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Technology in the ESL Classroom

Abstract: Technology is ubiquitous in today's world and has transformed how we live our lives. As such it becomes crucial to deploy technology into our classrooms effectively. When integrated effectively in the academic process, it provides for a helpful way to connect with students of all learning styles. In an ESL classroom specially, it is interesting to study how technology has revolutionized the acquisition of the four major skills namely Speaking, Reading, Listening and Writing. Technology has truly expanded the classroom beyond its walls and limitations of time by offering new ways of engaging with texts and innovative methods in the teaching-learning process.

As Wallace Stevens would agree, change is the only constant thing in the world as we live “[i]n a universe of inconstancy” (*Collected Poems* 389). However, the pace of change varies from time to time, and during the last 30 years the speed of change has been phenomenal with the advent of computer technology, internet, and other movements like Globalization. This has influenced every aspect of human life, from everyday personal life to family life and professional work behavior. It would not be an exaggeration to say that human life is in the grip of technology more

than ever before. When we speak of technology, we actually refer to many things including the set pattern of doing things to using electrically and electronically driven instruments and gadgets. These days, we have become so habituated to using these devices that it is hardly noticed that, really speaking, it is these devices that are driving us. The point is, the use of technology has left nothing untouched in our lives.

The field of education has not been impervious to this change. During the last 20 years or so, the process of education has become more dependent on the use of technology. Speaking of India, primary and secondary education is slow in implementing the use of technology; however, higher education has seen a sudden change in this respect, especially due to the compulsion of accreditation of institutions by NAAC and NBA. UGC, NAAC, and NBA's emphasis on research and quality education along with technologically advanced infrastructural facilities and their use has been responsible for this change. Even the universities have been forced to go online in their everyday communications with colleges affiliated to them. Thus, it became mandatory for every college to have a sound technological set up. However, there is a glaring gap between the set up and the users of it. Unfortunately, the number of competent users of this technology is very small. Many teachers, who are the mediators between knowledge and the students, are themselves ignorant of the value of the use of technology in education, and do not know how to operate the equipment at their disposal.

When we speak of technology, there are obviously advantages and disadvantages of it. A judicious use of it, though, is always beneficial. We will look at the disadvantages later. Let us first see how meaningfully and fruitfully we can use it in pedagogical situations.

LISTENING SKILLS

It would not be a bad idea to see how it can be very helpful in smaller aspects of learning like vocabulary. Images have always been known to be more memorable than words alone. When it is the question of language acquisition, whether it is the mother tongue or a second/foreign language, children are more likely to associate an image with a certain word. The reason is that,

human visual processing system and memory for images is far more superior to other modes of memorizing; this is called picture superiority effect (PSE) in cognitive theory. The reasons for this superiority are still being researched (Miller, 2011), but that is the truth and must not be overlooked. This is the building block to the acquisition of written language and reading comprehension. This is why children's story books and school texts are replete with images along with the textual content. Now, just imagine that stories are electronically narrated along with images, not only still images but also moving ones. Would not it facilitate learning that much more effectively? Especially, in rural and tribal areas where students cannot afford to buy textbooks, this would be far more useful—especially when it is the English language.

Listening skill can be divided into three categories: Passive listening (listening for pleasure or entertainment); Active listening (listening to learn and retain information); and Analytical listening (listening in order to criticize or make judgments). The first of these sub-skills is useful for:

a) Sounds

By using technology, for example TV or radio news, we would have an access to know how native speakers pronounce words. It helps us distinguish between two similar words, like sing and sink etc.

b) Stress and Intonation Patterns

The English system of stress, intonation and rhythm is extremely essential. For example, 'importance' and 'impotent' are often pronounced by most Indians with stress on the first syllable.

c) Predicting

To be able to guess what is going to be said next, we are more likely to perceive it and understand it well.

d) Vocabulary

Technology often brings the passive vocabulary into the learner's active vocabulary. Much of the vocabulary used in speech of a video or recorded speech etc may already be known to the learner, but this does not mean that he/she is very familiar with it. Technology helps us to be more familiar with vocabulary in speech.

e) Accents

We can differentiate various accents spoken by native speakers, for example by listening to live commentary of any sport or watching a movie (Cricket fans in India would be familiar with Geoffrey Boycott's strange Yorkshire accent). Movie provides different people with different accents.

