English as a medium of communication in India toil desperately to find suitable methodologies to facilitate the students in acquiring the communication skills. In the recent past the number of teachers using Computer-Assisted Language Teaching has increased markedly and the role of technology in education in the 21st century is widely discussed. This paper is intended to analyze the multifaceted use of Internet as an interactive teaching medium to impart communication skills to the Indian learners and also to explore the possibilities of integrating Internet in the field of English language teaching in India. A list of useful websites is presented which could be used for various teaching, learning and testing purposes.

Introduction

The object of education is to prepare learners especially the young learners to educate themselves throughout their lives. Today, the fast interactive environment has virtually made it possible for everyone to connect with faceless people in search of knowledge, breaking up all the boundaries. Language learning taxes mental challenges. Thus awareness of those challenges must always be at the forefront in language acquisition.

Advancement in computers, in digital memory, in Internet resources, in audio and visual transmission, in virtual imaging, wire and wireless communication has created new slabs for the use of technology in the teaching of English. Web publishing, digital archives, digital video, electronic conferencing, blogging, on-line gaming, virtual reality worlds are the potential new tools for teaching and learning English. These may be successfully used as a forum to teach English. In order to make effective use of new technologies, teachers must equip themselves with some basic e-pedagogical skills.

By merging the conventional methodology with emerging technology, we can improve learning. In higher education, the application of language learning portals and existing multimedia tools may be more suitable to the adult students. Instruction is now available as when students want it in the privacy of their residence or the browsing centers nearby. It is evident that Internet is

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one of the most powerful tools for teachers to help students to collaborate, interact and participate actively in the learning process. We ought to make use of available resources in the internet to improve the communicative skills of the non-native speakers. Native speakers widely use online portals for the updating in all areas of academic study. They not only concentrate on the grammar part of their language acquisition, but on expression, etymology of the language, games, alphabet games, fun cartoons, quiz, etc. Thus this paper overtly recommends the use of language portals in imparting communicative skills among students to meet the emerging challenges.

Aims of Teaching English

It becomes clear that English is an all-important language and the ability to use this language has become a necessity tool to an educated person. The study of a language has four aspects. They are Semantic, Phonetic, Graphic and the Phonetic-Cum-Graphic aspects. Semantic aspect deals with 'Comprehension'. It is the understanding of the meaning. The Phonetic aspect deals with the spelling and pronunciation of words. The Graphic aspect is the written form of a language. The Phonetic-Cum-Graphic aspect is the Reading of the language. All these aspects of the language work in co-ordination with each other. Thus there are four general aims in teaching English. They are:

- To enable the pupil to understand English when spoken.
- To enable them to speak well in English.
- To enable them to read well in English.
- To enable them to write well in English.
These aims correspond to the four language skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening and reading are passive or receptive skills and speaking and writing are active or productive skills.

Problems of Teaching English

Second language learning is, to a certain extent, a conscious process. During this process, the learners have to transfer the knowledge of their first language to the acquisition of the second language. Further they have to compare and contrast the features of their first language and those of the second language. If necessary they can even 'unlearn' certain features of the first language which are not present in the second language. Some structures may not be the same in the Indian languages. So the learners of English should 'unlearn' the sequence in their first language, so that they will acquire the structure of the English sentence easily. Hence some sort of 'self-monitoring' is useful when the learners begin to practice their second language. Teaching of writing has been one of the concerns of English teachers since days immemorial. Yet, most of the students shy away from systematically developing communicative skills.

A high percentage of school - learners leave the precincts of the school as ignorant of English usage as they were when they entered the school first. Many years of learning English leads most of our school goers nowhere. Teaching of English in our schools is in a chaotic state today. Pupils are taught English for about six periods per week for twelve years. But it has been estimated that they hardly know few words by the time they join a University. This means that they have hardly been able to learn English words at the rate of one word per period. They do not know how to use the commonest structures of English. The mistake is in our Educational system itself. A teacher's target is to

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"prepare" his students for the examination and not to make his pupils competent in the use of the language.

