

An Alternative Language Pedagogy in Online Classroom Language Learning

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Abstract

There is nothing that is devoid of change. Changes in the educational scenario with the upheaval of the pandemic have been quite of a storm. A classroom transaction earlier used to be a closed intimate framework, where it was practically impossible for anyone other than the teacher and the students to be present. That structure has changed in totality with the advent of digital sessions. From a preschool learner to the postgraduates in colleges, all have been transformed into virtual learners. The changeover has been too sudden that the entire school fraternity has been battling hard to arm themselves with the virtual reality devices they were previously alien too. This paper is an attempt to look into the various facets of online language teaching of learners in higher secondary classes. Augmented reality, virtual reality, online tools, videos and google classrooms have taken over the erstwhile classroom mode and it is with apprehension that we look into how the learners have welcomed this abrupt change. If the need of the hour is an alternative language pedagogy, then the language teachers are to fall in place for the change too.

Keywords: online language teaching, higher secondary classes, alternative language pedagogy, flipped classrooms

Introduction

The COVID – 19 pandemic has distorted the equilibrium of the world. The field of education has had quite many onslaughts in the past few months. School closures, online teaching, postponed exam schedules, WhatsApp classes, Google meets, etc. have now become terms that are discussed at length in all spheres of discussions. The ray of hope in these distressing times is that the battle to combat the virus is on in a fuller swing.

The education department of the state of Kerala is not freed from the malicious attack of the virus. According to a study report published on 29th June 2020 by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, the state of Kerala tops in digital education in the country. The state has battled tough and has seen to it that the children of the state are able to manage their learning spells with the online classes broadcast on KITE (Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education) - run Vickers education channel titled 'First Bell'. The state's model of online education is a mass democratic digital education movement. This venture has actually bridged the digital divide with the help of the community by ensuring access to all students of the state from Classes 1 to 12 to access the online sessions. One example is the online sessions (Jayaraj, 2020).

The writer is a practicing teacher and has felt that with the deluge of online classes the teacher community has tapped their technological prowess to match up to the expectations of the state. On a complementary note to the online classes, teachers interact with learners through various means to ensure effective learning through dialoguing and mentoring. The paper attempts to make a study on the immediate shift in the teaching learning mode, the challenges faced by the teachers in this respect and the possible pedagogic practices that can be used by the teachers in the days to come.

The abrupt transition

Before moving on to any detailed study of the condition prevalent now, it is necessary to understand how the abrupt transition

from real classroom scenario to the virtual mode has impacted the learners. In the erstwhile normal classroom transactions, it was human interactions at its height. The heterogeneous energetic conglomerate of uniqueness in the classes interacted actively in groups and in peers. The learners used to arrive at decisions to resolve difficulties of relationships and also areas of study with peer, group and guide help. The only flaw one would point out was the mandatory physical presence of the learner. All other aspects went in well to make school life a memorable experience on a daily basis.

With the new online mode, the learning that takes place is very much impersonal. Trying to understand concepts of disciplines that involve practice; especially science and vocational subjects is rather difficult. Though there are very many discussion forums, resolving doubts and issues seem to be impossible when participation turns out to be very low in such forums. Moreover, a pressing need of the learners is constant need of motivation. The merit of the online classes for the 'tied down' learner is that he/she can learn whenever and wherever one feels like.

In this respect, one should understand that online classes are by no means an emulation of real classroom practices. It is not an alternative to real classroom learning. But in troubled times, when classroom practices are totally out of thought, online classes can well be supplemented with WhatsApp discussion classes and other modes of virtual learning. And to find ways to adapt oneself to this quick change in mode of learning and knowing is not that easily acceptable by all and sundry.

The 'new' challenge

The teacher community across the globe has never run away from change. Whatever be the obstacle ahead, they have found ways to tackle the issues. But with the online classes in full swing, the teachers feel that they it is difficult to understand students at close quarters. Each classroom activity earlier gave immense opportunity to the teacher to assess the different abilities and capacities of the different

learners in the class. But with closely packed online schedules, assessing these are out of thought for the teachers now.

