

The Role of Educators and Instructional Materials in an Engaging Online ESL Teaching-Learning Environment

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Abstract

The role of integration of technology in second language teaching and the importance of digital literacy have been emphasized in various Indian educational policy documents. From using a handful of e-resources for enhancing the teaching-learning experience to depending more on technology to reach out to their students during a pandemic, teachers have witnessed a quiet revolution in the education system. Today's classrooms are no longer just physical spaces, made of brick and mortar; the term now encompasses any learning environment wherein the participants communicate with one another effectively and accomplish their learning objectives. Such a scenario calls for a renewed understanding of learner motivation, effective pedagogy and utility of various teaching-learning resources. This paper aims at discussing the role of the language educator in distance learning, delineating effective steps for designing a lesson for remote learning and exploring creative ways of teaching using the plethora of digital resources one finds at one's disposal.

Keywords: distance learning, digital literacy, pedagogy, e-learning, technology, digital resources

Introduction

It is a fact worth acknowledging that unlearning the art of teaching, as teachers have always understood it, is a time-consuming endeavour. Switching to remote teaching requires observation, experimentation,

hypothesis formation, successes, failures and review. Another prerequisite to remote teaching is the understanding that the instructional materials used during the lessons are designed and/or adapted in a way that facilitates learner engagement, leading to increased motivation and fulfillment of the learning outcomes.

Teacher as Instructional Designer

According to Hartley (2005), instructional designer is likely a better description of the emerging responsibilities of the 21st century educator. With an increased awareness of the importance and role of the learner's perspective in any teaching-learning scenario, the need to create, adapt and enrich materials has been felt by teachers.

The term 'teacher' is synonymous with 'instructional designer' because a teacher creates and/or selects learning experiences to facilitate knowledge acquisition and takes into account various factors, such as learners' prior knowledge, age-appropriateness of content and their readiness to learn certain skills and concepts. The keyword that highlights the process of designing instruction and distinguishes it from lesson planning is 'systematic'. For online learning to be successful, this knowledge becomes essential for educators, who now have greater access to a variety of resources and the opportunity to supplement, if not completely replace, their existing teaching-learning material, including textbooks.

Steps to Design a Lesson for Remote Teaching

There are five essential stages of systematic planning:

- a. Needs Analysis: It is an in-depth analysis of the learning environment to identify available resources, previous knowledge of learners, their expectations and differences, context of learning and possible problems.

The following questions can be asked at this stage:

- i. What are the learning outcomes of this lesson?
 - ii. What is my learners' prior knowledge?
 - iii. Do I have any material that can be enriched or adapted, or should I create new material?
 - iv. What problems can I possibly face while teaching the lesson?
- b. Materials Adaptation/Design: It involves decisions related to the

activities that should be included and taught to fulfil the lesson objectives. The sequence of the various sub-concepts to be covered during a lesson is also considered.

The following questions would be asked at this stage:

- i. How much and what content should I include in the lesson?
 - ii. What sub-skills do I want to give my learners practice in?
 - iii. Do I teach the concept in isolation or relate it with a theme?
 - iv. Do I want to use the inductive or deductive approach to language teaching?
 - v. How should I sequence the various activities?
- c. Integrate technology with ESL lesson: The most effective e-tools and formats are chosen to make the ESL material easily accessible, navigable, aesthetic and interesting to the users. The plan is seen from the learners' perspective and important decisions regarding making it usable for learners are taken.

These questions need to be asked at the technology to ESL lesson integration stage:

- i. How should I present the content?
 - ii. What e-tool(s) would be most user-friendly?
 - iii. Do I wish to pay for them? Even if I do, will my learners have their subscription? Will they be willing to purchase the required subscription?
- d. Classroom implementation: Learners engage with the content and work towards fulfilling the outcomes that were decided at the very beginning of the process.
- e. (Teacher) Evaluation of the lesson and materials: The effectiveness of the plan is now assessed. If the course objectives are met, the format understood and e-tools easily used by the learners, no changes are made to the plan. However, if a lack of understanding pertaining to an area of the second language or a difficulty in using the decided formats is observed, the plan is revised, making necessary changes. Since each stage is dependent on the previous one, the designer is, in a way, continually evaluating her plan and this knowledge, combined with the lesson-end reflections, helps her make judgements regarding the efficacy of the whole lesson plan.

