Pandemic –based Esl: A Swot Analysis

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The COVID situation

The lockdown following the outbreak of COVID-19 Pandemic has put a pause button on life. It has disrupted full-time academic activities abruptly leaving administrators, teachers and students in a quandary. According to the UNESCO, "nationwide closures are impacting over 90% of the world's student population. Several other countries have implemented localized closures impacting millions of additional learners."

 Is not surprising to find attempts to restore 'normalcy' amidst uncertainty of lockdown. In fact we have been witnessing an expeditious quest for alternatives to regular teaching-learning by concerned educationists. Discussing Corona virus and education, the *India Today Web Desk* reported: "…What they thought would be the future of education is what we are seeing becoming the present scenario…. To make virtual classrooms a reality, there needs to be a paradigm shift in the popular belief of what online teaching learning encapsulates. The focus should not merely be on lesson delivery and sending assessments via email".

Perhaps we should all have commenced teaching   ESL online   by   probing deeply the   Strengths, Opportunity, Weakness and Threats of such an endeavour. This paper attempts a SWOT analysis and goes on to suggest an answer for the 'billion dollar question'- what exactly can be done to make online ESL teaching effective?

Brief review of studies

Napolitano (2020) quoting the *Hechinger Report* pointed out that teachers are today using high-and low-tech means to reach English Language Learners during corona virus crisis. From phone calls to text messages and handwritten letters, educators employ multiple tools to find what works.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all higher education institutions (90 percent) as per a recent survey used some form of emergency distance education to complete the Spring 2020 term. And 56 percent of faculty who moved courses online were using teaching methods they had never used before. (Kelly, 2020)

Lederman (2020) quoting "The Changing Landscape of Online Education, 2020" (CHLOE for short) survey stated that about 70 percent of respondents of the Survey said that they did not require students to take training or orientation in studying online before they took a virtual course. The author rightly points out that the "coronavirus has dramatically changed the environment for online learning like so many others".

Riggs (2020) in a special column 'Transforming Higher Education' observed   that the three forms of interaction in an online environment- Student-content interaction, Student-student interaction and Student-instructor interaction "don't happen spontaneously. They require planning, intention, and instructional design".

Bishop (2020)   quoted in the *Guardian* an observation of the founder of the research group *Ed Research Works* :"…there's an opportunity here to collectively see and experience how personalized learning and true learner-centered instruction can be accomplished…2020 is illustrating to us what the true non-negotiables are in our conventional

education systems, what our critical goals are for learners and alternatively where we do, in fact, have room to innovate".

SWOT Analysis

Morrison (2018) discussing SWOT Analysis in education sees it as "a tool that can provide prompts to the governors, management teachers and staff involved in the study of what is practical and less effective in the schools' systems and procedures…"It is defined as follows:

*Strengths – Factors that are likely to have a positive effect on (or be an enabler to) achieving the school's objectives.

*Weaknesses – Factors that are likely to have a negative impact on (or be a barrier to) achieving the school's objectives.

*Opportunities – External Factors that are likely to have a positive effect on meeting or exceeding the school's aims, or goals not previously considered.

*Threats – External Factors and conditions that are likely to harm achieving the school's objectives or making the objective redundant or unachievable.

What follows is a discussion of the Strength, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats involved in Pandemic-based ESL.

Strength

*Now educators can select devices and programmes that can ensure quality alternatives to face-to-face interactions.

*Teachers who were hesitant to explore the possibilities of Online learning are pursuing crash courses in e-learning. So once they familiarize themselves with the nitty gritty of Online instruction, the slow but sure implementation of remote learning during holidays is becoming a possibility.

*The teacher now is at liberty to tailor digital tools such as collaboration suites and online learning platforms for their ESL students. G Suite for Education, which includes Google Slides and Docs, has translation features that can help ESLs learn new words to enable them to express themselves better in English. Even Microsoft Translator can be used by which has the added advantage of integration into communication platforms like Skype.

*There are tools for instant messaging which makes communication with learners during shut down easy to handle.

*The Immersive Reader tool can be used by ESLs to not only translate the text, but also have it read aloud to them or explained with a picture dictionary.

* With the lock down and insistence on online learning, teachers who have thither to been hesitant to exploit online tool are exploring and learning to use them. Here, networking helps a lot and connecting with teachers and sharing strategies is one of the best ways to prune one's own skill of using technology tools for instruction.

*During online sessions focusing on listening and speaking, the teacher of English has the added advantage of providing a variety of pre-recorded materials and also provide opportunity for learners to record own utterances for self-correction and improvement.

*In teaching writing, when a tool like Google Doc is used for collaborative writing, when the teacher provides continuous comments for student input, the learner gets an opportunity to learn from mistakes made by peers.

*The scope for introducing a game element into the classroom is possible while using a tool like Kahoot for teaching grammar.

*In an online teaching environment, the teacher can use emoji's or stickers to encourage and create a positive learning atmosphere.

