THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN LEARNING AND TEACHING ENGLISH: A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO THE EXISTING CURRICULUM AND EVALUATION SCHEME INTHE POLYTECHNICS IN ASSAM

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Abstract:

The status of English as a universal language is being reinforced gradually with the dawn of modern communication systems. Technical education, one of the most significant elements of the human resource advancement, stresses the building of communicative competence in the current globalized settings. The latest drift in engineering studies can be evaluated to a great extent on the basis of the learners' good command in English as most of the latest science and engineering theories are written in English. Moreover, in the Indian context, success in recruitments is mainly based on the demonstration of communication skills along with subject knowledge. Progresses in technology have made it easier for teachers and learners of English to access a wide range of resources as language learning materials. Communication technologies have occupied a central role amongst the range of technologies which are used for language teaching. In this regard, mobile technology has played a major role and widespread uses of devices such as smart phone, laptops and tablets turn out to be very attractive tools for language learning. This paper uses analytical methodology to research on the use of Information and Communication Technologies in learning and teaching English in the polytechnics in Assam in accordance to the existing curriculum and evaluation scheme.The paper also highlights the difficulties faced by teachers and learners in the process and makes an attempt to provide certain recommendations to meet those challenges.

Keywords: Communication skill, Language learning, Polytechnic, Technical education, Technology

Introduction:

The ways of assimilating technology into the lives of people has been changing considerably over the last two decades. These changes have gradually reached the educational segment. English as a global language plays a significant role in the lives of students. It is vital not only as a subject but also as an interdisciplinary feature that is required to improve the social position of their lives in individual as well as professional arenas. This paper deals with the use of technology in learning and teaching of English, especially in the context of the existing curriculum and evaluation scheme in the polytechnics in Assam. The research is conducted using analytical methodology. It makes an effort to explore the present scenario in these technical institutes and attempts to find out the benefits of incorporating technology in the polytechnic sector in the state. The paper also points out certain complications that may arise in the process and tries to offer some suggestions that may be adopted to combat the difficulties and thereby bring about a higher success rate in learning and teaching English language.

Polytechnics in Assam

Polytechnics in Assam offer diploma level technical education and vocational training in specialized fields. These institutions support self-employment of the youth. This paper focuses on the polytechnics run by the Government of Assam under the Directorate of Technical Education, Assam and affiliated to State Council for Technical Education. The courses of the institutes are recognised by All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), Ministry of Human Resources and Development, Government of India. The objectives of English in the diploma level in the state is to inculcate an ability to use English language at a functional level and develop the learners' favourable attitude towards English language and gain mastery over it to express ideas, feelings and experiences(Curricular structure 1). The subject, entitled 'Communication in English', aims to equip the students with the basic grammatical concepts, punctuation and vocabulary and develop knowledge and understanding in basic sentence structures to be used in everyday situations. The contents in the curriculum also intend to enhance competencies in written communications like letters, reports, memorandums, e-mails etc., primarily for official purposes. Further, the State Council for Technical Education has formulated an evaluation scheme keeping in view the overall upliftment of the students. This advanced, transparent, non-arbitrary and internationally accepted evaluation scheme is expected to encourage classroom participation, competitive spirit among students, closer interaction between teachers and students, transparency, accountability and increased compliance with AICTE norms (NES for Polytechnics 1). The evaluation scheme is based on some work-specific skills. It encourages the students to participate actively in group discussions and make presentations in the classroom. In fact, the existing curriculum in English and the evaluation scheme emphasize participation in the activities for the development of communication skills for success in education and career.

Present Scenario and the prospects of using technology in language learning

However, the present scenario in these technical institutes in Assam offers not a very encouraging picture of students' proficiency in English. Many of the students that pass out from vernacular schools and join these institutes are deficient in English foundation and do not bear the confidence to communicate in English. This can be termed as communication apprehension (CA), the sense of nervousness or fear while communicating in varied circumstances. The fear or anxiety could be due to any of the following reasons: lack of proficiency in the target language, lack of practice, insecurity or any pre-programmed thought pattern. Even those who have high level of proficiency in a language can experience CA (Sasidharan 27). This lack of comfort in communicating counters all attempts of the syllabi as well as the teachers and poses as a major hurdle to English learning for students in the polytechnic sector.