After transacting the lesson, the following questions can be used as a

checklist for teacher evaluation:

- i. Did the learners enjoy the lesson? How can I say that?
- ii. What difficulties did they face in using the e-tool as well as in understanding the concept?
- iii. Could any other e-tool be used to make this lesson more engaging?
- iv. Were the learning outcomes achieved? Do I have evidence of that?
- v. Did I give my learners enough opportunities to share their views and to ask queries?
- vi. Were the activities sequenced appropriately?
- vii. Can I teach the same topic using another theme in order to integrate it with another subject?

These five stages are a part of the technology integrated ESL materials and instructional design model. ESL teachers/teacher educators can use the questions provided above as a general checklist to go through each stage effectively and validate the quality of the materials in their selection, sequencing, implementation and post-lesson evaluation.

A Sample Lesson Plan: Technology Integrated ESL Materials

I now present one example lesson plan I created by integrating technology to a set of ESL materials. This was done following the model outlined above.

Topic (Language Function): Apologising

Skill Focus: Listening and speaking

Theme: Aliens

Level: Grades IV-VI

Duration of the Class: 40 min

E-tools to be Used: Pear Deck, Flippity

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the lesson, learners will be able to:

- a. identify expressions of apology;
- b. make use of these expressions in oral communication; and
- c. listen for specific information.

Previous Knowledge:

- a. Learners are aware of some common ways of apologising in English.
- b. They can identify the new expressions of apology used in context.
- c. They can initiate a conversation based on a given situation.

Anticipated Problems:

- a. There might be disruptions due to connectivity issues.
- b. Learners might need extra time getting acquainted with the e-tool.

Introduction to the e-tool (5-10 minutes)

The teacher will share her screen and demonstrate the steps to be followed to install Pear Deck, the e-tool to be used to teach this lesson. A code will be shared by the teacher and learners will join the session using this code after which they will be able to attempt the various interactive activities included in the presentation. Alternatives to certain activities should be thought out beforehand which will be required in case of technical glitches. If a learner is unable to install Pear Deck on their device, the teacher may decide to allow them to type their answers in the chat box or write them on a piece of paper, which can be shown at the time of the discussion.

Warm-up Activity (5 minutes)

The teacher will mention how she finds it amazing that all humans have the same body parts, yet we all look so different from one another. She will mention that she is curious to know if there are creatures like us on other planets also. In order to activate learners' schema and introduce the topic of the lesson, the following questions will be asked:

- a. What do humans call the creatures that apparently reside on other planets?
- b. Do you believe in their existence?
- c. What do you think they look like?
- d. What, in your view, do they eat?
- e. Do you think they communicate like us? Why/Why not?

Activity One (10 min)

A conversation between the Indian Prime Minister and an alien will be played twice. Instructions to attempt the activity will be given beforehand. Learners should have a list of expressions of apology on their screen, which will be ensured by the teacher. Once they have joined using Pear Deck, they will be able to see the slideshow being shared by the teacher. Using the dragging functionality, they will drag dots (given at the bottom of the screen) to those expressions that they hear in the audio. They are, thus, required to listen for specific information only.

Text for the Listening Activity (Self-composed)

(Mr Narendra Modi, Prime Minister, of our country has invited a guest to teach us something valuable today.)

Modi: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. This is Narendra Modi, speaking live from the Parliament House, New Delhi.

As promised, I have arrived sharp at 4 pm to address the nation about a very important matter that usually doesn't receive much attention. It's the art of apologizing! In this endeavour, I am not alone today. There's a special guest who has joined me. This guest has travelled an unimaginable distance to share her words of wisdom with us. She has not come from another country, not even another continent, but a whole other galaxy. She comes from the Rue-ra City situated on the planet called 'Sorrology' or in other words, the planet of apology. So, please give a huge round of applause to our guest, the Prime Minister of Rue-ra, Ms Apolgen Sorru.

Alien: Good morning, Earthlings! If you expected me to begin by apologising just because I come from Sorrology, I'm **sorry** to have disappointed you. You saw what I did there!

We Sorrologists are quite witty and humorous just like you! So if you imagined tiny creatures with antennae and serious faces, I condemn your thoughts! Well, that was rude of me. **Kindly forgive me** for that remark.

There's something else I need to confess. It's my first visit here, and I have come empty-handed despite my buying quite a useful gift for your planet. I **deeply regret** my forgetfulness.

Please also **accept my apologies** for reaching late by five days. My spaceship had bumped into a couple of stars, and I had to step out to apologise to them. The spaceship usually runs smoothly. It was all my fault this time; I had fallen asleep while operating it.