Weakness

*Without any prior training teachers have been thrown into the deep end with online teaching I many countries there are many disadvantaged ESL learners who have little or no access to quality education tailored to their needs. In fact, teachers lack the right tools and training.

*Most teachers today have to administer their course, create suitable materials, broadcast ones class and interact with students and grade their work. This is being done by teachers without the right level of support and training, which in turn affects both teaching and learning. Initial teacher education had seldom given prime attention to embrace digital ways of teaching and learning.(Clark, 2018)

 *It is common knowledge that in normal times learners used to bring a variety of educational and cultural experiences into the classrooms. But this is not going to happen for a few days.

*There is no guarantee that all students will have at-home support to guide them not just related to the content being taught online but also through technical glitches likely to arise during remote learning.

*Most students today have neither a voice nor a choice. This implies that the social, emotional and ethical well being of learners has suddenly become more important than teaching of content and assessment.

*Families with multiple siblings will have to struggle if they have only one laptop when schooling happens in a distance mode from the home.

*Children taking tottering steps to gaining confidence in using the language will suddenly find struggling to learn the language all by oneself with very little help from the teacher in a distance mode of teaching.

*The online distance mode of learning already launched by institutions which developed the courses now being run online did not utilize the services of digital specialists or English language learning or teaching experts.

* There are certain essential knowledge and skills which teachers delivering lessons online require. These include:
1.Strategies for exploiting digital texts.
2. Practice in planning and delivering lessons online.
3. Effective correction of errors in an online context.
4. Gathering feedback, evaluating and reflecting on own teaching.

*It is an acknowledged fact that students need in-class support when working on higher level cognitive skills of the Bloom's Taxonomy. Teachers are not aware of the strategies to be used to nurture and foster higher level thinking skills in an online setting. .

*It is an acknowledged fact that teachers will require extra preparatory time to design web-friendly teaching activities, study materials, to get the academic year resumed, but this aspect has been ignored and many teachers have been pushed into online teaching from the very day of reopening of schools.

*Class management issues are likely to deter effective online instruction. Students may chat or post irrelevant online content wasting precious online time.

Opportunity

*Digital tools enable teachers to incorporate multimedia content in lessons using collaborative suites or mobile apps. This would make possible the presentation of learning materials in visual and auditory ways. Further, it is likely to make innovations in teaching a new normal for teachers.

*The current switching to online pedagogy has prompted teachers to experiment and perfect existing models of blended learning to keep students engaged and learning in their homes.

*Though it is yet to get accepted in a big way in India, it is possible to support ESL learner success with Data Analytics. This can help teachers personalize both learning and pathways. Data analysis can provide a snap shot of what students know and what can be done to meet their academic needs.

*Cloud-based platforms such as Microsoft Azure can compile student profiles that enable administrators to easily track and identify at-risk students.

*With digital tools, teachers can personalize learning for ESL's. In addition, teachers can leverage technology to support ESL learners during remote learning. Here it is worth recalling the words of Dr. David Suzuki (a recognized world leader on sustainable ecology and winner of the 2009 Right Livelihood Award, the Alternative Nobel Prize): "We must reinvent a future free of blinders so that we can choose from real options". Incidentally there already exists a rising competition for English proficiency for further education.

*These uncertain times if effectively utilized can be a time to experiment, innovate, reflect on ways of devising pedagogic strategies that benefit learners. The collective effort put by teachers will help identify ways of including future-ready skills too for learners by making use of online platforms. In fact, according to A. N. Whitehead (British mathematician and philosopher who was instrumental in pioneering the approach to metaphysics now known as process philosophy) "Civilization advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking of them".

*Research has shown that bilingualism has enormous benefits and teachers can tap on the learners familiarity with a language other than the target language namely English. So it would be a good idea to have translation programmes embedded in the laptop's of second language learners. Tapping on the learner's home language for interactive conversations during the initial stages would especially benefit the learner with a tendency to remain a passive observer.

*It is a fact that many teachers have thither to been using the social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp to communicate fairly successfully with their friends and peers. What is now required is to adapt the same for a virtual learning environment. Perhaps by managing the language one has been using thither to could be optimized to benefit learners and provide opportunity for interaction.

*This might be trying times, but before long online learning will soon become the norm and an integral part of teaching all around the world. So it why not perceive the issues with optimism for there will definitely be a light at the end of the tunnel.

Threat

*e-learning has quickly become the default solution and there are many ESL learners who lack the necessary technology nor internet connectivity to access resources from their homes. The spot light is now on ways of overcoming persistent issues of equity.

*There has been a sudden decline of face-to-face instruction between students and teachers. We are also familiar with the digital divide already existing among learners.

* A key concern is ensuring equity and access to learning materials to all students. Now many disadvantaged learners   have to adjust to remote learning environment owing to the pandemic. This is only going to exacerbate the existing achievement gaps among ESL learners.