An engineering student is expected to master not only written and oral communication skills, but also presentation skills and other work-specific skills. Employment in reputed companies depends to a great extent on his presentation of better communication skills. Moreover, communication skills in English will enable a student to communicate effectively in meetings, give presentations, attend phone calls and perform other communicative tasks with colleagues or clients. Hence, he should aim at gaining communicative competence that is, knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions, vary use of language according to the setting and the participants, produce and understand different types of texts and maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge (Richards 3). Qualified engineering candidates require to use up-to-date communication procedures for both formal and informal communication in the digital environment and so there is a dire need of developing competence in this field. The best way to learn a language is its interactive, authentic environments. Computer technologies and the Internet are powerful tools for assisting these approaches to language teaching (Wang

40). The application of internet technology has developed a new field for autonomy learning. The best use of it will make learning expected and successful (Zhong 150). Internet provides fast and efficient communication and in the present time, it is the most required technology in the globalised world. The internet technology offers a student with plenty of resources and material on various engineering topics as well as on language related subjects. It provides much potentials for sharing of notions and information and for developing communication skills. E-mail writing, another important aspect in communication, can boost competence in writing skill in the users. It is not just the speed and reciprocity of e-mail that enhances learning; it is also the medium itself. It is a new hybrid form of communication that brings speech and writing together, inviting conversational writing with a voice that the reader will soon hear (Goodwyn 19). It is predominant in business as well as in personal communication due to its provision of quick responses. Various mobile technologies devices such as smart phone, laptops and tablets are considered to be attractive tools for language learning. They help the teachers in teaching communication skill inside and outside the classroom. The multiple functionalities of mobile phones have made them a very effective language learning device. Mobile touch-screen technologies, also referred to as tablet technologies, have introduced a new generation of educational tools affording creative use and instant access to a wealth of online resources. They enable learning anywhere, anytime (Goodwin 6). The potential opportunities for communication are increased in the new environment. Almost all the students in the polytechnics today are equipped with a mobile device. They are not allowed to make use of these devices in the classroom as there are greater chances of being misused. However, when used properly, these could serve as powerful aids to language learning. The students today are quite eager to learn with the help of their mobile devices. They are seen browsing various sites for information whenever they are given an assignment. The new evaluation scheme prescribed by the State Council for Technical Education, Assam, provides the scope of using technologies in preparing assignments by searching materials with the help of internet facilities. The students often make use of MS PowerPoint in designing their presentations as a part of their assignment. Students are keen to incorporate a wide range of ideas while using the software and express their creativity in making their slides presentable. The use of mobile technology in the classroom can be expected to develop language skills and digital literary skills at the same time. Most young generation teachers are skilled mobile users because of the prevalence of mobile devices. Therefore, mobile technology should be used by the teacher as a tool for teaching and learning (Yaming and Ting 2). They serve as important tools for English language study and hence they could be adapted into the polytechnics' settings as well. These are widespread and quite relevant for most of the students. The devices possess superior quality multimedia stored on internal drives or removable memory cards. Moreover, the long-lasting batteries also serve purpose when learners are itinerant.

Among the four basic communication skills, listening activity is considered to be developed without much effort. But this ignored area needs conscious practice as English is not spoken naturally in the Indian environment. Nachoua advocates the use of technology in enhancing this skill. She considers that the use of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) is an effective way to enhance the motivation of language learners to play an active part in their learning instead of acting as passive listeners (Nachoua 1150). In the polytechnics' settings of Assam, English is not always the only medium of communication outside the classroom (and sometimes within the classroom too in subjects other than English) in spite of the norm that the prescribed medium of instruction is English. This is because of the fact that some students are deficient in active listening when instruction is provided in English. This deficiency can be addressed only when the students realise the need to consciously develop the skill of listening. In regard to the speaking skill, the students in the polytechnics of Assam are marked on the basis of presentations on topics from the prevailing curriculum. However, it practically becomes difficult to practice speaking

regularly as the number of students in the theory classes are large. There is ample scope for the students to develop writing skill in the classroom. The curriculum in English in the polytechnics provides the students with certain opportunities in practicing the use of correct English grammar, vocabulary and punctuation and also developing the skill of writing various compositions. In regard to the development of reading and comprehension skill, the chapter entitled 'Reading Comprehension' in the existing syllabus is expected to help to some extent. However, proper guidance is necessary to retain this habit. The students should also try to generate interest in reading books and materials of their choice. The effective use of reading strategies is known to amplify a reader's understanding. As technology has penetrated our lives, the perception of reading for comprehension through technology has to turn into a forward-thinking way of doing so (Drigas and Charami 5). Technological progress can help the students in providing numerous reading materials of their choice. The future diploma engineers are expected to progress in all the four language skills for smooth learning of engineering topics as well as for keeping pace with the latest drifts in science and technology. But, in reality, the students have little scope to develop these skills uniformly in the polytechnics in Assam. More than 70% of the evaluation is done on writing skills. Time constraints of the teachers to complete the allotted syllabus allow no spare time to enhance competency in the students in listening, speaking and reading skills in the classroom. In spite of this, students are encouraged to develop their presentation skills by creating digital slides, produce documents in MS Word, use internet and prepare their assignments. Most of the institutions are not equipped with necessary infrastructure and so all the students are not able to perform all these activities evenly. However, many of them make use of their personal gadgets and offer satisfactory performances. Mohanty states that learning with technology nurtures creativity in the learner as he or she is empowered to design individual representations of content using technology (Mohanty 24). The learners of new generation in these institutions are trying to pace ahead with confidence regarding the use of technology in the digital age.