Pupils are assessed in all the states in India by means of a single examination conducted towards the end of the year. In this system pupils usually work hard for a few days just before the examination and get through the examination. But, such last minute preparation does not help in the case of language. Language needs constant practice over an extended period and this can be ensured only if examinations are held at frequent intervals. The present system of relying solely on an all - important annual examination therefore does not serve the purpose. Moreover the question papers are set in such a way where all the questions can be answered with the help of bazaar cribs. For such an examination, students require no thinking, no originality, no imagination and no skill, though the vital aspect of language learning is integrated skill. Hence an average teacher tends to teach nothing more than what the examiner is likely to require.

Most of the time, the teacher tries to impart English language skill through mother tongue in most part of the rural areas. This brings in negative growth of the language. Unfortunately the long period of learning of English in schools does not yield the expected dividend in the form of language mastery. However being an International language English has to be learnt to make learners to cope up with the knowledge explosion. As it is also crowned as the library language.

It is important to recognize that language teaching is theoretical as well as practical. Teachers of English are quite often found complaining that their students refuse to open their mouths and virtually make no attempt to speak in English. It is worth examining whether it is the question of refusal to speak or denial of the right environment wherein the student cannot but speak. Obviously speech cannot take place in a vacuum. There should be worthy subject matter to be talked about, an interested person to talk about.

The existing courses to impart English have not been much of a success because they have failed to take note of the nature of English language, as well as the methods, materials and testing procedures. Teaching spoken English has come to be equated with the teaching of pronunciation (R.K Bansal 1969, Rani Rubdy 1989). The environmental lapses and lack of proper motivation are mainly responsible for backwardness in oral expression in India among other expressions in English. Greater tolerance, greater patience and less interference should characterize the teacher's approach to the student's communicative skills. His role is that of a facilitator of learning. Communicative approach to language teaching emphasizes 'fluency' rather than 'accuracy', 'content', rather, 'forms', then 'appropriateness' rather than 'grammar', overall 'communicative competence' rather than mere 'linguistic competence', should come into active play while teaching the English arsenals.

Class Room Deficiencies for the Development of spoken ability are:

- Lack of opportunity for oral expression for learners in the class room.
- Lack of sufficient encouragement for participation.
- Neglect of speech practice and written work in the language learning atmosphere.

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- Uninspiring strategies and incomplete teaching.

Stereotyped teaching procedure.

Teaching grammar both at school and college level is challenging to make grammar classes interesting; teachers have to teach innovatively and creatively. In general, teachers rely on either implicit or explicit teaching of grammar. The communicative approach which is very popular now a days is in favor of the implicit teaching of grammar. Majority of the learners feel that grammar lessons are uninteresting despite their awareness about the usefulness of grammar lessons. Meanwhile it is necessary to explore what learners think about grammar and the manner of teaching grammar. In other words, a study on the attitude of learners towards the teaching of grammar will throw light on the expectations of learners and the modifications that are needed in teaching techniques that will ensure the effective teaching of grammar.

Emergence of new Technology and English

Under such proviso e-learning helps to bridge the gap between traditional pedagogy with latest information and Communicative Technological applications. E-learning and virtual learning increases the effective reach of subjects in visual media thereby empowering the learners to add to and edit the contents. As technology advances the role of the teachers to deliver and facilitate e-learning for their expectant 'techno savvy' students to be in sync with the technology itself. In a poetry class, for instance, on Wilfred Owens's 'strange Meeting' which establishes that the poet is one of the greatest war poets of his time? The e-learning class of such poetry class would benefit from the start to end as it will be able to convey its message of the ghastly atmosphere of the hall of death,

zombie faces of soldiers who are distorted in pain and of the encumbered sleepers at the war zones through multimedia and animated graphic displays.

The main domains in which English is used are international business and tourism. These areas involve direct communication with other speakers of English, whether they are native or non-native speakers. In international business, English is used in joint ventures and business communications between Indian and foreign companies. The extent to which English is used, the number of people who use English and the purposes they use it for will of course vary from one place to another and one company to another. English also has an increasing presence in the media. In fact, it is now possible to find some English used in every kind of media format including daily, weekly, and semi-weekly newspapers, periodicals, radio broadcasts, television, wire service and internet sites .

