On the Internet

Recent Impacts of Internet on English Language Training in India

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Abstract

This article discusses the impact of the Internet in education in India, and in particular the difference it has brought to corporate affairs, which is a large focus of English language training in India. As an English language teacher, the author highlights the way English language teaching is promoted with the help of the Internet from middle school to tertiary levels in India. She further discusses the constraints faced by Internet users, and finally the future of Internet usage in language teaching in India.

Introduction

Thanks to the Internet, Indians now excel in the field of Information technology. Digital gadgets like mobile phones and personal computers (PCs) have more and more become an integral part of the lives of people in India, in contrast to the time when PCs with Internet connectivity were first launched solely for commercial use in 1995. It is interesting to find the Internet playing a major role in language teaching, the impact of which is especially noticeable to those who work in the corporate world. This article discusses various aspects of Internet use, particularly in the education sector, including its future in India.

Internet in Education

The Indian education system is quite challenging for students since the Directorate of School Education specifies integration of Internet with language learning in the school curricula at all levels from middle to secondary. For example, even at the middle school level students access resources from the net and use animation and graphics for completing their project work (which is included as a part of the curriculum). It is common even among middle school children to possess an email address through which they communicate with their friends.

In the case of college students, "surfing the net" for doing academic work is often considered a necessity as the resources provided by the Internet serve as an additional input to them. This encourages students to take responsibility for their learning process, offering greater scope for learner autonomy. The collaborative project work that they do by using web resources in turn enhances their performance in the classroom.

Internet and Language Teaching

The role of the Internet in the Indian education system has been consistently evolving, and language teaching in India as well has seen many phases. Gone are the days when teachers served as the sole resource providers, totally dependent on the printed material. The impact of globalization on the Indian economy is so significant that educators have now realized that the Internet can supplement a teacher as it provides greater opportunities for language input thus promoting language learning. Kalyaniwalla (2008), head of operations at Learn Smart India, said in an e-mail interview with ZDNet Asia, that "the Internet complements the learning students get in schools". He pointed out that the penetration of Internet has gone beyond urban areas and now provides online education even in rural areas on a regular basis. With the advent of portals like 24X7guru [http://24x7guru.com] and the India Times Test Center [http://testcenter.indiatimes.com/etesting/], subject knowledge is now imparted with the help of the Internet at the primary through secondary levels. It is encouraging to find the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) hosting English textbooks for students who belong to secondary to higher secondary levels, in order to enhance rural students' language skills.

At the college level, language teachers encourage students to do online communication exercises and listen to audio files found on the net relating to their topics (apart from the more obvious uses of Internet resources from sites developed specifically for ESL/EFL). Similarly, some teachers who have had orientation in using Internet tools give web based projects or assignments on different topics which necessitate students holding online discussions with their peers through Blogs created by their teachers. Students who actively participate in such discussions equip themselves with updated information by accessing articles relating to their topic of discussion from various websites. No doubt, these practices have enhanced their communication skills and promoted the positive quality of sharing ideas with others. The accompanying paradigm shift could both contribute to, and be attributed to, the evolution of information technology in the country.

There are different reasons for which language learning is imparted through the Internet in Indian institutions. They include the growing need for mastery of communication skills to secure challenging jobs in leading multi-national companies and the increasing number of students aspiring to go abroad to pursue their higher education. This has enabled many educational institutions to sign agreements with Language Testing Systems. To give a few examples, NIIT have secured exclusive rights to offer ETS's TOEIC® Listening and Reading test (Test of English for

International Communication^{TM}), TOEFL® Practice Online (TPO), and Criterion^{SM} Online Writing Evaluation Service–in India. The multi-year agreement with NIIT will also enable both organizations to create an awareness of ETS products and services in India. Similarly, many universities have signed agreements with the British Council for conducting the Business English Certification test to students of affiliated colleges. The aspirants undergo training within their institutions or in other institutes in handling tasks in GMAT, TOEFL, and IELTS, with the help of the Internet. Software development and software outsourcing companies in India such as Genuine Infotech Private Ltd. [http://www.genuineinfotech.com] offer computer-based and paper-based formats for conducting the TOEFL test. It is worthwhile to point out that many English teachers in India serve as ELT consultants and free-lancers and work for different training institutes to deliver language training to students. The basic knowledge of surfing the net for accessing information and engaging in language tasks promotes their language teaching practices.

The educational system in India is moving away from its previous reliance on maximum retention (and rote) to one of exploration and research, making it an enjoyable and rewarding experience. To site one example, reputed educational organizations like Auroville have set up a language lab (Auroville Language Lab) for the benefit of those who aspire to learn English along with other foreign languages as well as Hindi, the national language of India. ALL (2004) claims that it provides language education for adults with the help of networked computers with headphones and digital resources such as high quality films, videos, audio materials and interactive software in many different languages.

The extent of encouragement from various quarters for Indian teachers to integrate their teaching with the online environment is indeed heartening. One of the best examples is the portal created by the President of India for teachers of various disciplines, including English, to share their views or classroom experiences with each other through the net. When the portal was launched on September 5, 2008, the President herself invited teachers to post their articles on best teaching practices and exchange ideas through the portal [http://www.teachersofindia.org].

