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### Blending the Old with the New Through Technology – Sanskrit and E –Learning

#### Abstract

A new method of learning using technology has been in vogue since quite some time now. Called E – learning, this new technique which resorts to electronic educational technology is all set to revolutionize the traditional methods of learning. With access to technologies that not only provide the texts to learn but also audio and video, simulation and collaboration with trainers in different places of the world, the World Wide Web opens up a fascinating learning space, with the possibility of training even through mobiles and androids, in due course. Language learning requires a passion and a concerted effort. Through the use of the multimedia, learning becomes easier as learners can acquire knowledge sitting in the comfort of their homes. Used in the class, it not only allows for individual learning and evaluation of the learner with texts in audio /video format but gives trainers the possibility to support learners by connecting with others in different countries across the globe, making language learning a delight. This paper looks at how the learning of the ancient language Sanskrit can be enhanced through the new approaches offered by educational technology.

Key words: E -learning, multimedia, technology, language learning, Sanskrit

#### Introduction

Language learning and assessment requires four essential skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing. The first two are known as receptive skills and the third and fourth, productive skills.

When we talk about learning, there are four primary learning styles –visual, auditory, read-write and kinesthetic. Although generally learners make use of all the four styles, one style is usually predominant. For optimum learning benefits, it would help to be familiar with the characteristics of each style as well as the strategies associated with it, in order to cater to the specific learning needs of the individual. While these approaches are time tested and continue to be effective, more exciting methods of learning have come into being through technology.

Defined as "the study and ethical practice of facilitating learning and improving performance by creating, using and managing appropriate technological processes and resources."(Richey, 2008) educational technology is set to rule the world. The educational technologies used in modern day learning have enhanced the learner's interaction within the class, and outside through the virtual mode, making language learning an exciting process. From traditional learning methods like the grammar – translation method, bilingual method, direct method, audio-lingual method, structural approach and communicative language method, teachers are now resorting to internet, you tube, twitter, smart boards, blogs and podcasting to make learning more interesting, interactive and more meaningful.

Not to be left behind in this new world of fascinating propositions offered by the World Wide Web, Indian languages too have joined the bandwagon and are exploring the multitude options before them. To the list can be included the mother of all languages, Sanskrit. Unlike other languages, the Sanskrit language is not a language that grew haphazardly or organically. It was invented and perfected with great deliberation. It is not only a 'Civilizing device' but also a great product of that civilization. As its name suggests, it was refined from several dialects of which the *Dravida* dialects of the south form a big part or vice versa. *Sanskritam*, its proper name means that which is refined, as distinct from *prakrit* which means that which is natural and therefore crude or gross.

Experts of cybernetics or artificial intelligence affirm that Sanskrit is an ideal existing language readily adaptable to computer usage. All Indian languages have a large proportion of identifiable Sanskrit words or vice-versa. The language which served as a valuable tool in the past is set to play a valuable role in the future. It is not only an instrument but also a glorious product of Indian Civilization, being a repository of a host of spiritual, philosophical, material and practical

achievements of the past. Despite its age, even today experts gain useful knowledge in medicine, in psychology, in design, in horticulture etc., by delving into the ancient texts.

The Sanskrit language was a perfect medium for memorizing and transmitting essential knowledge at a time when the printing machine had not been invented and literacy was not very widespread. With the vowels and consonants and every conceivable sound in Sanskrit arranged in a logical scientific manner according to the biological nature of the speech organs, verses could easily be memorized and everything worth knowing put into verse form. Many distinctive verse forms were recognized as suitable for different purposes. One good example is the *Gayathri* verse form or meter of the famous *Rig Vedic* mantra.

Modern science has validated the ancient insight of the seers to the extent of proving that a sound pronounced or heard has varied effects on different parts of the brain. The same invocations, with the same accents were uttered or declaimed by priests in all parts of the country. Thus we can aver at a very mundane level that the Sanskrit language served as a tool to preserve the cultural unity of the country. According to Justice Markandey Katju, “the foundation of Indian culture is based on Sanskrit language”. There is a misconception that Sanskrit is only a language for chanting mantras in temples or religious ceremonies. However, that constitutes less than five percent of Sanskrit literature, with more than ninety five percent having nothing to do with religion. Instead, it deals with philosophy, law, science, literature, grammar, phonetics, interpretation etc. Sanskrit was in fact the language of free thinkers, who questioned everything and expressed the widest spectrum of thoughts on various subjects.

