

# Fostering Autonomous Learning through Technology in the Language Classroom

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## Abstract

This paper examines the use of autonomous learning through technology in the language classroom. In the classrooms, learners should be equipped with the tools for their own learning, while the teacher guides and provides support. Listening, speaking, comprehension projects which could be helped by the use of audio cassettes, videos, television, writing and writing correction programmes, can now be fruitfully be done with computers. These new tools support and extend student opportunities and access to academic and authentic language skills. The aim of the paper is to project the advantages of virtual classroom over the traditional classroom. Also, the factors which make the students learn the language thoroughly without much of a strain will be discussed. Teachers should take it as a challenge as how to make their pupils motivated to learn the English language and how to make the learning process itself motivating for children. The objective of the paper is to report the gains that may be obtained from the use of technology to develop language skills in students of English as a foreign language.

[**Keywords:** Autonomous Learning, digital technology, language classroom, ICT]

## Introduction

**E**nglish teachers have become more aware that the exclusive use of communicative approach does not suit all English teaching situations. Also, they have discovered that no single teaching method deals with everything that concerns with the form, the use, and the content of the target language. So, at present, it is needed in India to modernize English teaching. That is to combine the new with the old so as to adapt the communicative approach to traditional teaching structures.

In the present century, it is very much necessary foster autonomous learning through technology in the language classroom to arouse the interest of the students, to give importance to language at school/college level. Virtual classroom brings an open learning environment allowing the students to join the learning process which would otherwise remain a passive process for them. All classrooms are not computer oriented but a teacher oriented computer assisted classrooms can be provided. Together with the teacher, the learners try to reach their aims within the accepted syllabus. The teacher is well aware of the activity of the learners and their potentiality of development. It is therefore important for the teacher and the software and the course designer to set up the tasks and the exercises in such a way that the teacher and the learner should not feel separated. Some students strive very hard to get through in the second language and some never strain to learn the language and thereby they fail to build up their career. If autonomous learning through technology is brought into the language classroom, automatically the physical strain will be decreased and it is a two way process of learning, the language as well as the technology. On the whole, to decolonize the teaching strategies, English Language Teaching have to accommodate the ceaseless implementation of changes

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taking place in the pre-global scenario, without surrendering completely to the process of globalization.

## **Use of Technology**

The idea of using autonomous learning through technology in language classrooms seems to be challenging. Using such techniques in a classroom, students get an opportunity to

- learn a language collaboratively
- be more enthusiastic about learning
- become autonomous learners
- work together constantly and collaboratively
- communicate with the native speakers

Using techniques such as the Internet, digital media tools and common software applications would help to enhance students' learning. Hence it is suggested to

- create visual aids for teaching
- improve access to resources, such as online literature libraries
- review and comment on students to work more efficiently
- integrate video clips into presentations
- broaden choices for students to demonstrate learning

Innovations in teaching and learning are directly related to new ways and new tools that correspond to the lifestyle of learners and to those things that attract and motivate them. Language teachers have a tradition of integrating new techniques into teaching. Anthony defines techniques as "A technique is implementational—that which actually takes place in a classroom. It is a particular trick, stratagem, or contrivance used to accomplish an immediate objective. Techniques must be consistent with a method, and therefore in harmony with an approach as well" (64). In designing or selecting the software, the learner

- i. needs clear instructions on how to start the programme.
- ii. should be aware of the content of the materials.
- iii. should be able to navigate the programme efficiently.
- iv. should know
  - What is in this programme?
  - Where am I now?
  - Where can I go and how do I get there?
  - Where have I been already?
- iv. feels that it is important to achieve consistency in commands and keywords that are used in instructions and explanations.
- v. may need to access dictionaries and help on the content of the programme
- vi. may need to make use of a notepad as an extension activity which should be available via a mouse click
- vii. should be able to choose the language of the onscreen instructions.
- viii. If the learner quits the programme before completing, it should be possible to re-enter at the point where he/she gave up.
- ix. The level of the programme should be clear to the learners as they are slow learners, average students and above average students.

## **Advent of New Technology**

Bringing new voices into the classroom, teachers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century took gramophones into their classrooms which were replaced by reel-to-reel tape recorders. The

advent of the language laboratory when the audio-lingual method was to the fore, considered as central to successful language learning which were followed by video players and video cameras. Language laboratory was also used to teach pronunciation and dialogues, and to show films. The content of this material has not changed, but it is more accessible to students and teachers. All these innovations when compared with the existing media, become integrated with the new strategies.

