TECHNOLOGY AIDED LEARNING TECHNIQUES DURING AND AFTER COVID-19 IN CONTEXT TO FLE

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ABSTRACT

Learning of a foreign language is considered to be a challenging and also a very interesting domain. A lot of innovative practices have been adopted to make the learning of a foreign/second language a smooth and easy-going process and the search for the innovative ways is always on. In the present time of Globalisation learning a second/foreign language has come up as an add-on skill that can provide a competitive edge to the language enthusiasts. In the times of Pandemic, technology has come up as a blessing that has facilitated teaching as well as learning. As far as language teaching is concerned, along with the technological innovations, the research in language didactics, phonology and, linguistics has contributed a lot in bringing out the change in pedagogical practices in languages in Higher Education. Globalization and technology all together have made learning a border-free scenario. This study will shed light on the technology aided learning methods with special emphasis on E-Learning and the blended learning method in the language classroom and at the same time on the innovative best practices that contribute to the teaching and learning of a foreign/second language online.

This study adopts a mixed-method: a survey questionnaire that is followed by personal interview.

Keywords: FLE, Global competence, Challenges, Pandemic, Innovation, Technology, Digital tools, Creative thinking, Pedagogical innovations, E-Learning, Blended learning.

Introduction

Teaching and learning in the times of globalization are no longer restricted to the classroom. Technology has made both a border-free scenario. Especially in the times of pandemic, technology has immensely emerged as a blessing facilitating teaching as well as learning. Moreover, the continuous striking of the pandemic all over

the world may benefit from the digital learning through the specificity of a flexible curriculum, affordability of online classes and its accessibility (CONAHEC, 2020). We all have witnessed a whole anthology of pedagogical practices, each one being more innovative than the others. A new orientation in pedagogy is thus formed which has paved the way for progressive education.

In this study, we propose to discuss E-Learning as well as the blended learning methods in the FLE classroom and at the same time, we wish to highlight the innovative best practices that contribute to effective teaching and learning of a foreign language online. The pros and cons of E-learning as well as blended learning will also be presented. Investigative in nature, this study also includes a survey followed by personal interviews providing both quantitative and qualitative data.

In the present times, learning a second/foreign language is essential to evolve in the professional context as well as the personal context. Knowledge of more than one language can open doors for students. Learning a language is a social process. The more one interacts, the more one learns better. That is why learning in a group is always motivated but what if the offline class is not possible for instance due to the pandemic? The solution came up in the form of E-Learning.

Shirley Bach, Philip Haynes and Jennifer Lewis Smith (2006) have examined the growing evidence of the impact of the Internet and the World Wide Web on social systems and, in particular, the education system. It was seen that online learning is a part of the modern transformation of higher education.

First and foremost we will try to break the myths as far as online learning is concerned. Lack of concentration is the first thing that comes to mind when it comes to online learning. Well, concentration is a fickle thing that can come and go easily. Even during an offline class, the students get distracted due to multiple factors. What makes the learner keep going is the thirst for new knowledge that the learner wishes to acquire. An interactive class can come up with a solution that must be planned by the teacher. There are a several innovative best practices that make the class more interactive and many planned activities can contribute to it positively.

The face-to-face connection with the teacher may be seen as a problem during the pandemic but thanks to the internet, this problem can now be resolved. The platforms, like Google meet and Zoom, make it easy for the learner to be face to face with the teacher. This does not mean that we are side-lining the importance of human touch, as it used to be there in the offline classroom, but at the time of pandemic, the technology and the tech tools have kept the learning an on-going process.

Learning a language is a social process. Language is always better learnt in groups. A face-to-face interaction allows you to understand the gestures, the expressions and other cues also contribute to make the learning of a second/foreign language better.

Innovative pedagogy needs to meet several criteria. It needs to be new in relation to the existing practices, it also must bring change and improvement in the existing practices, and it needs to be durable and transferable and must not stay isolated. The Covid-19 pandemic has transformed the educators into practitioners who need to use new technology to keep the knowledge floating.