A classroom- be it real or virtual - is a mixed populace with the ‘too good’ and ‘not so good’ students. The constant need to motivate and encourage the underperformers is a difficult area ahead for the teachers. Teachers have to supportive shoulders for many learners in dealing with parental and peer pressures. But with the virtual mode on, even that close talk gets a longer period of postponement. Collaborative learning has been of advantage in making inroads in many learning and comprehending areas. But this too is badly affected in the online way of learning and teachers just can’t accept it.

A teacher finds satisfaction when he/she is well connected with the learner. But even that satisfaction level is slightly tampered now. Teachers, the once effective communicative channel between the school, parents and learners finds it really tough to tide through the challenging times of the pandemic. Though the disappointing areas are many, teachers are finding newer means to combat the crisis.

Pedagogy at the time of the pandemic

People all around are in a state of trauma. So, a pedagogy that takes into consideration the lived reality of the learners alone will survive. It is easy for one to say that enquiry based, student centered, activity oriented tasks need to be given. But how do we engage learners in all this is a big question. Adopting a trauma informed pedagogic approach sounds effective in this respect. This requires having a keen awareness of our students’ past and present experiences and the effects of those experiences on our students’ well being.

The term ‘trauma - informed’ has recently made way into the foray of education from its erstwhile areas of therapy and psychology. The original trauma – informed principles (safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration and empowerment) were developed by Roger Fallot and Maxine Harris, the pioneers of trauma informed care.⁽²⁾ Trauma has the ability to affect almost every aspect of a human. The stress and the strain that an adolescent learner undergoes at school are indeed of a big

nature. It is even more disturbing when one is devoid of any social mingling and is contained within the four walls of one's own home. Studies suggest that trauma of any kind can even physically alter the wiring of a learner's brain. If such alterations have been effected in our higher secondary learners, then teachers need to be aware of it too. A teacher's job is to help their students' minds develop. But if something is altering the course of their typical development, then it becomes a significant factor in their education.

The higher secondary learners are in a transition phase of being not fully grown up as an adult and not too far from childishness. This tug of war of pedagogy versus androgogy is a major area of concern in our so called 'grown up' learners. With the online classes more on the anvil, androgogic practices seem more in the higher secondary learners as they learn best when they feel the need to learn. The learners also put in a meaningful relationship to the learning content and the process with their past experience. The experience of the learner is used as a learning resource in this end.

Taking all this into consideration, trauma informed pedagogic practices can well facilitate more of language growth in the learners by adopting the narrative exercise practice. The critical pedagogic angle in the learners is also worked out well in this context. These include the learner as an individual being acknowledged, the other's experiences being listened to, the experiences of oneself and the others being evaluated, feedbacks being received and even given, etc. One area of concern for an online educator is how the learners comprehend what is being taught. So the teachers should strive to keep their communications brief and precise. Students are also being inundated with information and more of such items will never be helpful. It is also necessary to limit feedbacks on assignments by speaking only to the most important parts of an assignment. This will help a teacher in grading the assignments in a timely manner and help students keep their focus on learning.

Connectedness should be a term of focus for the present day online educators. To foster a sense of connectedness, our teachers can:

- Once in a week, make time to ask learners about something funny or interesting they are engaged presently in. This eases a lot of tension in our learners.
- Greeting learners by name in an online/ Whatsapp class is a great confidence booster for all age groups.
- Consider putting students together in small groups to work on projects or activities and encourage them to work together online or by phone. These activities may include virtual puzzles or even word games. The key is to help the learners feel connected to others in the virtual class by sharing an important aspect of themselves and this helps the class to get to know each other better virtually. While assessing the group works, the teacher can foster a sense of community by highlighting each learner's contribution to the group activity.
- While planning activities make use of web conferencing sites so that learners get to see, hear and interact with each other and of course, with the teacher.
- Even in an online language class, model and normalize range of emotions by giving learners opportunities to express themselves in non-verbal ways. This may include drawing a picture of an event in a lesson or showing the most important thing that happened to them that day.