The second sub-skill will help the learners in:

- a) Retention of the heard information in memory
- b) Contextualizing communicative functions of utterances
- c) Getting acquainted with different speech styles, registers, dialects, and performance errors
- d) Realizing that meanings can be expressed using different expressions and grammatical forms
- e) Inferring meaning and make predictions using personal knowledge, experiences, and strategies

Once the learners acquire the first two sub-skills, they can be made to take a further step to listening skill, i.e. listening to improve their critical listening ability. This sub-skill entails:

- a) Reflecting what has been said by paraphrasing
“What he/she is suggesting is,” and “He/She seems to be *for* this or *against* that.”
- b) Asking questions to clarify certain points
“Do you mean this?” or “Are you rejecting that altogether?”
- c) Summarizing the speaker's comments periodically

- d) Deferring judgment until the speaker's argument is over
- e) Forming appropriate and judicious response

Apart from or in the absence of our language lab, there are many online resources to train the learners in listening to the English speech sounds. One of them is www.bbclearningenglish.com. It introduces basic speech sounds in English, and in many other aspects like connected phonemes, and so on. Another useful website that can be very useful in teaching the English sounds is www.readinglessons.com, which uses animations for narrating simple and very short stories (for which you will need to subscribe first though a free trial period can be availed).

The audio-visual and computer-based technology is very helpful in improving listening skills as they make available a vast variety of language variation from casual spoken language to very formal language. Therefore, it is necessary for a language teacher to know the technology.

READING SKILLS

The purpose of reading is to understand the content. The success of any education depends very heavily on the learner's reading comprehension. As Ertem observes, "reading comprehension is an active cognitive process, and involves interaction between reader and text to construct meaning" (140). According to Ertem, there has been a decrease in motivation to read for pleasure within students. Ertem also argues that struggling readers are experiencing a lack in decoding skills and fluency which is responsible for poor comprehension skills. In order to bring about a change for the better, it is necessary for teachers to increase students' interest in reading.

There are five essential components of the reading skill as identified by America's National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in its report of 2000:

1. **Phonemic awareness** : is commonly defined as the understanding that spoken words are made up of separate units of sound that are blended together when words are pronounced.

For example, hearing and saying that the word ‘cat’ has three sounds or phonemes /k/ /a/ /t/ is an example of phonemic awareness skill.

2. **Phonics** : a set of rules that specify the relationship between letters in the spelling of words and the sounds of spoken language.
3. **Fluency** : recognizing the words in a text rapidly and accurately and using phrasing and emphasis in a way that makes what is read sound like spoken language.
4. **Vocabulary**: words we need to know to communicate with others. There are four types of vocabulary:
 - a) **listening**: words we understand when others talk to us
 - b) **speaking**: words we use when we talk to others
 - c) **reading**: words we know when we see them in print (sight words and words we can decode)
 - d) **writing**: words we use when we write

Listening and speaking vocabularies are sometimes referred to collectively as oral vocabulary.

5. **Comprehension** : constructing meaning that is reasonable and accurate by connecting what has been read to what the reader already knows and thinking about all of this information until it is understood. Comprehension is the final goal of reading instruction

There are some very good online tools that can be used not only to create interest in reading but also to improve reading comprehension. These websites are tools that make use of a variety of activities and exercises, all of which aim at providing students with meaningful practice in areas related to reading comprehension. Let us have a look at some of them:

1. Reading Bear

A St. Charles Place Education Foundation project of WatchKnowLearn.org, 'Reading Bear' is a great tool for helping beginners learn to read. Although registration is necessary for subscription, it is "all free and non profit." Reading Bear integrates both vocabulary practice (over 1200 vocabulary items) and phonetic awareness (covering different phonetic principles and patterns of written English) into their lessons. All of these lessons are provided in the form of narrated presentations playable either as a video or as an interactive slide show. Presentations are available in seven different versions. In the fullest version, the narrator sounds out a word slowly and quickly, then blend it slowly, and finally (after an optional prompt) blend it quickly. As sounds are pronounced, the corresponding letters are highlighted. Then a picture is displayed illustrating the word, show a sentence (with the individual sounds again highlighted, karaoke style), and finally show a video illustrating the sentence.