As far as language teaching is concerned, along with the technological innovations, the research in language didactics, in phonology, in linguistics has contributed in bringing the change in pedagogical practices in languages in Higher Education.

The new innovative teaching practices

Christopher Dede (1987) concluded from their study that technological innovations and development shall bring new processes and mechanisms that shall be highly responsible for the creation of new knowledge, synthesis of knowledge, storage and usage of knowledge. This is certainly a challenge for formal education, which is often seen and expected to transmit the existing knowledge. In second/foreign language teaching, teaching a language through digital technology is still an area of research. Thanks to new paradigmatic breaks in information technology, knowledge and language teaching are now seen from a new perspective. The new innovative pedagogy is a blend of 'creative learning' and 'innovative teaching'.

To create an educational environment, several new pedagogical methods have been practiced by teachers. These new pedagogies open the door for the development of a number of language competencies of learners. The aim of these pedagogical practices is not only to improve the level of teaching but also to adapt them to the needs of the students. Until now the term 'innovation' was seen to be associated with science and technology but new reforms in the education sector have broken the myth. Pedagogical innovation is a pedagogical action that is student centred and which is characterized by the development of the well-being of the students and by the improvement in the quality of learning.

As far as higher education is concerned, for a language class, many innovative practices have come up as a solution. Online teaching comes with a bundle of solutions like zoom breakout rooms, QR codes, 3D learning, Jigsaws, and many more. Quality teaching and learning material are provided which makes learning not only effective but fun. Pre-Recorded video lectures help the students to understand the concept at their own pace.

As it is said that the main aim of teaching is to foster thinking skills in students, these innovative teaching techniques can help to a great extent in fulfilling the same. Alvino (1990) defines thinking skills as "The set of basic and advanced skills and sub-skills that governs a person's mental processes. These skills consist of knowledge, dispositions, and cognitive and metacognitive operations." Even in a language class, thinking skills must be fostered in students as it will enhance their creative writing skills too. Giarrusso, et.al. (2001) believes that teacher can help students develop thinking skills through their course organization and delivery. In today's time, when E-Learning is taking place, such courses can be designed in a much more innovative way.

According to EdStaff (2018), there are three elements in the modern learning environment: connected devices (such as notebooks, tablets, or even smartphones); audio-visual tools (including projectors and touch-screen displays); and purposeful furniture that allows students to learn in different ways at different times (such as standing desks, collaborative workstations and, connected seating).

The pedagogical innovation passes through many stages of novelty, change, and improvement and it must be kept at the centre of the reflections of the educational bodies. As the world is changing, the same needs to be done with our teaching methods. To meet the expectations of learners and at the same time, that of the companies, the education sector must welcome the new innovative pedagogies with open arms.

What is E-Learning and its importance?

E-learning, which means learning while using electronic technologies outside the classroom for the acquisition of educational curriculum has facilitated learning from the comfort of home, and can be highly effective if innovative teaching techniques are used in a right manner. Traditional teaching practices are getting replaced or transformed by modern pedagogy and methods. Both, the teacher and the taught, are getting advantage of the online teaching methods.

The pandemic hit many sectors and the educational sector is one of the sectors which have been highly affected. E-learning has provided opportunities for students to continue learning. In a language class, the teacher can send the video lectures on topics like poetry and grammar and the students can watch them several times as and when they like which facilitates discussion in the classroom and applied learning can be better practiced.

Another purpose that technology can solve is the practice of interpersonal skills as the students can interact with the other speakers of the same language via video and audio in real- time. Engaging online games and applications can enhance their discrete skills.

Another form of E-learning is adaptive learning which adapts teaching and resources according to the learner, taking into account the learning pace and level of knowledge of the learner. After this evaluation, the learner is offered the best suited specific resources. Adaptive learning is a great way to emulate the teacher's ability to provide quality teaching to every student.

In a second/foreign language classroom the teacher can adopt effective pedagogies which will enhance language learning. Presentations play a vital role in the classroom, may it be traditional or online. Presentation tools like Google Slides, SlideShare, Microsoft PowerPoint facilitates both teaching and learning. Online whiteboard which works like the classroom blackboard can not only digitize what the teacher is teaching, but it also helps the teacher to re-share the content.

