



Digitalisation of English Language Teaching in Gujarat at School Level

Abstract

There is no denying the fact that today we are living in the Digital Age. No sphere of modern life is untouched of digitalization. Even the teachers of English Language across the world are on pins and needles to achieve digital equity for their students. As asserted in an essay by Anurag Roy that English serves as a window to the world, it becomes imperative for the ELT faculties to keep up with the changing times. This paper explores new dimensions of ELT strategies in context of today's media saturated world.

Introduction:

Industrial revolution which began in 17th Century sowed the seeds of urbanization in the world. Digital revolution, known as the Third Industrial Revolution, began from late 1950s to the 1970s marking the beginning of Information Age. Internet started in the United States in 1960s and today it has developed at a leapfrogging pace that we cannot imagine the world without it. In 1990s the World Wide Web changed the whole scenario in all the fields. A study made by W3Techs showed that in April 2013, almost 55% of the most visited websites used English as their content language. So the layman was faced with a situation where he had to learn English language if he is willing to become a global citizen.

In India, English language had gained importance when Macaulay recommended the use of English as a formal means of education for the Indian masses in his 'Minutes' in 1835. As D. Bhaskara Rao mentions in his book :“Few enlightened Indians like Raja Rammohan Roy felt that the system of classical education would keep the country in darkness and association with English will be a promise of modernization and liberation.” Though English education had been introduced as a part of a political diplomacy, its significance was realized mainly for communicative purposes. The main purpose of English Language Teaching in non-english speaking nations is no longer literature but language, and no longer beauty and appreciation of literature but utility and practical expertise in English.

According to the Constitution, the official languages of the Union Government of the Republic of India are Hindi in Devnagri Script and English. Anti-Hindi agitations in South India indirectly contributed in bringing English into limelight. English Language received an important place when National Policy of Education in 1968 outlined “three language formula” to be implemented in Secondary Education. The State Government of Gujarat follows this formula for the overall benefit of not only the natives but also the non-natives living in Gujarat. Medium of Instruction in educational institutions are set to be two: regional medium (Gujarati) and English Medium. Gujarat is mainly a business hub. Spread of e-commerce has made it mandatory for gujarati speaking people to come out of their comfort zone of vernacular language and adopt English for connecting to the rest of the world. Mother tongue is considered to be of utmost importance for a child's successful language learning.

Conventional Methods of ELT:

1. Grammar- Translation Method:

This method focuses on learning the grammar rules first as English is the second language. Knowledge of grammar rules are applied in translating and understanding the text. Deductive instructional approach proves to be inadequate in boosting speaking and listening skills of the learners as this method is teacher – centered. The aim of achieving communicative competence comes to naught in this method.

2. Bilingual Method:

This method makes use of two languages – the target language i.e English and the mother tongue. Dr. Sharada Bhat states the main principle of this method as “Controlled use of students’ mother tongue, the introduction of reading and writing early in the course of language learning and integration of writing and reading skills.” It is strongly believed and verified by the teachers that this method makes their job of transferring knowledge easy. Dr. Sindkhedkar throws light on the drawback of this method in these words: “This sort of teaching simplifies the job of the teacher in explaining the text. But in reality, the learners are incapable of weaning themselves away from the mother tongue, because the teacher has also made him more dependent on mother tongue.”

3. The Direct Method:

This method receives its name from the fact that meaning is to be conveyed directly in the English language through the use of demonstration and visual aids, with no recourse to the students’ mother tongue. This method follows the natural principles of language learning. Practice of this method delightfully brings to our notice that attempts have been made to make second language learning as important as first language learning.

Changing scenario of ELT in 21st Century:

In 1960s Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) initiated the revolution in language teaching methodology. It is broadly defined as “the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning.” Initially a stimulus in the form of text presented on screen was provided to the learner and he was supposed to respond by entering an answer at the keyboard. A rapid development of Internet was taking place parallel to the development of computers. Today internet has become an integral part of our daily life. The Internet is used by more than 50% of the world population, as its applications are found in nearly every field of life, be it communication, knowledge, news, shopping, marketing, entertainment, education etc. Visual data and interactive features of multimedia gave internet an inevitable place in language learning classroom. Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) evolved as another milestone in English language teaching and learning. It is interesting to have a look at the results of a survey published in NDTV news article in June 2013. The survey was conducted on nearly 17,500 High School students across 14 Indian cities, which revealed that about 70% students owned smart phones. And 20% of them said they used mobile phones to access internet (compared to just 12% in 2009).

Late 90s witnessed the onset of social networking sites like CompuServe. The interactive platform for virtual sharing hit the stride in early 2000s and still today facebook, twitter, youtube etc. are reigning the social networking kingdom. The growing ubiquity of cell phones, especially the smartphones, has made social networking just a finger tap away.