2. Rewordify

'Rewordify' lets you read more, understand more, learn more words, and teach more effectively. It simplifies English, teaches vocabulary, creates learning materials, and lets you create documents to teach a global audience. It has many more features, and it's all free.

3. SpeakIt

'SpeakIt' reads selected text using Text-to-Speech technology with language auto-detection. It can read text in more than 50 languages.

This is how to use SpeakIt:

- First select the text you want it to read
- Then click the icon to start listening

- When it is ready to read, the number of sentences is shown on the icon
- To stop listening at any time click pause

‘SpeakIt’ has been added to Google Chrome as an extension and is thus readily accessible.

4. Read with Me

‘Read with Me’ is a web platform that is useful for monitoring oral reading progress on any web device. It provides students practice with fluency at home on any web device and to keep track of miscues. They can also use it to record and listen to their own reading. It also has tips for parents and teachers for monitoring. Giving ‘Read with Me eBooks’ a try is worthy of recommendation here.

5. Language Garden

Signing up is required for this application. It is a treasure trove of materials and resources on teaching language literacy. Using Language Garden, students will be able to learn about language plants, read and listen to narrated stories, and compose their own language plants.

For improving the students’ reading skills, it is always good to begin with Aesop’s Fables or Panchatantra, especially for Indian learners. Later, other books which are very interesting and useful may be prescribed, and students can enjoy and learn at the same time. There are some good magazines in English published in India: *Champak*, a fortnightly that can be very useful at the beginner’s level; *Chandoba* is another popular monthly published in English and can be helpful at the intermediate level of learning. There are some very good novels for reading; however, they have to be prescribed judiciously on assessing the learners’ progress. Here are a few of them:

1. *Fantastic Mr Fox* by Roald Dahl

Roald Dahl is one of the greatest children’s authors and very popular with adults too. Beginning with a children’s book is a good way to begin reading English novels, as they often have exciting

plots and fun dialogue. Fantastic Mr Fox is a very short novel, 90 pages long. Online version is 53 Pages only. It creates a sense of suspense, desperation and drama as the farmers close in on Mr. Fox.

2. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon

Written in a childish and colloquial language, this story about the adventures of a young boy with autism, Christopher, has an intriguing plot. When he discovers the murder of his neighbour's dog, he decides to investigate it. As it is told from Christopher's point of view, his matter-of-fact explanations for everything he sees are clear and easy to understand and take you on an intriguing journey. Since the novel employs the first person narrative, the readers learn a lot about his problems, feelings, his character and other personal things, which helps in empathizing with the autistic Christopher, thus enhancing tolerance.

3. *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame

This classic tale takes place in the English countryside and shares the adventures of the animals that live by the river. Appreciated by Maria Tatar as a novel that "takes us into a pre-modern world of lyrical beauty, with animals that behave like humans, landscapes that are painted for us rather than described, and language more literary than spoken," it "takes us into a pre-modern world of lyrical beauty, with animals that behave like humans." Grahame's simple use of language with imaginative stories makes this a pleasurable read for both adults and children.

4. *Animal Farm* by George Orwell

Allegorical in nature, the novel tells the story of animals rebelling against their human masters, and makes an entertaining read though it is a satire of the Russian Revolution. Orwell uses simple English to appeal to all reading levels with a 'less is more' approach, and the animals speak in short, clear sentences.

5. *The Giver* by Lois Lowry

The story cogently creates two different worlds, the children's world against the adult world, which would certainly appeal to our young learners. Written in almost the journalistic style, Lowry uses short sentences and simple grammar to create a linear narrative that captivates the

reader from the outset. It is a story of a boy called Jonas who lives in a community where freedom, individuality, and choice do not exist.

6. *High Fidelity* by Nick Hornby

This modern tale from the 1990s uses a casual style of language and is written from the point of view of the 35 year old Rob, a heartbroken vinyl record storeowner living in north London. It has a quick pace to it and uses short and often funny conversations between characters. One can read the novel without a dictionary as it is written in plain and accessible language.

There are many other interesting novels for the learners to read. The teachers can simply guide them in the process of appreciation depending on their age and maturity, and give some activities to carry out, individually and in groups too.