Moreover, the teacher and the student can connect on the same canvas to fulfil the purposes such as Mind mapping, interactive exercises, and reviewing homework. E-Learning facilitates face-to-face teaching by providing an environment like a classroom. Students can be encouraged to work in groups on the topics connected to literature or grammar or even practice the jeu-de-rôle (act out the scene) through zoom breakout rooms. In place of giving a lecture on the art and culture of the country of which the students are learning the language, the teacher can present a visual tour which will result in a better retaining of what they will learn.

Class Blog can also be introduced in the class which will enable the students to post a blog about what they have learnt in the class for example about the culture and civilization of the country or a brief about a poem that they have read or a biography of a writer etc. and at the same time, it will enable the teacher to share their material on the blog. The blogs can be shared among the students to share knowledge.

We strongly advocate the idea of integrating social media, and multimedia into the language classroom as they provide immense possibilities for an increase in the exposure to the language. By using platforms like Skype, Edmodo, video conferencing they can spend time discussing what they have learnt beyond the hours spent in class which will also result in teamwork. Alaslani K. and Alandejani M. (2020) have advocated the idea that Social network sites (SNSs) are the most essential communication tools among students, especially at higher levels of education.

New educational activities can be envisaged through Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+ by relying on their functions of sharing, communication, archiving and creativity. These social networking sites are deeply rooted in the social life of students and can be used effectively. Many educational activities which are the base of education for example surveys, projects, research and competitions can be introduced via these sites.

One of the important advantages of this method is that it has a low technological or conceptual barrier. Another advantage that it offers is the possibility of mass teaching. At the same time, this approach faces criticism well as it can be time-consuming and it may have issues relating to the privacy of users.

There are also certain other limitations as far as E-learning is concerned. In a traditional classroom, being in person with a teacher and peers, the student thrives to perform better as a sort of social pressure is created in the classroom. Mostly it is seen that students with weaker academic backgrounds face problems during online class. The role of a teacher becomes more significant here in designing more activities to engage the students which may result in making every student a part of the class.

Another major concern is the vulnerability of E-Systems to a number of threats which includes software attacks, espionage, technical hardware failures, and technical software failures along with many other problems. These problems are to be dealt with to have a smooth teaching-learning experience.

Another form of learning comes in the form of Blended learning, which is also known as hybrid learning, facilitating both the face to face and digital learning. It aims to provide an impactful, effective and engaging learning experience to language learners. Blended teaching makes use of digital technologies best practiced in a classroom. The teacher can work more in a collaborative manner. It paves the way for face-to-face and online activities.

What is Blended Learning and its advantages?

Blended learning is defined as a formal instructional program that includes classroom time and individual study online while using online training tools. It can be seen as a multi- channel method that involves tutor-led activities, digital tasks, videos and also face-to-face discussions.

This type of learning often takes place in a real classroom with a dedicated teacher but it also offers additional learning opportunities using a digital platform. The need to improve a more engaged learning experience is at the core of the interest in blended learning. (Garrison D. Randy, Vaughan Norman D. (2007).

It comes with a bundle of opportunities for the teacher as well as students. It allows the student to learn a portion of academic content as and when they like at home and also helps the teacher to engage the students in a deeper and richer way of learning the language.

Blended learning is becoming more and more popular, thanks to the flexibility and a higher rate of learner engagement and also the efficiency that it offers. There are a number of pedagogical models to learn. The way the learners acquire knowledge today is very different from what it was a few decades ago. Much of this

innovation is linked to the advent and development of technology as computers have become extremely important teaching tools.

Blended teaching and learning enhance teacher and student interaction, improves student learning outcome, presents better opportunities for experimental learning and enhances student engagement in learning. It opens the possibility of a more open teaching and learning environment with greater access to information. Blended learning incorporates both, tech-based learning and human touch as well which comes in the form of encouragement and guidance from the teacher. Blended learning (BL) also helps the teacher to assess the performance of each student in a better way.