Sanskrit was in particular, the language of scientists in ancient India. Today, we may be behind the Western countries in science, but there was a time when India was leading the world in science. Knowledge of the great scientific achievements of our ancestors like Varahamihira, the first person to speak about the eclipses, Artyabhata, a great mathematician who invented ‘zero’ and its usage, Charaka and Sushrutha, the greatayurvedic doctors who invented ‘surgery’, and many others are enough examples to inspire and take our country to the forefront of science in the modern world.

The word, Sanskrit is the anglicized version of *Samskritam* meaning ‘prepared, pure, refined or perfect’. It is called Devavani, meaning, the language of Gods. It has an outstanding place in our culture and was recognized as a language of rare sublimity by the whole world. Sanskrit was

the language of our philosophers, our scientists, our mathematicians, our great poets and play writers, our grammarians, our jurists etc. In grammar, Panini and Patanjali, authors of Ashtadhyayi and the Mahabhasya have no equals in the world. Likewise in astronomy and mathematics, the works of Aryabhata, Brahmagupta and Bhaskar opened up new frontiers for mankind.

The Sanskrit language made two great contributions to the development and progress of science in ancient India. The great grammarian Panini created classical Sanskrit, which enabled scientific ideas to be expressed with great precision, logic and elegance. Science requires precision and logic. Sanskrit is not just one language. There are several Sanskrit's. The Sanskrit that we have today, also known as classical or *laukik* Sanskrit, is Panini's Sanskrit. This is what is taught in schools and universities and this is the language in which all our great scientists wrote their great works. Panini has built the structure of the Sanskrit language with just four thousand *sutras*. His effort in changing the shape and linguistic facility of Sanskrit language soon became a relevant idea for scientific and mathematical literature.

Having already been identified as a language that is readily adaptable to computer usage, there is no reason why Sanskrit should not tap the rich resources of what technology has to offer, to make teaching-learning a delightful process. E-learning, the new technique which resorts to electronic educational technology is an ideal learning platform which is growing rapidly because of four main reasons -

- 1) Increase in the availability of higher speed computer networks to provide information and services;
- 2) Recognition that teachers need to 'work smarter' with constant updating of skills;
- 3) Convenient just – in – time education for teachers
- 4) Cost-effective alternative to traditional classroom based education and training.

In order to teach Panini's grammar, Patanjali's Astadyayi, which has laid the foundation to teach and learn Sanskrit, educational technology could be designed and implemented in such a manner so as to attain broader educational reform. Just providing teachers who follow an outdated curricula, professional development through the use of computers, will not show any systematic improvement in learning. If teacher professional development in the use of technology to improve teaching and learning has to be effective, it has to be multifaceted, modular, authentic,

collaborative, incentivized, interactive and ongoing; allotted sufficient time and financial resources and evaluated and revised. Since designing and implementing teacher professional development programs requires quite an investment, care has to be taken to ensure that teachers acquire the knowledge and skills needed to use technology effectively to reach out to new educational opportunities and to participate in the global knowledge-based economy.

It is unfortunate that Sanskrit, the divine language spoken for more than thousands of years, is now used only by priests in temples and that people do not recognize that many of the words in everyday language have their origin in Sanskrit. Students in colleges and schools opt for Sanskrit as the first or second language because it is taught through other languages, making it easier for them. Even when the Britishers came to India they learnt Sanskrit with the intention of winning over the Indians who strongly believed in the *Vedas* and *Dharmashastras*.

It is generally opined that Sanskrit is a difficult language to learn. On the contrary, it is not. The first stage requires understanding the power of the forty-nine basic sounds of the Sanskrit alphabet. The complete alphabet must have been worked out by learned grammarians on phonetic principles long before it was codified by Panini around 500 B.C. as it is arranged in such a scientific method with the simple vowels coming first and then the complex vowels, followed by consonants in uniform groups according to the organs of speech with which they are pronounced.