Learners in their 'troubled teens' need a ray of hope to always hang on. Hope is the expectation that everything will work out and the feeling that things will be all well soon. Currently, people around are often engulfed in discouragement or hopelessness or they are angry with how things are. Learners particularly may be disappointed in missing out on sports, competitions, performances and many other events at school. Hence, it is necessary to inculcate a sense of hope in our learners nestled in their homes. Some ways our online teachers can adopt include:

- Ask learners to connect with someone in their family or community to ask a person they respect how they stayed hopeful in troubled times.
- Speak about other historical times of crisis and how those distressing times ended with communities coming together.

- Encourage learners to participate in creative activities that satisfy them.
- Narrate stories of hope and help that have come out during the present crisis period.
- Whenever possible share a positive affirmation or strength of a student in your class – it will go a long way in their life.
- Provide opportunities for your learners to discuss things and even beliefs that bring them hope.

Teacher initiated safe space pedagogic practices are also essential in perfecting value-oriented learning in our learners. The term “safe space” suggests a classroom (either real or virtual) free from threat or harm. Ideally, a safe space is one that facilitates discussion of social justice issues without endangering its participants by way of judgement, coercion, or pain. Creating warm and inviting virtual spaces for the learners and providing activities that incorporate self-reflection and mindfulness go a long way in furthering healthy virtual classroom sessions. The learners of the higher secondary age group also need to engage in daring and thought-provoking activities as part of their learning - knowing process. Hence, driving them to brave safe pedagogic practices under the guidance of the teachers is also a welcome mode. Giving learners a chance to share what they have learned or even a chance to teach their classmates is challenging at the same time encouraging too. This can include having learners find and teach small self-relaxing or mindfulness exercises that promote self-regulation or a craft work that promotes creativity.

Other pedagogic practices can include; joint productive activity with the teacher and the learner producing materials together; language development activities across the curriculum; contextualization techniques by making meaning of learned facts and concepts by connecting school to learner’s lives; coming up with challenging activities to teach complex and critical thinking concepts; and also instructional conversational modes to reach out to learners in dialogic modes.

School days after the pandemic

Everyone knows for sure that change is inevitable and these times will definitely fade through. School days after the distressing lockdown days will be even more challenging. Keeping the learners glued on to their seats is going to be a big headache. Newer classroom strategies need to be put into action. Teachers will be more taxed when they will have to simultaneously manage real classrooms and use technology to their aid too. Flipped classrooms may become an eventuality at least in the higher secondary sections of learners.

The flipped classroom model

The flipped or the inverted classroom mode has been around in practice since the late 90's. Two high school chemistry teachers of the US, Jonathan Bergman and Aaron Sams popularized this approach. Flipped learning is an approach where learners gain necessary knowledge before a class and teachers guide learners to actively clarify and apply their learning during the class hours. It is in a way a blended learning approach that places the learning content outside of class time and that the teacher can spend more time in the class interacting and facilitating the learners to understand concepts better. In a way the valuable class time is used to support a deeper level of understanding through active and engaging learning tasks. This in a way will help the learners to mix their classroom sessions with the virtual learning mode they were used to during the times of the pandemic. Learning will be more of having a deeper and sustained understanding of concepts through analysis, application and problem solving.

To the teachers of the 'New Gen'

Traditionally moulded teachers fear that conventional classrooms may soon dwindle into oblivion. But we need to understand that the role of a teacher is never to be reduced to the stature of a mere extension as a user of ICT tools. Studies show that teachers are by the nature of time and space, naturally autonomous. Few teachers go by prescribed method; the majority chalks out their own pedagogy. So, it an effort to evolve alternate language teaching methods for the

changing times in the changing environs. For the teacher community, the race towards excellence never ends. Let's surge ahead!

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