Significance of interactive English language portals in the promotion of Communication skills:

Today students and faculty members have got an opportunity to access to powerful digital tools like iPods and PDAs which transform teaching and learning experiences into something unimaginable. Meanwhile, students have discovered the community-building and networking of instant messaging, discussion boards, online forums, blogs, and wikis while still occasionally using e-mail. These tools are dramatically changing the communication patterns and relationships between learners and the faculty (Clegg - Heap, 2006).

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Nowadays, Internet is gaining immense popularity in foreign language teaching and more and more educators and learners are trying to make use of the benefits of this technology. World Wide Web enables students to tack in a huge variety of human experience. It helps them to learn things by self manipulation and monitoring. This medium can increase the motivation level of the learners. This internet medium can certainly evict the hesitation of the learners. It can personalize learning and helps to remove the shyness or inhibition of students and provides the scaffold for student-centered collaborative learning.

It is evident that internet is one of the most powerful tools for teachers to help students to collaborate, interact and participate actively in the learning process. We ought to make use of available gifts of internet for the enhancement of communicative skills of the non-native speakers. The native speakers are widely using online portals for the updating in all arenas of academic study. They not only concentrate on the grammar part of their language acquisition, but on expression, etymology of the language, games, alphabet games, fun cartoons, quiz, audio, and video and all such plethora of devices which also help for the popularization of English. Narrowcasting, pod casting, and web castings are some of the emerging technologies in the field of new media. Learners ought to make use of all the benefits of the new technology to improve their communicative skills. Video streaming technology helps in enhancing interactive portals through pronunciation video course materials which root out mispronunciation and improper expression and ensure perfection in the expression. Never before have we had such inexpensive access to so many valuable resources—most of which are free. In addition to files, databases, libraries, there are many resources and projects designed for teachers and students.

Invariably all the English speaking countries and their educational institutions are having their own language portals. Though English is the mother language of native speakers they are keen to ascertain the quality of their language. Even broadcast outlets like BBC and CNN have their own English language portals and other business outlets do also maintain language portals. It is more appropriate to quote names of a few portals of English language for better understanding and significance of internet in imparting communicative skills of English. They are;

English Words Derived from Latin-Greek Origins (It focuses on derivatives of Latin and Greek prefixes, roots, and suffixes used in English vocabulary.)

An Etymological Dictionary of Classical Mythology (It talks about English words' origins).

Etymologically Speaking (List of some curious word origins).

Focusing on Words (vocabulary development and etymology)

Martha Barnett's Funwords.co m, Online Etymological Dictionary (This is a map of the wheel-ruts of modern English).

Origin of Phrases (investigates how common phrases came to be).

The Word Detective (a master word sleuth tracks down word and phrase origins).

The American Heritage Book of English Usage (A Practical and Authoritative Guide to Contemporary English)

Apostrophe Protection Society (aims to preserve the correct use of this currently much abused punctuation mark)

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Common errors in English (avoid titters of amusement at the way you write or speak.)
Test Standard English grammar, usage, etc. (tests of grammar, usage, spelling, punctuation, and style)
Gallery of "Misused" Quotation Marks (They're quotation marks, and they turn up in the strangest of places)
The blue book of grammar and punctuation (on-line reference guide and workbook)
Grammar Bytes! (An interactive grammar review with definitions and exercises)
Grammar Clinic Frame (an on-line grammar clinic forum discussion group from England)
Grammar and Usage for the Non-Expert (It addresses and solves common problems of grammar and usage for people who want answers but not a lot of technical explanations)
Grammar Slammer (Online Demo and Complete English Grammar Resource - the help file that goes beyond a grammar checker)
Punctuation Made Simple (discussion of several of the most useful punctuation marks)
That's Right Words articles (grammars information and hints)
World Wide Words (explores some of the byways of the English language)
Ask a Linguist (a place where anyone interested in language or linguistics can ask a question and get the response of a panel of professional linguists).
Linguistic Phenomena/Devices (a list of some of the lesser known linguistic phenomena and devices used in English writing).

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