Challenges to English Language Teaching

In the wake of the changing global scenario, a lacuna has been felt by the educators to meet the challenges of change in teaching methods. In Gujarat the main aim of language teaching is a good academic record of the students. Entire process of teaching - learning is examination orientated. The monotonous methods of ELT makes it an uninteresting experience for the learners. The boom of social networking sites have dawned the reality of having limited vocabulary upon the learners. The demand for using enhanced English language skills has increased among the students. The teachers find it difficult to cope up with the emerging trends in English language pedagogy. The Principal of HL Commerce College, Ahmedabad aptly remarked in an article about the lack of communicative skills: "Even when students have taken admission in English Medium schools, there is hardly any interaction in English in the classroom. It is often in Gujarati or Hindi. Students don't talk much in English and hence the problem in fluency." The examination pattern of Gujarat at school level i.e the Semester System(50% of the question paper consists of Multiple choice Questions) indirectly encourages the students towards cramming of the subject rather than language appreciation, concept clearing and practical applicability.

Advent of Digital Smart Class Concept:

Introduction of multimedia in language learning divulged a new avenue for language acquisition. A conducive teaching- learning environment was created in classrooms. A teacher's toil in administering the language to the learner got diminished. Animated DVDs, CDs added a new facet in teaching strategies. Learning Grammar rules appeared to be uncluttered. Instantaneously this new change was welcomed by both teaching and learning fraternities. Moreover, 3D presentations were like cherry on a cake. Potential of Internet in education sector got maximized when online printable contents for English Language began to be available. But it was an uphill battle for the educators as they had to find the suitable content with reference to their target learners and curriculum. Financial constraint also was one of the biggest limitations that teachers faced to utilize the online/ printed material in the classroom. In the early part of 2000s e-learning transformed into digital learning. Companies like Educomp, Teachnext etc. came up with an idea of digital education. Concept of a 'Smart Class' came into existence. Not only digital academic content in the form of modules was presented but also the medium to use it in the classroom (hardware) was provided. Teachers were given training to use digital content effectively in the classroom. Not only teaching but assessment process also was taken care of in the modules. Full-fledged Digital Class Transformation System was implemented in Gujarat in 2011 with 150 schools in Gujarat and over 8000 schools all over India. This notion of smart class was aimed at "empowering the teacher with cutting-edge education tools within the classroom to enhance the learning experience.(Nilesh Gotecha, Regional Manager, Educomp Solutions Ltd.)" In terms of English language, the content provided was not up to the mark of Gujarat State Board Curriculum. But surely it was agreeably accepted by English language teachers because in a laissez faire way, an individual teacher was allowed to upload self-made contents as per the requirement of the students.

Scope of using Social Media tools in the classroom:

Students find themselves very comfortable to work on a digital landscape. Due to Smart Class concept, the equipment like white board, CPU, Speakers, Projector, Stylus etc. already exist in the classroom. So the primary requirement to use online educational apps gets fulfilled. Using social networking sites in the classroom can be very rewarding in terms of language acquisition. The teachers can take advantage of exposing the students to educational videos on youtube in the controlled situation of the classroom. There are thousands of videos available that may prove to be excellent resource for

literature classes. For instance a poem 'On Television' by Roald Dalh prescribed in Gujarat State Board of School Textbooks, can be very well explained through a youtube video. (The link is given here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsYvHuvX1EE>) At this juncture a question that comes to our mind is that even though equipments are available, internet connectivity may not be. The offline feature of youtube provides the solution of this dilemma. The preparation time taken for its set up in class may seem to be another issue. But electrical advancement will come to a teacher's aid. Mobiles can directly be connected to the screen. Having it saved in the offline videos will also prevent unwanted advertisements from popping up on screen while teaching learning process is going on. Not only literature but other skills like speaking and listening can also be very well put into practice. The most useful videos can be embedded to a blog or a website. Blog writing can prove to be very productive as students will consciously use the language to express their thoughts as it is a public platform. Blogging platforms like Tumblr, Edublogs.org, Blogger.com etc. provide a student and class oriented blogging accounts. These blogging sites are mobile friendly too. By creating a class Facebook page, lot of word puzzles, quizzes, creative writing articles, current trends in language, writers' column etc. can be posted. Students can study those and respond to it. Conducting a debate or a discussion about any particular topic from facebook page can enhance learners' linguistic skills. Class notes and multimedia content can be shared through facebook page and make it available to all the students at the same time. By providing the links to useful websites, students can be encouraged to explore the knowledge treasure on their own. Through a classroom twitter community, teachers can connect the students to the current news feeds and uncovering the exciting world of latest terminology and thus enhancing their vocabulary and knowledge. Posting of the new blog article can be declared by tweeting. Blogging websites can be easily synced to the Twitter account instead of providing the bookmarks.

Conclusion:

Though Gujarat has undergone an intensive transformation in educational field, still there are certain stumbling blocks to be dealt with. Effectiveness of the new teaching strategies can only be determined when the teacher is well-equipped to carry it out. Teachers are expected to assume a greater responsibility as they have to present the best English language items to their students. Though social networking sites are ubiquitous, the students in the rural areas cannot be benefitted to some extent due to the lack of required apparatus in their classrooms. Nevertheless, English language teaching has definitely risen to a new level because of digital environment.

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Mrs. Preeti J. Shah
Calorx Teachers' University
Ahmedabad

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