There are a number of dynamic digital tools such as E-learning software, video-based training along with the traditional classroom practices to pave the way for blended learning models. It allows the teacher and the student to connect even outside the classroom using collaborative tools like blogs, and online discussions. Not only this, with the help of online communication tools like interactive apps and drop boxes teachers can communicate effectively with their students. Communication is the key to language learning which is very well facilitated by the Blended classroom. More communicative sessions result in better language learning.

At the same time, it is important to mention that the execution of blended learning classes may become a challenging job as it requires more the delivery of engaging and interesting content. Apart from this, there is a huge technical dependence and IT literacy is highly required. Another aspect to be taken care of is the supervision part as there is an obvious less supervision as compared to face- to-face classroom.

Here we wish to state that the negative aspect of this type of learning can be minimized and can be directed towards a fruitful outcome with wisely planned content and its implementation.

The question that arises is why should you switch to this approach? Blended learning offers the learners a personalised experience as they can learn at home and also at their own pace. By various ways of testing, like online quizzes and tests, the trainer can very well observe the learners' outcome. As a result, in the classroom the trainer can focus on the needs, strengths and weaknesses of the learners. This can foster a collaborative environment in class and increases the engagement rate.

Blended learning leverages various types of learning materials like charts, videos, photos, info graphics which makes it easier for the learners concentrate, assimilate and understand the concepts more. The students also make use file sharing services like Google Docs to collaborate and share their comments on the project.

Flipped Classroom

This innovative pedagogy called the 'Flipped classroom' appeared in the 1990s at Harvard, in the United States, the credit goes to the Professor of Physics, Eric Mazur. This innovative pedagogy works on the formula of 'Online training, offline (face to face) application'. The flipped classroom is also seen as an effective as well as an active method of teaching a language.

The teacher/instructor records and shares the lectures outside of class and shares the same with students to transfer the main bulk of knowledge and the students are advised to watch them before coming to class. The class is then more devoted to the applied learning activities and towards higher-order thinking tasks via discussions, case studies, or practical work. Students may receive support from their peers and instructor as and when required.

Flipped classroom encourages students to work at home in the form of readings or watching lectures and work on problem-solving during the class. Therefore the learner has direct access to knowledge by building his lessons before coming to class. The learners may build the lessons together in groups while sharing them and confronting them. Unlike the traditional classroom where the teacher used to be the leader of a lesson, here in flipped class the students are motivated to take the charge. The teacher plays the role of a coach who guides them, challenges them and orients them.

Lecture and homework get reversed in this flipped classroom method. The teacher plays the role of a guide controlling the conversation's flow. It is more of a learner-centered model where they explore the learning in a greater depth. Various techniques can be used for better-flipped class like Polls, Online quizzes, Mind maps or word clouds.

In a language class, for example, the teacher can provide the content of art and culture or literature in the form of a video lecture and engage students in a discussion in class to assess the knowledge that they have gained through that lecture. The assessment can also be done through the form of quizzes in this context. The learners are thus graded on their skills.

Flipped classroom opens the way to have conventional classes in a much more effective way which results in helping the teacher to be able to develop the subject, the teaching aid and its applications. Thus the teacher, by supervising the students ensures the application of the rules.

In the learning of a second/foreign language, technology can play a significant role, if it is used in a positive direction it can surely enhance the language learning skills. The role of educators is highly important in Technology-Enhanced language learning. In the learning of a language, isolated use of technology is not

recommended, interaction and communication with language educators as well as peers forms an integral part of language learning and will always occupy an important place in language learning.

This pedagogical innovation opens the possibility to individualize and differentiate teaching. This also helps to promote peer tutoring as the struggling students benefit from the explanations given by their peers. The students who are at ease with the topic also deepen their knowledge while explaining and commenting on the topic which is discussed in class which indeed helps to reinforce their learning.

On the other hand, this flipped pedagogy faces some criticism as some experts are of the opinion that it carries a risk. This pedagogy externalizes knowledge outside the classroom which accentuates inequality to the detriment of learners without appropriate resources outside the classroom. Further, externalizing knowledge legitimizes and increases the individualization of the learning process.