The presence of language laboratories in some polytechnics in Assam is a step towards incorporation of technology into the English classes. Such labs can be expected to bring about effective language learning. A well-equipped laboratory provides different language learning provisions. A language laboratory provides an assortment of resources for students wanting or needing to improve their language skills. The learning resources provided include relevant language learning materials or links to various language learning sites, access to newspapers and magazines, access to online libraries, interaction with language specialists and multimedia facilities. Teachers can also include assignments and activities that provide opportunities for problem-solving in realistic and fictional situations that would ultimately work towards improving their speaking skills (Sasidharan 15). Students are supposed to practice different communication activities in the laboratory class. It plays an imp role in developing autonomous learning, learning-based tasks and self-reflection. Language laboratories also provide the scope of new ways of language assessment. The overall assessment shift from teacher to self and peer evaluation contributes to the development of student autonomy which is emphasized in learning in the 21st century (DEECD 25).Students become aware of their own strengths and shortfalls and turn out to be better learners. The guidance of the teacher in association with technology will boost up the learning process. The language laboratories in the polytechnics in Assam could have facilitated the development of the four communication skills in English. But since lab activities do not form a part of the curriculum, they are not given due importance in these institutions. Moreover, lack of adequate number of computers hinders the pursuit of language learning.

Difficulties

In spite of a bright prospect of assimilating technology into the existing curriculum in the polytechnics in Assam, certain factors may be listed as hurdles in the process of integration.

- Hew and Brush identify lack of resources and lack of time to be two of the significant barriers of technology integration into the curriculum (Hew and Brush226-227). Although most of the students today can easily handle a smart phone and perform different activities with its help, there are some who lack access to a computer. In such cases, it becomes necessary for the teacher to decide a starting point in making use of technological devices in the classroom and that may be time-consuming. Moreover, students get exposed to English language only for a few hours during the English classes in these institutions. In other classes, no real importance is placed on speaking and writing grammatically correct sentences. Time constraint to finish the syllabus rarely allows the teacher to emphasize on all the communication skills in the classroom. As a result, their speaking and writing skills in English continue to remain inadequate. It becomes difficult for the students to spare time from their allotted schedule and get engaged in technology based learning activities.

- The use of technology may not always prove useful in the polytechnics. While making use of mobile technology, there are chances that students get diverted and also cause disturbances in the classroom. Boella considers that the first drawback to using Smartphones and Tablets in the classroom is the potential for students to go off task and use their devices inappropriately(Boella 38).Use of Internet providing access to the various websites such as pornography may pollute the minds of young learners and they may get diverted very easily. Computer games very often prove to be extremely addictive. Various health related issues might arise due to excessive use of technology. Emergence of plagiarism is another difficulty in the use of technology. There are numerous materials available in the websites. The students may make use of copy-and-paste without even realizing that they are committing a crime in plagiarising from the web.

- It may become difficult for some teachers to implement technology in language teaching in the classrooms. This feature is often due to their lack of background knowledge needed to use the devices available in the classrooms. Teachers' lack of sufficient knowledge and skills regarding ICT is one of the main obstacles perceived by educational practitioners in realizing their goals (Pelgrum 174 and Bingimlas 24). Baylor and Ritchie also claim that technology would not be used if faculty members do not develop the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes to infuse it into the curriculum [17]. (Baylor and Ritchie 4). In the polytechnics' settings too, lack of sufficient training may pose as hurdles in the use of technology in teaching. Morris and Venkatesh state that for technology adoption decisions, age matters (Morris and Venkatesh 398). According to Rahimi and Yadollahi, with more teaching experience, the teachers were less likely to use ICT for instructional purposes (Rahimi and Yadollahi 206).This may be due to lack of enough training to exploit effective ways of integrating instructional tece5tghrhnology into language teaching [21](Dunn and Ridgway 206).

Suggestive Measures

The presence of hurdles in the use of technology for language learning in these institutions in Assam, however, can be combatted with necessary modifications and implementation of new strategies.

