

THE ROLE OF THE ENGLISH TEACHER IN THE E-LEARNING SYSTEM

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Introduction

One of the major objectives in the English language classroom is to get the learners to learn English and use it as well. This is done best when they are involved actively in the teaching-learning process. It then means that their interest must be sustained in classroom activity and this can be done with the help of e-learning materials. A teacher fine tunes her/his expertise to meet the needs of the learners and uses different techniques to teach different skills/subskills.

E-Education

E-education simply means internet based education. It involves both e-teaching and e-learning and also several other strategic measures. It incorporates a local, regional, national and international view of education. E-education highlights the need for continuous and relevant training and support for educators and administrators. It however puts a minimal focus on e-teaching and a heavy emphasis on e-learning.

E-Learning

E-learning takes place as a result of interaction in an Internet environment. The widespread use of computers in the field of education has brought about the concept of e-learning. This mode of learning consists of course materials that can be accessed on-line or through the internet. Like the traditional course, the internet based education too has all the materials and works more or less in the same way with assignments, tests, etc. The only difference however lies in the way the materials for the e-learning courses are delivered. It is available in two modes-the DVD/CD-ROM and the Internet.

DVD/CD-Rom

In this mode, the entire course is available on DVDs/CDs. Learners can read the DVD/CD-ROMs on individual computers or on the Local Area Network (LAN). The LAN works like a classroom, with all students accessing the same material.

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The Internet

The internet, on the other hand is a medium where courses are offered online. Learners can surf the sites, and be aware of the courses available. They can choose the course they want to pursue and then register for it on-line. Once they register themselves and complete all formalities, each one of them is given a password that will enable them to go on-line. Unlike the DVD/CD-ROMS, course materials are available on-line, and the students have to work through these. Most such courses have assignments that the student should complete and send to the tutors on-line. These assignments are then evaluated and feedback on the work sent, generally by email. Students can also avail themselves of chatting with the concerned tutor or can interact on other means like skype etc. At the end of the program, students have to take a test on-line. They are assessed, and awarded certificates after successfully qualifying.

Advantages of E-Learning

- i. One most important advantage of e-learning is that it encourages students to learn on their own, and at their own pace too.
- ii. The study materials are available in the form of DVDs/CDs. One can buy a DVD/CD and go through it as and when one feels like and for as many times as is necessary to understand a concept. Since the DVDs/ CDs generally present the matter in an interesting way with figures, cartoon characters and even music, children invariably enjoy these sessions. It also asks them to invest in the learning process which is a desirable quality to nurture.
- iii. Like face-to-face interaction, most e-learning courses offer ‘blended learning’ whereby some work on the computer is combined with live teaching by teachers. This blended learning takes care of peer interaction too.
- iv. In some cases, e-courses offer ‘live’ chat sessions with teachers which is possible by using webcams. Video conferencing is another option e-learning makes use of.

Disadvantages of E-Learning

- i. E-learning requires computers and internet facility, which many schools and colleges, especially in the rural areas do not have. Even when some schools and colleges have these facilities, the speed of the internet is atrociously slow. There are also frequent power failures.
- ii. The systems are too expensive to purchase and maintain, especially in the context of rural India. Many schools and colleges cannot afford to buy and maintain the huge number of DVDs/CDs required for the courses

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- iii. E-learning expects students to be responsible learners who need to work on their own. Many students are not inclined to or used to accept the new phenomenon. Peer interaction plays a crucial role in the process of learning. In an e-learning environment, however, peer interaction is missing.
- iv. A computer is impersonal. It can not be a substitute to a live teacher in a classroom setting.