SPEAKING SKILLS

In this age of globalization, people from various nationalities come together for all sorts of businesses, where face to face or phonic conversation is required. This obviously entails good speaking skills. As Bahadorfar and Omidvar observe, Brown and Yule maintain that speaking skill is one that the students will be judged upon most in their real-life situations since it is an essential part of everyday communication and since most often the first impression of a person is based on his/her ability to speak fluently and comprehensively (9). So, teachers have a responsibility to prepare their students as much as possible to be able to speak in English in the real world outside the classroom.

What is “Teaching Speaking”?

As Nunan comprehensively suggests, teaching speaking is to teach our learners to:

- a) Produce speech sounds and sound patterns used in the English language
- b) Orally produce differences among the English phonemes and allophones

- c) Produce English stress and intonation patterns, and the rhythm of the English language
- d) Choose proper words, sentences—even the tone—depending on the social setting, audience, relationship with the audience, situation, and subject matter
- e) Organize their thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence
- f) Express a particular meaning in different grammatical forms
- g) Use the language as a means of expressing values and judgments
- h) Use the language confidently and effectively with fluency

The Roles of Students in Learning Speaking

There are some categories that can be used as the role of learners in developing speaking skills in the classroom (Brown 1994):

- a) **Imitative:** It does not intend to carry out any meaningful interaction; rather, it is used to focus on some particular aspects of the language, like certain difficult sounds.
- b) **Intensive** - It goes one step beyond imitative to include any speaking performances that are designed to practice some phonological or grammatical aspects of language.
- c) **Responsive** - It includes short responses to teacher-/student-initiated questions, suggestions or comments.
- d) **Transactional** (in dialogue) - Transactional language is used for conveying or exchanging information; it is an extended form of responsive language.
- e) **Interpersonal** (dialogue) – It is more than the transactional skill in that it is not merely an exchange of some fact or information. It serves to maintain social relationships. These conversations are a little trickier for learners because they can involve some or all of the following factors – a casual register, colloquial language, involving emotional charge that often requires slang, innuendoes, sarcasm etc.
- f) **Extensive** (monolog) - Here the language is more formal and deliberative. It can be planned or impromptu, as in reports, summaries, even in speech or extempore.

As we are discussing the use of technology, it is indeed interesting to see how we can use it to improve this skill. There are many tools or gadgets available which can be used for communication and thus for testing and thus improving speaking skills; they include:

a) Communication lab or Language Lab

Using the interactive language lab for listening and producing correct sounds drills the learners in gaining accuracy and fluency in their speech in the most useful way.

b) Video conferencing can be used to give practice in responsive and transactional oral skills.

c) Videos are a powerful tool because they provide not only context, but also authenticity, motivation, interest and confidence, the sociolinguistic and pragmatic level of language, nonverbal features, such as gestures and body language, active involvement and participation, and real vocabulary acquisition. (Blasco, 2009).

d) CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning)

Basically, CALL means uses of computer and the internet for language teaching and learning. It offers individualized and private learning, so that the learners can learn even without the teacher assisting them for everything and at the learner's pace instead of the teacher's. As a tool for English language teachers, it offers a variety of tools including word processors, spelling checkers, grammar checkers, concordances (for finding all the uses of certain words), and collaborative writing through LAN in which writers can have real time discussions and take decisions as to the correctness of their writing.

e) Speech recognition software

It helps in automatic speech recognition used for foreign language pronunciation and speech practice, and be embedded into the CALL software. It also helps learners with some disabilities and with limited English language in writing tasks through its in-built voice-to-text programme.

f) Programmes through educational satellites:

India launched the world's first educational satellite on 20 September 2004. It is specially configured to meet the growing demand for an interactive satellite-based distance education system for the country through audio-visual medium, employing Direct-to-Home (DTH) quality broadcast. It will use the virtual classroom concept to offer education to children in remote villages, quality higher education to students in areas without access to good technical institutes, adult literacy programmes and training modules for teachers. Countrywide Classroom was its earlier version. These

days, TataSky also has this facility for many educational programmes including English language learning.

g) TELL (Technology Enhanced Language Learning)

There is a little difference between CALL and TELL. Call has the computer in front of the learner, whereas TELL makes available other tools with the help of the computer technology, like LCD projector, interactive whiteboard etc. TELL is best seen as something that provides teaching aides as it functions more as Computer Mediated Communication (CMC).

h) Pod casting:

The word “podcasting” is a portmanteau word that combines the words “broadcasting” and “iPod.” At the core a podcast is an audio file that is automatically received from the internet and then synced to your MP3 player. The files are received by subscribing to what is called a podcast feed, which is often free. Sometimes, this is also called an RSS feed. It is not necessary to remember to check for new feeds or shows; they are automatically downloaded for you. For example, gaana.com is a podcast feed you can subscribe to and receive audio songs into your desktop or portable device with the internet connection.