- Yusof and Saadon considers an integrated way of classes that combines traditional teaching and web based teaching to be the most beneficial for the learners (Yusof and Saadon 407).In the context of polytechnic too, such an integration shall prove fruitful in language learning as it advocates traditional approaches of pursuing a topic and also making use of communicative tools. Teachers should realize that technology, when used appropriately, would improve learning. Moreover, the learners can assess themselves and bring about self-improvement with the help of adequate resources. It is not a matter of pure transformation of traditional course materials to an online format. Basic computer skills of the teacher will prove insufficient for teaching purpose. A teacher has to develop and extend his understanding of language learning and technology. He has to play the role of educator as well as that of the facilitator. He needs to be given the evidence that ICT can make lessons easier, more interesting, fun, enjoyable and motivating for teachers as well as the pupils(Mumtaz338). Proper training and availability of resources can lead to superior quality teaching practices. The teachers should focus on improving the quality of teaching and develop variety of tasks to meet the needs of the students. They need to bear in mind that it is pedagogy, not technology that determines learning effectiveness (Appana 28). Teaching faculty must know to recognise the learning styles of individual students to maximize learning experiences in the classroom (Rogers 25,26). New and more effective pedagogical devices in combination with technological resources shall definitely yield a better success rate in learning English. Therefore, proper research should be undertaken on the development and employment of technology in the polytechnics in Assam. Creative thinking and collaborative working may lead to an output that will truly aid the language learners.

- All the polytechnics in Assam should be provided with latest technological infrastructure. Availability of computer to students in the institutes should be guaranteed. Equal importance should be given to develop all the communication skills through technological device. This will be possible when technology is allowed to pervade curricular work. Saglam and Sert declare that positive effects of technology integration can take place if this integration is deliberately inserted in the curriculum and the daily practice to achieve carefully designed outcomes (Saglam and Sert 10). The curriculum framed for Diploma in Engineering needs to be reshaped to suit the requirement of the learners. At the same time, it is very important to realise the relevance and instructional worth of various technological devices and integrate them accurately into the curriculum.

- The classrooms in the polytechnics in Assam are comprised of different level of students. Since the beginners will be in need of extra care, they may be supported through scaffolding. Scaffolding plays an important role in introducing a new topic or a new technology in the classroom. Implementation of scaffolding technique can enhance students' co-operation in peer scaffolding as well as facilitate their learning by providing them with appropriate assistance (Zanggoei and Davoudi 1289).Patnoudes talks of visual scaffolding as an excellent way to acquire English language. When students can see an image of what the teacher is describing or see the key words that the teacher is explaining, it makes the input much more comprehensible and removes the affective filter which results from the fear or boredom that comes of understanding very little in class (Patnoudes 27-28). Again, Bing-jun Ma asserts that visual simulation technology can change the traditional teaching mode, stimulate students' interest in learning and improve the quality of English teaching (Ma 75). The adoption of visual simulation thinking may be considered to be a very effective method of teaching English in the polytechnic sector.

The environment needs to be stress-free and students should be motivated to speak in English. The teacher should find out the different levels of language and technological abilities in the learners. The activities for language learning should be selected on the basis of their current skills. It is the duty of the teacher to consider the ways to assure and preserve the curiosity of the learner in the classroom. The goals and objectives of the lesson along with the needs of the students should be kept in view in order to achieve successful learning outcomes. The teacher should design a particular teaching strategy and explain the students regarding its effectiveness to reach the target. This is a way to motivate the learners to learn with interest keeping the goal in mind.

- Once the use of internet is made a compulsory part of the course content in the polytechnics, the teacher should ensure that proper use of internet is made and students learn in a secured environment. Students need to be trained in approaching online texts with hyperlinks (Kern 102). The guidance of a teacher is very essential in making good use of the resources available in the internet. A learner may not know their utility and feel lost by the different materials and different links available on a particular topic. Once the student is able to understand the kind of tools he should use online, he will be an independent learner. He will realise that internet offers an excellent environment for enhancement of knowledge through browsing and interaction.

Conclusion:

To conclude it may be stated that adoption of technology in polytechnic education in Assam has a bright prospect of facilitating focused practice in the learners and enhancement of communication skills. The learners will find greater opportunities to communicate in such settings. They are expected to develop self-confidence and become motivated to use English in different situations of their life. The students will also acquire digital and electronic skills that are integral in their lives to communicate and develop the confidence to establish a place in the competitive world. Teachers equipped with proper training must get ready to use technology with suitable teaching strategy and maximise its benefits for language learning. Proper planning of the curriculum providing proper time management to integrate technology in the classrooms shall yield the best possible results.

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