## New Technology

Fostering technology has become the trend in foreign/second language teaching. As Gousie states:

In the fast-moving 1990s, a variety of new technological tools have appeared on the scene. No longer were we swept by a wave of methodology; we were swamped by a tidal wave of computer-assisted technologies. Suddenly the capability of incorporating laserdiscs, hypertext cards, CDs, CD-ROMs and the internet into our syllabi became a reality. (55)

The new technologies have given access to “multi-literacies” (The New London Group 1996) that require readings of visuals, web pages, etc. It is needed to recognise this for two reasons: one, to be aware of the new tools, for the materials are limited and even out-of-date. Second, as the students are comfortable using these tools, it is very much needed to incorporate their features in the language classroom. Technology lessens the efforts in the hands of the intelligent user and enhances the scope of his achievement, confidence and enjoyment.

## Computers

With the advent of multimedia, computing and the Internet, the role of computers in language instruction has now become an important issue confronting large numbers of language teachers throughout the world. Computer serves as an activating tool. It helps the students to develop their use of English and chances should be given to improve their skills. Hence, the students are given tasks, by writing or speaking. These activities are often fun for the students and provide an enjoyable classroom experience and thus helping them in the learning process.

When the students get themselves engaged in the classroom they could learn better and likely to cause fewer discipline problems. Teachers should make the students interested in the subject, in the class and in the target language with much hope and enjoyment. Jeremy Harmer in his *Practice of English Language Teaching* says “If students are engaged, if they are genuinely interested and involved in what is going on, the chances are that they are going to learn an awful lot better because they are not just doing what they have to do because they are in school, they are also involved in what’s going” (7).

At advanced levels net-surfing for library-exploitation services on an effective scale can be recommended. In the case of printed textbooks, it can only approximate spoken discourse and an authentic audience, but the communication tools in the new technologies provide opportunities to introduce authentic communication into the classroom. These collaboration tools can support the objectives of a language program, such as authentic communication and collaboration. Another component of authentic communication is interacting with unfamiliar people in a distant location. For example, telephonic conversations with officials, videoconferences with a team of people, etc. technology transmits voice in both directions. Software such as Skype and hardware such as a webcam can connect computers at distant

locations, allowing participants to interact. The constraint here is that this has to occur in real time, for which adequate infrastructure (in terms of electricity and connectivity) is required. Spelling checker can be used to generate words. "Typing in a few letters of the word and then selected the correct word from the alternatives provided" (Gupta 260).

### **Computer-assisted Language**

Computer-assisted language learning has increased responsibilities, creativity, productivity and team work. The English learning programme will just serve the student's desired goal of learning. In one sense, students easily get the individual attention from the computer. Second, it offers teachers with more powerful teaching tools with the aid of modern computer technology. It permits the student to have his own pace of learning and monitor and evaluate his own performance if he is doing individual practice. Teachers should be aware of these points while using computers in the classroom.

- Remember that computers and other equipments are just tools and one has to make them work for him and not against him.
- Do not feel satisfied with the materials the software provides
- Create one's own materials based on the software.
- Motivate students by using computer games, prepared as classwork materials.
- Make schedules flexible enough so as to accommodate individuals or small group sessions with the computer.
- Think of the combination of teacher-led classes and computer sessions that best suit one's needs.
- Design one's own computer oriented tasks for the development of language skills.
- Direct the learners to the objectives one wants to achieve
- Use Internet accessibility and create writing and speaking tasks for the learners, using the computer resource.
- Encourage learners to use their intellect by assigning them computer tasks such as looking for information in databases that will make them think and use English.
- Encourage them to use word processors and their applications such as spelling and grammar checkers.

At a basic level, the technology allows us to store and access audio files. Further, such files can be found on the Internet and used to teach units such as pronunciation and dialogues. Thus, the computer seems to bring out student capabilities better than a handwritten text can. It also allows teachers to show students how to compose and edit their essays. Some teachers feel that students should write everything by hand and mark them for neatness and accuracy. However, these are merely the mechanics of writing that the computer can perform flawlessly.

### **Internet**

Technological environment may have profound effects on teaching and learning. Internet is a powerful pedagogic concept, adding value to materials. It occupies an important position in the ELT classroom. It is used to communicate by voice, chat, message, blogs about everything and anything using the widespread examples of social networking like Facebook, Twitter, Orkut, YouTube, MySpace, etc. The World Wide Web can be used very effectively in teaching English as a second language interactively. It makes it possible for students to tackle a huge amount of

human experience. Preparing for an Internet-based language lesson may be demanding because looking for information on the World Wide Web requires a considerable amount of time and concentration. In such a way, students can learn by using the web themselves. They become the creators not just the receivers of knowledge. However, it is absolutely rewarding using it in teaching languages, as students benefit from it enormously. In addition, the range of educational materials that are available in Internet constantly increases and the new resources appear on the Internet has to be exploited. The World Wide Web should never be used in the language lesson just for the sake of novelty. It should be used to develop purposeful interaction in the language classroom.

With the advent of the Internet, students and teachers have access to vast resources and some of them are more current than what a textbook can offer. Although teachers are wary of allowing students to use the Internet fearing that students will plagiarize, it provides new opportunities. Internet throws up an interesting challenge. Since material on the Internet is not reviewed for factual accuracy, the quality of the information is uneven.