The Survey and its findings

To examine the outcome of E-Learning and Blended Learning and to get a fruitful idea about the views of students as far as the online and blended mode of learning a second/foreign language is concerned, the author of this study surveyed a group of total 61 students which was followed by a personal interview.

To provide quantitative as well as qualitative data, the survey was done not only on students but also on professionals who were learning a second language using digital tools. The questions to which the students replied aptly were focused on their learning of a language in blended and online mode. These 61 students on whom this survey was conducted belong to humanities, fashion technology and as stated earlier professionals who are learning FLE. The students replied aptly and expressed their views and experience on learning a language online, especially during the pandemic. They were asked to express their views in context to learning of a language in particular apart from the other subjects.

They were asked to rate their experience on a scale of 1 to 4 and during the interview, they were also asked to express the pros and cons of learning the language online. The following results were obtained:

E-Learning and Blended Learning
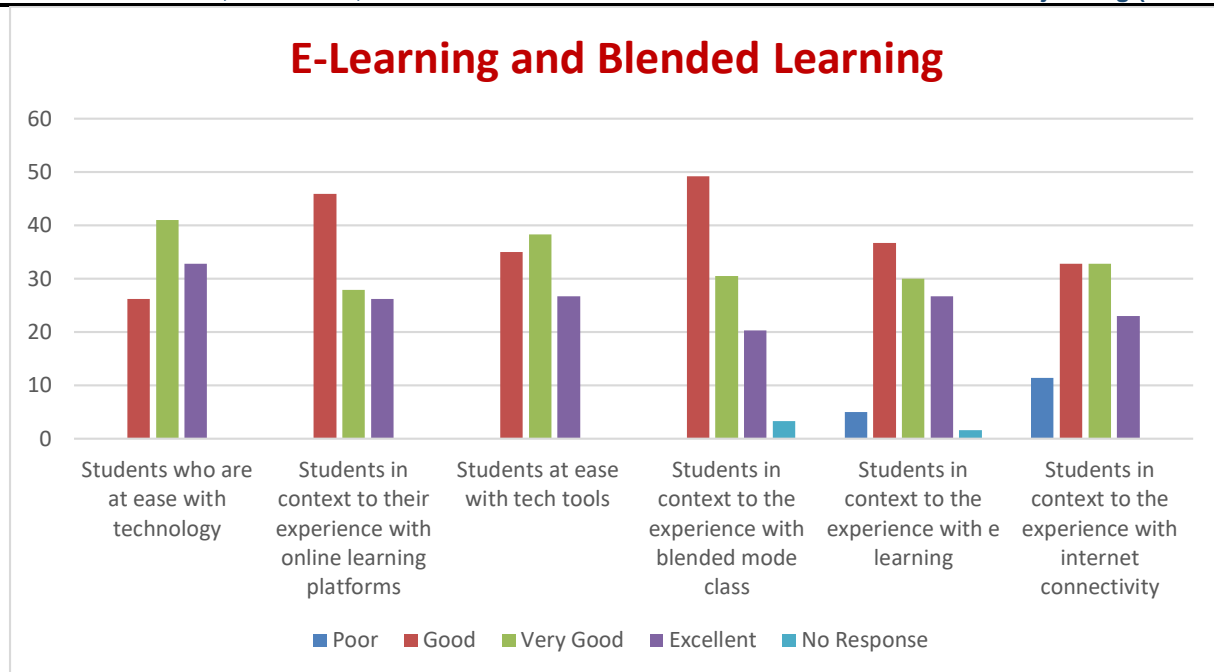
The majority of students conveyed clearly that they are at ease with technology and expressed their liking for both, the blended mode as well as E-learning. They were also asked to write about their experience in E-learning/Blended classrooms. We are stating below some of the responses from the learners, exactly the way that they have put in the survey questionnaire, in order to give a brief overview of what the students think about the new innovative pedagogy:

"It's been a great journey so far! Teachers deal with students politely. We can learn and grasp a second language in our comfort zones! Timings are flexible to work in and travel time is also saved!"

