

ICT as an Aid in Teaching English Literature and Bridging the Digital Divide

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Abstract

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in higher education can revolutionise the education sector in India, thereby making its impact felt in other areas like governance, economy and administration. The National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology (NME-ICT), launched in 2009 by the Central government, seeks to provide connectivity across the country. It is a project under which various schemes have been undertaken. One such scheme has been undertaken by University Grants Commission (UGC) to develop e-content for around 77 subjects at the postgraduate level, which would be put up on the web portal of the Ministry of Human Resource Development – “Sakshat”. Today in the fast paced world where everything is digitized, the education sector should not lag behind, because it is education which ensures the future of the citizens and the progress of the country. Use of ICT in higher education in the field of engineering, medical science, accountancy, management, business administration, computer science, information technology can be easily thought of. But what about the use of ICT tools in the so called ‘traditional’ subjects of history, literature, political science, economics and other areas of humanities? In this paper, I would focus on how use of ICT in the teaching of English literature can make it interesting for students, teachers, research scholars and how the dynamics of the subject can come alive, for study of literature is, in fact, is studying a number of subjects in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary modes and ICT can provide a fitting platform of convergence for that.

[**Keywords:** ICT, Teaching, English literature, digital divide]

Introduction

ICT is crucial to supplement the conventional or traditional mode of education. The word ‘supplement’ here is important, because technology cannot replace the teacher as such. The use of ICT can supplement or add to the traditional mode. In the present context of technology and information boom, traditional mode of teaching seems monotonous and in most of the colleges and universities across the country English literature is taught in the traditional mode where the teacher speaks for an hour or so and leaves the class. The students too get tired of the monotonous everyday routine. Moreover the importance of English literature as a subject of study needs to be revitalized. More and more students enter into fields like engineering, management, accountancy, medicine where they feel their future is secure, in terms of material needs. But English literature is a subject from which one cannot run away. It is a compulsory subject in most of the courses at the senior secondary and degree levels. English literature is seen to be a ‘traditional’ subject and students who wish to become teachers generally take up this so-called ‘traditional’ field. The use of ICT in teaching English literature and language can revolutionize the way the subject is seen, taught and thought of. The role of the teacher is of immense importance in the teaching of literature but ICT can enhance the teaching by doing

away with boredom and making the students interested in what is being taught. It can motivate and keep the students engaged because ICT tools work at different levels – the students can have an opportunity to see, read, visualize, hear, ponder, discuss, interact and learn. This can be achieved through various means involving ICT.

The Scope of ICT

English literature comprises a number of sub-fields – for example, poetry, fiction, drama, criticism, literary theory, to name some of them. Each requires a different kind of study and different modes of teaching. The use of ICT can help the educator to use different modes of teaching, which will subsequently help students to keep the text or the issues involved in it, in their minds, perhaps, throughout their lives. But this depends not merely on the use of ICT but also the student and the educator. Thus in the teaching of English literature as a subject of higher studies, a combination of the old, involving the teacher and the new mode of teaching, involving ICT tools can go a long way. Moreover ICT would help in research in various fields of English literature. ICT tools would help students comprehend the text and would improve their proficiency. ICT tools can also help in making students attentive and interested.

English literature can be made appealing by the use of audio-visual devices, web resources, playing of movies or staged plays, online glossaries, dictionaries, thesaurus, etc. The use of Clicker – the Student Response System introduced under NME-ICT can enhance interaction in an English literature class. Scenes from movies can be shown and discussed. Use of slides having video, audio, images and texts – a combination can be helpful. Recitation of poetry can be played using ICT tools, use of multiple choice questions on different topics, quizzes, presentations are some of the ways in which ICT can be made effective in a literature class. Teachers would be relaxed as they would not have to memorize and can use slides to take the discussions forward. Using blackboard would no longer be necessary; also taking of attendance of the students present which takes up 5 – 10 minutes because Clicker can do the same. Effective integration of ICT tools into the educational system is a challenging task and the success of NME-ICT depends on this, apart from other things. Ensuring quality, equity and access at the same time is a daunting task which needs to be fulfilled.