The Internet also offers an opportunity for extensive reading. Instead of the limited universe in the textbook, students can look up additional information by following their interests or explore alternative views. This feeds into a research culture that is not limited to a set of “facts” in a textbook. The main objection that teachers have to the use of the Internet is that students will not write their own essays but will merely copy-and-paste material that they find on the Internet. It is easy to detect material that has been copied off the Internet because it does not match the student’s linguistic ability.

## **Motivation**

Motivation is increased, when a variety is offered to make one feel more independent. Krashen is of the view that “A right level of sustained motivation is an important teacher-support in the student development programme” (14). Motivation through appropriate planned teacher work be created at the pre teaching stage, maintained at the whilst-teaching period and supported and reinforced in the post teaching reproduction and feedback. However, Green holds that “no matter how comprehensible and successful the teacher’s motivation enhancement plans, certain students will, of course, nevertheless help to provide the impetus for the learner to achieve all that he is capable of achieving in this particular field of intellectual endeavour” (2-3).

## **Practice**

Next factor to facilitate language acquisition is that the students’ need for practice. Teachers must ensure that classroom interactions are managed properly. In order to avoid being the centre of classroom interactions, desks should be arranged in such a way that the students can look directly at one another. This helps to create interactions among the students. The first part of classroom teaching will be stress and intonation practice. It consists of pronunciation, revision, presentation of vocabulary, oral practice, reading of material on the new structure. Revision and extension of previously taught material are to be practiced in the classroom.

Ronald Wardhaugh’s views that: “Good teaching practice is based on good theoretical understanding. There is indeed nothing so practical as a good theory. Teachers should . . . try to capture some of the excitement of the many challenges that confront us in teaching English to speakers of other languages” (19).

## **Advantages**

The major advantage of fostering new tools over the traditional classroom is that it reduces communication anxiety. Teachers notice that some students are very conscious of their linguistic competence which might cause a failing in their communication. They identify that these students often cannot put their ideas effectively and cannot produce continuous speech. Moreover, the new technical environment allows the learners to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences without any inference of the teacher and at the same time minimizes anxiety and enhances personal security. Without fear it enables them to discuss a topic. One should be aware of that the second language learners are non-native speakers. Warschauer says, "More non-native than native speakers use English on a daily basis to do business, research, access academic information and to communicate with friends and colleagues" (49).

## **Results**

The various results of the different types of students randomly selected are brought to light. Students who are interested in what they are studying tend to make better progress and learn faster. Teachers provide students with lessons that are not only well-structured but also interesting and enjoyable. Careful thought and preparation will help to achieve this. The three important factors—Engage, Study and Activate, have to be taken into account while learning,. Preplanning should be made in such a way that every activity, every exercise, every part of a lesson should fit into one of these categories.

Also the study reveals that the girls and the boys are equally motivated by using new technological tools. Learners who are exposed to CALL showed more involvement towards learning the target language. It is found out that in CALL classes, technology is more welcome than in the traditional way of teaching and learning English. It is found out that the teacher should concentrate on the methodology of the CALL class to make the students learn without much of a strain in learning the language. The students expressed their desire to spend more time in using new technological tools to learn L2 in an effective manner. The time taken to learn the language differs from student to student based on their computer literacy.

While boys are especially interested in computer games, the World Wide Web and the technical features of the computers, girls are more concerned with the communicative aspects. When compared with girls, boys perform better. At the end, both reported that they were more attracted and motivated by using new technological tools in the classroom. Girls generally expressed more positive attitudes towards the virtual lessons and little slower than boys in using computers.

## **Study Objectives**

Feedback was collected from the students to document the differences between the CALL and the non-CALL classes. Regarding their communication in the classroom, audio-visual and other teaching aids, traditional textbooks, etc. were used. All their views were analysed and compared to reveal the differences between the CALL and the non-CALL classes. From the collected data along with the language teacher, the results were discussed. Slow learners' performance was amazing and they performed like an average student whereas the performance of an average student and a good student were more or less the same. A Questionnaire was prepared to assess the pupils' motivation for learning the language and the changes were noticed.

## Conclusion

The key factors contributed to foster autonomous learning in the language classroom increase the impact of new technology, decentralization, students' autonomy and a change in the behaviour and perception level of students. Authentic use of technology to facilitate local processing of global resources helps to meet the student expectations and act as a showcase. New technology tools mentioned in the paper help us to achieve the language in a proper way and prove that printed textbooks could only mimic. Language is for communication and these tools emphasize the skills of communication. It is concluded that virtual classroom increases pupils' motivation for language learning, compared with the traditional language classrooms. According to Ortega, "it is not computer per se that can be beneficial or harmful but the way we put them to. The newest technologies can be made to serve the most traditional pedagogies" (Bakke & Miller 29).

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