Sanskrit will become a planetary language only when it is taught in an interesting manner. Teaching through the modern technological methods will encourage learners to learn, shedding all inhibitions and not afraid of making mistakes. The “Vyoma linguistic centre” has already developed the software to teach Sanskrit via DVD with Audio and Video settings, making the teaching and learning of Sanskrit grammar a lot easier.

Sanskrit had always inspired the heart and souls of the intelligent people. The great German scholar MaxMueller who helped introduce Sanskrit to the West during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, stressed that without a thorough knowledge of Sanskrit language and literature, art, religion and philosophy of India, a liberal education would not be complete – India being the intellectual and spiritual ancestor of the race historically and through Sanskrit.

Max Muller also points out that Sanskrit provides perfect examples of the foundation for other languages like German, Teutonic etc., without mentioning its influence on Asian languages. The

transmission of Buddhism to Asia can be attributed more to the appeal to Sanskrit. Even in translation, Sanskrit works evoked the admiration of Western poets and philosophers like Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Melville etc.

Civilization cannot exist without language. Of all the discoveries in the course of human history, language is the most significant and yet the most taken for granted. On the contrary, language helps in describing the subtlety and complexity of human life and prepares one to meet its challenges. The intense search for truth in ancient India led to the discovery of a perfect tool in the form of the Sanskrit language.

Access to modern technology which did not exist at the beginning of the century was made possible through advancement in the field of mathematics, a 'language' which has helped us to discover the interrelationship of energy and matter with a high degree of precision. The resulting technology is the evidence of the tremendous power that is unleashed simply by being able to make the finer distinction of a language that mathematics affords.

At the same time mankind has fallen behind due to the advancement in technology. The current state of political and ecological imbalance that we are experiencing can be attributed to the fact that technology has exceeded the power of human beings to be in control. It may be that the languages used for everyday communication do not help in making the differences required to make the distinctions required to be in balance with technology that has taken over our lives. Nevertheless, the sooner we realize that technology is here to stay and that we need to capitalize on its benefits, the better for us.

E-books is a good learning option. Though it may not be possible to create an e-book with different references, it can be planned in such a way that it contains all the course detail and the relevant material. It can be for a duration of thirty hours, with an introductory video, the main objective being to learn the basic components like simple Sanskrit weekly verses and grammar. Spoken Sanskrit may consist of graphics, dialogues and textual material, with audios and videos with the grammar section containing an audio commentary to the course text book. Some of the relevant references and books may be scanned and uploaded for the benefit of the students, so that they can complete the tasks and rectify their mistakes.

The e-texts can provide solutions to many problems. E-texts through mobile devices like iPods, iPhone etc. helps in mobility. Students can complete tasks by listening and viewing the course materials. This ensures that students study with the available e-resources whenever they are at the field of work. E-books might also be preferable to the internet as they can be read independent of the operating system. Also multimedia issues may be solved as the videos and audios embedded in the e-text can work instantly over the previous web based model.

Modern Science has thrown light on the ancient knowledge to the extent of proving that a sound pronounced or heard has varied effects on the different parts of the brain. It is not a new concept but existed in the earlier century itself. The same invocations and accents were used and uttered by people all over the country. Thus we can prove that Sanskrit language can serve as a tool to preserve the cultural unity of the country.

#### Conclusion

Technical experts are of the opinion that Sanskrit is an ideal language readily adaptable to computer usage. All Indian languages have a large proportion of identifiable Sanskrit words. Therefore the language served as a valuable tool in the past, transmitting and preserving Indian civilization. It may play an even more valuable role today with developed technologies. It is not only an instrument but also a glorious product of Indian civilization. Despite its age, even today useful knowledge in medicine, in psychology, in design, in horticulture etc. is being gained by experts in their respective fields by delving into ancient texts. So we can say that teaching and learning of the Sanskrit through e-books will always be a beneficial concept.

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