How to rejuvenate a literature class

Poetry: Through slide shows the teacher can put up the poetry on screen. The writer's image can be shown. An audio can be played where the poetry is recited, made more interesting if the poet himself/herself recites. Students perhaps may be interested in listening to the author's voice. Apart from these, poets like Blake and Rossetti whose poems have a corresponding painting, their poems can be shown accompanied by the corresponding painting or illustration. Moreover poems involving myths too can be visualized through images presented in slides by the teacher. Of course, the role of the teacher is the most important in making ICT effective. Hence both man and technology has to go hand in hand. Important journal articles and books can be referred to the students through the slides itself so that the teacher need not use the blackboard or spell out the names of the writers or their works. When everything is given, it encourages discussion and helps in creating a critical insight. This critical insight can be enhanced further if the students are given assignments whereby use of ICT tools cannot be done away with. Hence it is they who would use these tools and search for information from various sources. Moreover if poems are shown on screen, it becomes easy for the teacher to point out relevant details and also contrast one poem with another, making literature lively and an involving exercise.

Suppose a poem like “To Autumn” is to be taught. As suggested an audio can be played where it is recited. This ‘hearing’ of the poem will help making an impact on the minds of the students because it will stay on for some time and they would enjoy responding to it. To explain the music of Autumn portion from Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony or from Vivaldi’s Four Seasons can be played to effectively let students go through a rich experience. A picture of the poet can also be shown, or different pictures in varied settings, if available, so that it can be related to his/her biography and while the pictures are played, the biographical details can be discussed by the teacher. Similarly in order to give a feel of the Romantic age, other visuals can be displayed. The combined effect of the ‘visual’ and ‘hearing’ would make students experience what is being taught. The themes, images and movement of the poem can be discussed through different slides which are innovative and effective. It will depend on the teacher how he/she prepares the slides or presentations.

Fiction: Techniques similar to those in poetry can be applied here. In addition, movies based on novels can be shown in full or some important scenes can be presented and discussed. The themes, characterization, historical context, narration can be discussed through slide shows and presentations. Youtube can be integrated—of course with caution—to introduce certain memorable scenes from movies based on novels. Through this students can be introduced to the works of great directors.

Drama: In addition the techniques mentioned already, staged plays can be shown through ICT tools and the minute intricacies of a play can be discussed. As a result the use of light, sound, stage setting and props all will come live before the students and thus would have a lasting impact on them. This would accomplish the dual function of literature to edify and give pleasure. For instance, BBC has a great collection of Shakespeare’s plays which can be integrated in the library.

Criticism: This could be made interesting by the use of examples from literary texts and through practical exercises. The use of ICT would enable to make criticism an enriching and in depth exercise. Critics on a subject can be referred to and students may be encouraged to go through their works.

Literary Theory: This is an area which most students dread. Their fear can be done away with by the use of ICT. The theorists can be shown on screen, their interviews or recorded lectures can be played. The ideas can be applied to literary texts and hence their relevance be made clear. Examples, pictures and other such devices can be used to make students alert and attend to it with interest.

Others: Indian Writing in English, African, American literature and other such areas can be taught through ICT. History of English literature can be shown in tabular forms. Video conferencing can be facilitated so that interaction can take place among students, research scholars and teachers not just within India but across the world. This would make them aware of the literary scenario elsewhere, keep them up-to-date, bring in different points of views and interpretations and enhance their knowledge. Research scholars would be helped if through cloud computing or through other technology, resources are made available at one place. The concept of e-content undertaken under NME-ICT would be helpful. But scholarly journal articles should be made accessible at a larger scale. ICT combined with the traditional methods of teaching can make teaching and learning literature a vivid experience.

Moreover, teaching literature should not be limited to use of slides or projectors alone. The development of e-content would help students refer to relevant information on a topic. A portal can be developed exclusively for literature. This portal can have the e-content which can be updated by academicians and research scholars with authentic information. In addition, free

e-books can be uploaded so that students can have access to these as well. Links to important journals can be provided or perhaps articles on a single writer can all be listed in one place.

The Digital Divide

Something more important that requires attention is the issue of digital divide. The gap or the inequality in the distribution and use of technology between urban India and rural India, that is, the digital divide present in India has an adverse impact on the growth and development of the country. The digital divide also exists between developed and developing countries of the world. The focus in this paper is more on the Indian scenario. The use of satellite and other devices in the field of education is not new in India. But through NME-ICT it will be carried on in a huge scale and in an organized way. The goal of access, equity and quality is ensured through this mission. The focus is on integration. The use of ICT tools in higher education, which is the thrust of NME-ICT, will help bridge the digital divide in the following ways:

- Under the NME-ICT focus will remain on building computer/technology infrastructure throughout the country. This will include remote areas which hitherto had remained untouched by the advent of technology. When remote areas are included, the other thing which will be of interest is the use of technology. Training in the use of ICT tools will take the plan forward. Once people learn to use these, the bridging process of the digital divide India is facing would prove successful.
- Use of ICT tools will give a boost to distance learning and education. This in turn will help people in the remotest parts of the country to avail education and fulfill their dreams and help in the development of the country. Through ICT, distance learning can be made simple and easy, which in turn help in bridging the digital divide.
- The plan of using low-cost ICT devices like the tablets will go a long way in bridging the digital divide because low-cost devices can be made accessible to a much larger group of students. The government should take more effective steps for this. Costly devices are not accessible to the students from remote areas of the country.
- The use of ICT in higher education will help in increasing the GER (Gross Enrollment Rate) of India. The increase in the GER would bring in equity and access in the field of education. Equity in education in a sense implies bridging the digital divide. The more the enrollment rate in higher education through distance or regular mode, the faster will be the process of bridging the digital divide.
- Online courses, development of e-content, e-learning, digital libraries, online encyclopedias, journals, and books would promote learning and make knowledge available to all irrespective of the distance or location or financial resources. If the required ICT infrastructure is present or made available in remote parts of the country, then the resources mentioned above would be available in rural India as well.
- Since India is a huge country, with more area under rural rather than urban population, it is only through ICT that higher education can be made available to all the villages of the country. The step to provide ICT in the universities and

colleges is indeed a laudable initiatory step. Moreover this will lead to the trickling down effect and would be able to encompass schools as well.

- Under NME-ICT polytechnic or vocational skill development institutes have been encompassed. This step would help in bringing students and unemployed youths under the purview of ICT and enhance their learning skills and hence development. This would also ensure that more students enroll in these institutes. This too would lead to the bridging of the digital divide.
- The budgetary allocation for NME-ICT in the Eleventh and Twelfth Five year plans is praiseworthy. Such attention given by the government will further the process of bridging the digital divide. Other such policy moves by the government can help a lot in this area.
- We cannot forget the digital divide between the developed nations and the developing ones. The use of ICT tools in higher education in India will, to a certain extent, help in bridging this digital divide as well. India might someday be able to be at par with the developed nations, although it is a distant dream.
- When everything is computerized, the records of the performance of the students too would be computerized. This would make getting employment easier, as the original certificates need not be verified every time. The task would be light both for the candidate and the employer. Also there would be no possibility of any sort of discrepancy. Again online interviews would be possible. This would enable people from any part of the country to apply for jobs anywhere, which would help bridge the digital divide.
- ICT would support collaboration in different programmes on higher education from different parts of the country and the world. The space would be opened wide for all. Collaborative programmes between different institutes will prove fruitful as there will be opportunity for video conferencing, sharing of resources and other activities.
- Last, but not the least, research scholars can make use of ICT tools to carry forward their research. They not only can have access to works done in their field of interest but also use ICT tools in presenting papers during seminars, conferences and discussions. This would hone their skills as well as make them adept in using these tools and compete in the international field. This would not only help in bridging the digital divide but also help in the development of the country.

In order to bridge the digital divide, it is very important that ICT tools are integrated into the education system and that these are accessible to all. Training of teachers in using ICT tools is of utmost importance, so is its effective usage. If ICTs are not accessible, or are not used in an appropriate manner, it would not be possible to make NME-ICT a success nor would it be possible to bridge the digital divide.

'Connectivity' is a key-word when we talk about ICT. But there are a lot of questions which needs to be attended to while talking about ICT and connectivity. First is whether people are interested in using ICT tools. Next is whether the required infrastructure is available to them. Then, if it is available, are they competent enough to use them and derive benefit out of them. Government intervention is necessary so that ICT can be made successful in higher education. And NME-ICT undertaken by the government of India seems to be in the right direction. It focuses on access, skill development, training, quality, building infrastructure and equity.

Through ICT, problems of the students can be attended to easily. The way online shopping sites respond to customer grievances, through ICT student grievances too can be answered. Moreover, ICT in higher education would provide employment to a number of unemployed youths in the country.

Thus we may conclude that ICT is an important tool which has the potential to make the teaching and learning of 'traditional' subjects like English literature or to be broader, literature in any language a lived experience. It would help in revitalizing the importance of such subjects by various means. The means mentioned above are only suggestions and not exhaustive. A lot more can be done with the opinions of experts in the field of ICT. The present government policy, NME-ICT seems to be on the right track. It would help bridge the digital divide to a certain extent and also help in the growth and development of the country by building up human resource and providing employment. Some of the ways by which the digital divide within the country and in the international scenario can be bridged are enumerated. But it should be kept in mind that bridging the digital divide is a complex issue and NME-ICT can be seen as a preliminary step towards this goal.

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