For learning English, <http://learningenglish.voanews.com> is a very good website for ear tuning and vocabulary. There is a website, www.fluentu.com/english/blog/esl-english-podcasts, which has a list of 11 most useful podcasts for learning English.

WRITING SKILLS

Writing is an important part of life, whether in the workplace or school, as a hobby or in personal communication. Good writing skills are important when one’s work involves writing, whether as a teacher or a journalist, as a cleric or public relations professional. Writing is a productive skill like speaking. It helps the writer express emotions, feelings, and thoughts in a relatively permanent form, unlike speaking. The connection that establishes between the writer and the

reader is of a quite different nature than in oral communication. Writing helps one organize one's thoughts as one writes them on paper or on screen.

Personal writing is different from writing for school assignments and writing for professional needs. While personal writing is most often informal, writing for school and for profession requires critical thinking and logical argumentation in the expression. The latter sometimes requires research as well; it also helps the writer learn more about certain things in life. In short, formal writing improves one's presentation skills in a much better way than any other form of expression. My personal experience with students is that they respond well if they are asked to write short descriptions of things or events about themselves in the beginning. The difficulty level regarding language use (like using conjunctions or using two different tenses in one sentence etc.) may be increased once they start feeling comfortable. Then it is possible to try other topics or subject matters with increasing difficulty.

Writing cannot be really taught except instructing how to structure one's ideas in a systematic or logical way. This is especially very true about creative writing. However, people learning a foreign language may be taught how they can use technology for better writing. This is obviously a very elementary level, but very useful nonetheless. In professional life, too, good writing skills have great importance. Most people spend a fair amount of time at work communicating via the written word using emails, notes, letters, texts and Tweets, Whatsapp and Facebook messenger tools etc. Messaging a colleague, reporting or writing to your boss, or crafting the company newsletter, your writing skills can either boost or hinder your career.

A study of language is generally inseparable from the study of literature and also cinema as visual texts. As fiction shares with film the ability to employ the structures and devices of narrative it becomes a valuable pedagogic tool. As an engaging and enjoyable activity, films become a very useful tool in the ESL classroom. An increasing number of teachers are successfully employing films in the ESL classroom because of the ability to give 'authenticity' to language exchanges in 'real' situations. Hence learners are able to see language used in its entirety including the appropriate use of language in a particular situation, replying to responses, facial expressions and gestures. Even in the literature classroom, films are beautiful complements

to the themes in fiction. For instance, *The Diary of a Young Girl* is a world classic that reminds us of the horrors of the Holocaust, the resilience of the human spirit and the tragedy of war. A movie like Mark Herman's *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2008) can be an excellent accompaniment to the book as it deals with the same themes and opens up ideas and possibilities for students to discuss. Some short films would serve the purpose in a more fruitful way, especially if the audience is required to fill in the gaps that are glaring but not fully expressed in the film; for example, a short film like Albert Lamorisse's *The Red Balloon* (1956), or even a proper movie like Majid Majidi's *Baran* (2001). After watching them, or even during the screening, the learners can be made to discuss some issues, and they would be very willing to comment, thus generating the English language. There are many websites and blogs that provide innovative and well structured lesson plans based on films and documentaries for the ESL classroom. Some of the more popular ones are Allat C, Viral ELT and Film English.

As teachers in the modern classroom, some of the most advanced means of instruction are available to us today. The ESL classroom definitely stands to benefit from a meaningful incorporation of technology into pedagogy. The education sector lags behind other sectors in the integration of technology in its daily processes due to a number of reasons, the major ones being a lack of awareness of the variety of tools available or a lack of conviction in their effectiveness. These issues can be solved if an effort is made to avoid implementing technology superficially and instead incorporating it meaningfully in the academic process through the various means explained here by the researchers.

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