*It is hard for ESLs to improve own language skills without any form of face-to-face interaction.
* A large number of tech-shy teachers have been rapidly pushed to remote teaching and have been forced to learn how to teach online. They are using digital tools, apps and resources without thoughtful consideration. This creates a number of concerns for student learning along with issues related to privacy, student data, accessibility and the existing digital divide.

*When the focus switches to teaching online, teachers are in a way becoming de-skilled and the humaneness of teaching gets invariably lost.

*Teaching English online is not the same as teaching English face to face.When a large number of students log in for online learning, learner interaction which is the key to success in developing competence in the target language is considerably reduced. The kind of language used by the teacher will be dissimilar to the ones actually required to use in the real world.

*It is a fact that the Internet has completely transformed changed the whole idea of publishing. Today anyone can become a publisher, that is one who is not necessarily from the teaching sector with an affiliation or prescribed qualification. The effect of all this is that loads of materials are now available online not necessarily of high quality. In fact there are several content available online which do not significantly contribute to any language development of the learner.

* Good online lessons we know considers the needs of learners, has clear aims and focuses and incorporates the best practice in methodology. This we know is not currently happening. And when teachers are forced to teach online without proper training, it can negatively impact the learning of students.

*Data collected from learners forced to study online have revealed a conspicuous absence of a humane touch characteristic of face to face instruction. Providing proper scaffolding and moving smoothly from receptive skills to productive skills is the foundation for any good learning of languages.

*There is always the lurking fear of student data being misused. The phenomena called 'Zoombombing'-display of obscene content while using a tool like Zoom, or students becoming victims of cyber bullying is a possibility. Whether all institutions can take necessary precautionary measures to check stealing of student location data and tracking of IP address without student knowledge is doubtful.

*Parents and guardians who can afford paid tutoring would see to it that their children get the best possible resources. But for children who come from poor socio-economic backgrounds for whom parents cannot afford to additional expenses for online tutoring during the shift to remote teaching there is every possibility of an exacerbation of the digital divide between students.

*Keeping students on their toes and getting them to type on the chat box to ensure they every single student is attentive can be an additional strain for the teacher.

Effective online instruction

Technology we know is a powerful tool for transforming learning. Perhaps the time has come for reinventing our approaches to learning and collaboration. More than ever before it has now become imperative to provide students with choices for how they access content (e.g., reading, watching a video, listening to a podcast), how they engage with the content (e.g., choosing topics of interest or related to their homes or communities) and how they showcase their knowledge (e.g., choosing which tools to use to display their understanding). (Trust, 2020)

Smith (2016) who attempted a detailed study of online teaching   provided the following tips for effective online teaching . Most of those tips have a relevance to teaching in COVID times. They include :

1. Know the technology.
2. Expect the unexpected and remain flexible.
3. Create and maintain a strong presence.
4. Set clear expectations for the course.
5. Establish a sense of comfort and develop a community of learners.
6. Promote reflection and communication through quality asynchronous discussion.
7. Have a good balance of active leader and active observer.
8. Request regular feedback and be mindful of misinterpretation.
9. Regularly check content resources and applications.

Zuger (2020) after exploring the strategies teachers use and the challenges faced by ESL/ELL students during remote learning provided a few notable tips:

* Upload teaching material on YouTube.
* Create online Vocabulary Word Wall on Google Classroom.
* Use FlipGrid so kids can see the speaking and listening components.
* Use Talking Points App to communicate with families in their first languages.
* Send weekly "Tips for online learning".
* Keep it interesting.
* Focus on connecting personally and digitally with entire families.
* Forge partnerships in the community.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to include here the guidelines for learning during Covid-19 provided by the intergovernmental organization, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL):

1.Institutions should take emergency policy decisions to adopt alternative ways of teaching, including online learning.

2.Ensure that learning is delivered using ICT tools such as radio, TV, mobile devices so that no learner is disadvantaged.

3.Identify and use existing OER to provide quality learning.

4.Develop and implement strategies for synchronous/asynchronous approaches.

5.Encourage teachers to use free resources such as MoodleCloud to conduct online classes.

Summing up

The time has come for teachers to leverage technology to support ESL/EFL during remote learning. It is an acknowledged fact that e-learning is now becoming the default solution. So it is imperative to look at the Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threats involved. A close reading of the aspects highlighted in this article can help those at the helm of affairs in educational institutions to gain a proper perspective of the issues that have cropped up following the unprecedented lock down which resulted in a disruption of academic activities across the world.

Yet there is a bottom line to it all . The Pandemic crisis has helped all of us come together across boundaries. There is every possibility of teacher collaboration to grow which can improve learning. More than ever before it will make possible quality teaching and learning materials to be better curated and more widely used. Teachers will continue to innovate and experiment with online tools and may even want to continue online pedagogies and more significantly there is the likelihood of teachers receiving more respect, appreciation, and support for their role in society.

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