Traditional Learning vis-à-vis E-Learning

E-learning can give students much greater control over their own learning experience while giving e-teachers an opportunity to further meet the needs of individual students in a digital age (Layton, 2000; Wallhaus, 2000). A comparison of some aspects of conventional learning and e-learning are shown below:

- i. In the traditional learning, students attend a school in their local community or attend a boarding school. The average size of a class generally is 40-50 students. In the e-learning set up, on the contrary, there are no physical classrooms. Students do not have to visit a school etc. And the question of the size of the class in terms of number therefore does not arise.
- ii. Secondly, classes are scheduled according to school hours and timetables in the traditional learning environment. The students have to be in the classroom during these hours whether they like it or not. They are asked to work individually or in groups in the class. In the e-learning environment, however, students participate from a variety of locations and may “attend” multiple learning institutions and/or their local school. They have the freedom to determine the times when they wish to have class. Similarly, they can choose to work individually or collaboratively with people.
- iii. In the traditional mode, students generally enroll themselves with one school. Learning objectives are set by the teacher and the institution. The learners do not have much autonomy. They follow a linear pattern influenced by the needs of peers and the teacher’s planning. In the e-learning mode, on the other hand, students may take classes from more than one school at a time. Students may set their own objectives and explore their own learning needs and agendas. Students can follow a non-linear path at a pace that meets their individual needs at that time, i.e. just-in-time learning.

This comparison highlights some of the day-to-day differences that may become apparent according to how a school chooses to offer e-education and the choices which families will make for their children. It is important to recognize that while e-learning has much to offer it is not a signal for the end of regular classroom learning as we know it now. Classroom learning will continue to have an important role to play but as Rosenberg (2001) has identified, “it will be a different role from the past” and no longer the “default delivery system”.

The e-teacher’s role

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The e-teacher who is surrounded by rapidly changing e-environments and technologies must at times feel like they are trying to change a tyre on a moving vehicle. While explaining the challenge and changing roles for e-teachers, it is a little like encouraging them to be information and environment architects. The environment they create may well be totally aligned with the work of the regular classroom so that e-learning becomes an integral part of it. Alternatively it may be a virtual classroom where the students only visit electronically. This seamless transition from what we now accept as learning to an e-learning environment will in time mean that the “e” ceases to have any particular significance.

The ability of teachers to communicate via the Internet, accessing and publishing information is very diverse. There are some who are pre-e-literate and others who utilize the internet for regular school and classroom activity. It is not unusual to find teachers storing information so that it is web-accessible but to actually make the move toward e-teaching is the next brave step. Support for e-teachers is often difficult to get when the supporters have not had any direct and practical e-teaching or e-learning experience themselves. It is e-teachers who need to feel they are in the driving seat of a vehicle they have helped to design.

There needs to be careful consideration of how to make best use of the teaching possibilities in the internet environment. It is not about creating large amounts of content but about designing and creating different learning opportunities and experiences. There will be content online but it should be embedded in a teaching and learning framework that is flexible and accessible in terms of design. The content is not king, it is the activity around the content that is paramount.

The design of effective e-learning will be undertaken by e-teachers who are familiar with this new e-classroom environment. This is not the roles of the technical support people or software designers. The e-learning environment should be flexible enough for e-teachers to design and implement their own unique environments independently. Then e-teachers can leverage the distinct attributes afforded by the new technologies so that they are meaningful and motivational for e-learners. The assessment and evaluation of e-learning and the e-curriculum will not necessarily utilize the traditional models of accreditation.

E-Learning's impact on Teachers

The networked environment of this new Internet-connected world has expanded the opportunities for teaching and learning in ways that we are only beginning to understand. What makes the implementation of e-teaching so challenging is that we are asking teachers of the dot.com age to teach in a way in which they have never been taught when they were at school. They will work in an environment in which they have never been learners and may have had few first-hand experiences. However, without a history and a wide knowledge base to draw on, e-teachers will have the opportunity to be pioneers in their own right as they set sail. They will have the chance to examine what it means to be a teacher.

Conclusion

The rapid growth in all sectors including education and the availability of the internet has brought about a sea change. These developments have already begun to fundamentally alter the

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way. What we can now consider is that the access to the internet outside of formal classroom settings has opened up possibilities that were inconceivable say about a decade ago. For many students their home will be the principal place of access to the internet and the word classroom will assume a whole new meaning. The nature of the traditional classroom is going to change beyond recognition and we too may wonder why we didn't get it at the time. This is certainly creating an altogether new environment of learning.

References:

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