Technology is now in the reach of the masses in the Indian villages, and that has helped the Indian government to teach the fundamentals of the language through a government channel at convenient times in the village centers. Websites are suggested for exercises, and answers are dealt with in subsequent classes. Skills ranging from pronunciation to grammar are taught in such forums. Internet cafes throughout small villages in India enable access at a nominal price. Although the hits through such means have registered low figures, these are likely to increase as spreading urbanization necessitates language learning as a compulsory requirement for further progress in careers in modern-day India.

Nowadays organizations that bring out dailies or periodicals like the *Hindu* or *Deccan Chronicle* outsource to other companies for proofreading the contributions made by different writers. Similarly in web-design companies like Sify.com, few language

experts are employed in-house to edit the manuscripts submitted by their clients. This yet another indication of the extent to which the Internet is used by the corporate sector to outsource editing the use of the language.

The Impact of Internet-based Language Training in the Corporate World

The language teaching and training imparted with the help of the Internet has enhanced the operation of the corporate sector in the country. India has now become a hub for back office operations. Udupa (2001) in his article, "Information Technology Opportunities," mentioned the possibility of Internet penetration in e-commerce companies, which has since proven true. Leading organizations in countries like U.K, U.S.A., and Australia operate their back offices in major cities in India where the employees are being trained to do a variety of jobs, from on-line tutoring to marketing a product. The potential of the employees is well utilized (Indians are noted for their hard work) and at the same time local hires are paid good salaries. Meanwhile, those with the fundamental language proficiency to cope with the demands of their job involve themselves in training and assisting or guiding other employees. Some of these trainers even prepare software solutions to facilitate such work online. It is worthwhile to note that the online tutors, who are involved in tutoring candidates of different nations from middle school to collegiate levels, design the tutoring materials according to the norms specified by the contracting organization. How can they do it?

In the case of BPO's (business process outsourcers who perform a process or a part of a process of another business organisation and call centers, (which perform the part of a client's business which involves handling telephone calls) handling overseas customers, the induction given with the help of the Internet to newly recruited employees enhances their communication skills, particularly their accent, pronunciation and business vocabulary, not to mention their written communication. It is then mandatory for employees to pass a test of their language skills after the induction program.

Constraints in Language Teaching/Learning Practices

Although language learning is emphasized in the curriculum, administering to a larger number of students has always been a challenge faced by teachers at various levels. To begin with, teachers face difficulty in integrating technology with their regular classroom teaching. The language curriculum designed for science and humanities courses in arts and science colleges does not accommodate the use of technology as a part of the syllabus. The examination focuses mainly on testing students' content knowledge and hence teachers give utmost importance to the completion of the prescribed syllabus within the stipulated time. Similarly, large classrooms are a serious issue that teachers often face. It is considered a Herculean task to orient students to use technological tools. Furthermore, as a large number of students exhibit below average proficiency in using language skills at their entry to colleges they need to be given individual attention in the classroom. Paying individual attention through technology is not considered to be an attainable goal. It is also worthwhile to point out the attitude

of students towards the importance of their language learning. The foundation English that students learn in the above mentioned courses is hardly perceived to have any relevance to their employment and this curtails the interest of the students to use technology for language learning purposes.

Using Technological Tools for Language Learning

Mobile Phones

With regard to the use of mobile phones for language learning purposes, Indian universities are yet to make inroads as the service provided to the mobile phones does not support integration of technology. Apart from this, it is felt that the curriculum needs to be modified to accommodate such integration. How could mobile phone services be enhanced in order to promote language learning?

The solution is in the hands of the service providers. According to Jain (2006) the operators need to buy better software which has global utility and which could provide more options and better features for the users. This would serve as a platform for the service providers to offer better services. Once this is done, it is in the hands of the curriculum designers to frame a curriculum (for tertiary level learners) that enhances language learning through mobile phones. Moreover, it is felt that teachers have to conduct new projects using this tool, in order to encourage students to utilize the facility for language learning. This all applies to the use of iPhones as well, the new 3G device recently introduced in the Indian market.

The Future of Internet Usage in Language Teaching in India

The technology revolution in Indian education has reached the point where the concept of e-learning has been widely accepted. Ecole, well known for its Digital Library Solutions, offers language lab solutions which provide multimedia content with activities relating to all four language skills and grammar. We can attribute this to the increasing numbers of broadband connections provided by a few Indian service providers.

Unlike the situation in science and humanities colleges, in regular professional colleges language learning is promoted greatly through the use of the traditional type of language laboratories (where language learning is only partially promoted through the use of the Internet). The curriculum is so designed that the emphasis is on teaching ESP with the greater focus on enhancing students' communication skills and preparing them for job oriented and domain specific applications. This facilitates the integration of technology and helps teachers encourage students to access the web for doing skill related activities. It should be pointed out that quite a number of teachers have started integrating technological tools like blogs, wikis and podcasts for enhancing students' language skills.

The chances of wider use of Internet for language teaching looks bright and this could be attributed to the efforts taken by leading organizations such as the English Language Teachers' Association of India, ELTAI, who take great interest in educating teachers in integrating technology with classroom teaching through teacher training programs.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is heartening to see the growth in the use of Internet in India and the boom in the IT industry that has opened new avenues in turn for language teaching. The impact of this on the corporate sector has in turn revolutionized the work culture in India.

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