"It helps me to create and communicate new ideas .E-learning gives me the chance to uplift my skills and gain knowledge apart from education, it builds up my personality and it increases my level of participation and improves my discussion quality..."

"E-Learning is a concept, and a great alternative considering today's time and such times, however, it can never replace physical learning as there is always a better understanding among student and teachers in offline class. This is the reason that classroom learning was never replaced in 100 years despite technological advancement."

"The experience is good but not better than offline classes."

"E-learning is a good concept but I'm certainly not in favor of it as I personally feel that offline teaching has more benefits as it is more practical."

"it is very interesting to learn different languages and because of E-learning we can learn anything and everything from anywhere through the internet"

During the personal interview, they expressed their interest in having both online and offline classes. As the human touch, in the form of teacher's motivation and guidance, cannot be ignored in education, they expressed their wish to have offline classes as well. Although many of them expressed their liking towards the video lectures, as it is a convenient way of learning, but at the same time they wished to have a teacher as well as their peers sitting next to them. One of the benefits of Blended or Online Learning that they underlined is fewer geographical barriers and the possibility to restart the lessons as and when they like.

One of the other advantages of E-learning that they mentioned is that it is easily accessible with the only requirement of a good internet connection. There is plenty of material available online for students who wish to learn the language well. Here, it is equally important to mention that self-discipline is the key and is highly required in this kind of setup.

It was observed that these learners of a second/foreign language showed a welcoming move towards the new learning methods that incorporate in a creative way the innovative digital tools and the traditional pedagogy. But, at the same time, there were some who, after having struggled with the misunderstandings produced by some of the innovative pedagogies, demanded the return of traditional pedagogies.

Conclusion

An innovative pedagogical structure can be seen holding grounds in the form of a flexible hybrid model as far as the future of higher education is concerned. With these new innovative teaching and learning methods, the trainers can provide learners with instant access to their learning material whenever and wherever they need it as these new innovative ways rely in part on technology and the learning materials are available online. Thanks to this ease of access, the learners can acquire knowledge and learn at their own pace and can learn the language in a way that suits them the best. This is the reason the E-learning and Blended learning, which boost student involvement and motivation, is attracting growing interest.

The real-time face-to-face interaction is highly appreciable in a language classroom and as there are, to some extent, possibilities for the same in online mode too, the tech tools can increase the bar of teaching as well as learning a second/foreign language. The point to be duly noted is that the technology is enhancing with each passing day and we need to prepare our students for tomorrow. Virtual learning is not a substitute for a teacher's

presence but with the adoption of tech tools, learning can significantly be enhanced and at the same time learning can be made a 24X7 on-going phenomenon.

Technology can play the role of a purposeful tool in language learning providing wider exposure to the language. Evaluation of both the pros and cons of online learning can prepare both, the teacher and the taught, to face the challenges of this new norm and the methodology and pedagogy can be enhanced significantly.

In a language classroom, may it be offline or online, the foundation of language education needs to be student-centered, standards-based to develop proficiency in the language that one wishes to learn. There is a great need to understand the audience first while taking into account the students' maturity, their technological understanding and skills, and their propensity to accept E-Learning or Blended Learning as it is characterized by some level of independent learning. Additionally, for a truly transformational teaching-learning experience, it is equally important to adopt the best practices based on the need and competence of the learners.

As the world is moving forward, more flexibility is demanded and these types of pedagogical innovations offer the necessary freedom and inclusion with a much more adaptable method. These innovative teaching ways are beneficial not only for the learners but also for the teachers as the digital teaching tools provide teachers a better overview of the progress of learners which helps in providing a more effective and fruitful learning experience. It is important to underline that the teachers are now more adaptive to the forward-looking vision which results in flexible adaptability to new trends in the education sector.

All in all, we wish to conclude by saying that the co-existence of traditional and innovative teaching methods can indeed increase skills and creativity amongst the learners, and as we stated earlier, it can make 24/7 learning possible at the same time. A blend of both the pedagogies is the need of the hour and this methodology can open doors for both, the teacher and the taught.

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