Anyway, the lesson has been learnt, and I've promised to get them some fascinating objects from Earth. So, do offer me some. Do you think I'm being shameless? If so, I **beg your pardon**.

Lastly, I **take full responsibility** for the damage my spaceship has done to this ground, and I am ready to invest money and time to fix the same. Hope my presence here helped you in some way. If it didn't, then I'd say I'm **ashamed of myself!**

Thank you and take care! May the sorries be with you!

Activity Two (15 min)

This is where learners get an opportunity to make use of the various expressions of apology they heard being used in context in the previous activity. Situations will be provided and they will engage in pair dialogues. In order to add a pinch of excitement to the lesson, the teacher will make use of the random name picker available on www.flippity.net. It will be generated beforehand and she will only have to spin it to pick names at the time of conducting the activity. Once students are paired, they will take on different roles, unmute themselves and converse with each other. Those who don't get a chance to speak in class will be asked to pick any of the given situations, have a conversation on it with a family member and email the recording to the teacher.

Sample Situations

- a. You dial the wrong telephone number. Instead of calling one of your groupmates to say how boring you're finding the project you're working on, you call up the teacher who had given this work. Without realizing who is at the other end, you blurt out the truth. You wish to apologise to your teacher (by making use of some of the expressions of apology you are familiar with).
- b. You had borrowed your friend's favourite book, which was quite expensive. Despite your friend's initial hesitation, (s)he had given it to you since you had promised to return it in good condition within two weeks. Now you have misplaced it and need to inform your friend about it. You value your friendship and are genuinely sorry for having upset your friend.

Wrap-up Activity (5-10 minutes)

Pictures of (any) three planets will be shown to the learners, and using the click-and-choose functionality available on Pear Deck, they will select one of them that, according to them, is the planet where the alien in Activity 1 comes from. This is another opportunity for them to enhance their listening and speaking skills by justifying their choices and explaining them to their peers. The teacher's role here is to initiate discussion by showing the results after all of them have chosen one of the three pictures. She must provide the required scaffolding to enable learners to reflect on their choices and discuss them effectively.

On looking closely at the plan, one will observe that it centres on **the learner, the content, assessment as well as the community**. It is learner-centred as an engaging, easy-to-use tool has been chosen to teach the concept and ample opportunities are being provided to them to articulate their thoughts. These responses, along with their performance in the activities, would give the teacher a glimpse into her learners' minds, thus facilitating assessment. The knowledge constructs to be taught have been a focus as well since the teacher has selected a few expressions of apology, which her learners are going to learn during the lesson. Lastly, it is, to some extent, community-centred as well because the learners are to engage in pair dialogues and practice application of the concept recently learnt with a peer. These four lenses have been described by Anderson (2008) in his model of e-learning as crucial to ensure an enriching teaching-learning environment. An environment that caters to the above-mentioned factors is sure to help fulfil the purpose with which the instructional materials were designed and/or chosen.

Summing Up Classroom Implications

“Good language learning depends on at least three variables: aptitude, motivation, and opportunity.” (Rubin, 1979, pp.17-18) The last of these three variables actually refers to materials and all the activities learners engage in to acquire language structures. The materials used in a lesson are the instruments through which the objectives of the lesson are achieved. These are as important in a lesson as the teacher and the taught. However, it is a well-known fact that the tools used to achieve a desired outcome are only as effective as the craftsman who uses them. Thus, the educator's role is significant in selecting and/or developing the right materials. In addition, the choice of the right e-tools is of paramount importance since these can bring about a vast difference in the presentation and effective imparting of knowledge. These communicate the teacher's pedagogical strategies and her expectations from her learners. A tool that doesn't provide for learner engagement is a teacher's message that her learners are supposed to have a passive role. A tool that gives opportunities for their active participation affirms the belief that the teacher considers their inputs and participation an important part of the teaching-learning process.

Conclusion

The lesson plan with an integration of technology to ESL teaching presented in this paper has demonstrated that one of the most important factors while making the switch to e-learning is to increase learner involvement at all stages, starting from planning till evaluation. It is time we let learners make choices for themselves and participate in decisions that directly affect them. Teaching is an art and requires time to be mastered, whether it happens in the physical classroom or online. Switching from the face-to-face to the virtual mode of learning, along with teachers' self-reflection, is a part of their professional development and could be a rich area for teacher and action research.

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