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## **Use of Technology and English Language Learning in Rural India: A Post-Pandemic View**

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## Abstract

English has gained a special status in India due to its global status as a lingua franca and its history under Indian colonial rule. English, unlike other subjects, is not a knowledge-based subject. English is a skill-based subject where learning facts and concepts are not enough to master the language. The acquisition of the English language requires constant and persistent practice. English is usually considered a difficult language to learn by many ESL students in rural India and they feel afraid to use it inside and outside classrooms. The reason could be the dearth of expert ESL teachers, lack of resources and motivation, and many more. The world once came to a halt due to the pandemic in 2019. The government of India took many measures to continue to provide education to children across the nation. The educators and students had no alternative but to integrate technology into teaching and learning. The infamous pandemic also taught the world how to use technology to make students learn the skill of speaking this global language. The teachers and students had to leave the boundaries of four-walled classrooms and enter into a new (for many teachers) fascinating virtual world. Gradually, they recognised ways to skillfully use technological tools in imparting knowledge and improving skills. Moreover, in post-pandemic times, technology and education have become quite inseparable as the world has recognised the benefits of using technology in education, especially in acquiring the English language. The paper seeks to examine how technology aids in learning English as a second language in rural India where the reach of technology is limited. It also aims to find some practical and readily available technological tools which most students belonging to rural areas can make use of.

**Keywords:** *Technology, English language, Second language acquisition, Teaching, and Learning*

The aim of the paper is to deliberate upon the emerging issues and challenges pertaining to the integration of technology in English language learning in rural India. It also seeks to examine how technology aids in learning English as a second language in rural India where the reach of technology is limited. English language education in rural settings has remained largely unexplored despite the challenges teachers, learners, and other stakeholders face. English has gained a special status in India due to its global status as a lingua franca and its history under British colonial rule. English, being a global language, significantly impacts students in India. The importance of the English language can be derived from the fact that English, being an important part of the Indian education system, is taught as a compulsory subject at all levels of education. This language is used extensively by students who prepare for competitive exams. For instance, major competitive exams like IIT-JEE, NEET, AIIMS, etc. are mostly conducted compulsorily in English and in other regional languages. According to Article 345, the Indian constitution recognizes English as the official language of India which again increases its importance in India. In addition to this, English is the official language of 53 countries and is spoken by approximately 400 million people worldwide. English is such a

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versatile language that it opens many doors to career opportunities. It can be said that English has a wide scope and application, and knowing this language can guarantee a bright future. In *English Next India: The Future of English in India* (2010), David Gradott argues:

Throughout India, there is an extraordinary belief, amongst almost all castes and classes, in both rural and urban areas, in the transformative power of English.

English is seen not just as a useful skill, but as a symbol of a better life, a pathway out of poverty and oppression (p. 124).

Teaching English in rural settings can be a challenging activity. According to the Registrar General of India and Census Commissioner C Chandramouli, “The rural-urban distribution is 68.84 % and 31.12% respectively.” It means that nearly 70 % or the majority of the country's population is residing in rural India. Ignoring the majority means turning a blind eye to the problem. It will only make the situation worse and would definitely impede the progress of a country.

It is clearly true that English is considered a difficult language to learn by many ESL students in rural India and they feel afraid to use it inside and outside classrooms. The reason could be the dearth of expert ESL teachers, lack of resources and motivation, and many more. The world once came to a halt due to the pandemic in 2019. The government of India took various measures to continue to provide education to children across the nation. The educators and students had no alternative but to integrate technology into teaching and learning. The infamous pandemic also taught the world how to use technology to make students learn the skill of speaking this global language. The teachers and students had to leave the boundaries of four-walled classrooms and enter into a new (for many teachers) fascinating virtual world. There has been a noticeable transformation from BALL to CALL, and now to MALL. Gradually, the educators recognized ways to skillfully use technological tools in imparting knowledge and improving English language skills. Moreover, in post-pandemic times, technology and education have become quite

inseparable as the world has duly recognized the benefits of using technology in education, especially in acquiring the English language. The government introduced various platforms to provide education to even distant learners. To support and enhance educational delivery and management, the e-learning platforms such as NPTEL (National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning), DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing), SWAYAM (Study Webs of Active-Learning for Youth Aspiring Minds), SWAYAM Prabha, E-Pathshala, Shiksha Vani, etc. have been introduced which have really revolutionized the education sector. Irrespective of all the efforts, the scenario of teaching and learning the English language in rural India is still bleak.

It is a sad reality that teaching and learning English in educational institutions need serious attention. The situation is grave in rural areas, particularly in schools. A major problem is

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that English is taught like any other knowledge-based subject. Rather, English is a skill where learning facts and concepts are not enough to master the language. The acquisition of the English language requires constant and persistent practice. It is a misfortune that students are made to memorize the 'skills' and are expected to copy them, mindlessly, in an exam. The more students perfected the arts of rote memorization, the more marks they got in exams. The role of an English teacher is not confined to the four walls of a classroom. In other words, they are not expected to cover the prescribed syllabus only, rather, they are expected to be a trainer, a counselor, a supervisor, and a facilitator. The challenges become more intense when it comes to teaching students from rural areas as they lack basic infrastructure to aid their English learning process. Poor grounding of students as regards basic sentence structures, vocabulary, and most importantly, its practical usage, results in the aversion of students to the English language.

Gradually, they begin to find the task of learning and understanding the language cumbersome. In such a scenario, ineptitude teachers make the entire teaching and learning an arduous affair. Governments have from time-to-time revised education policies but sadly, it has not been enough. Despite making various reforms, the quality of education a child received and the skill he/she acquired is still measured by the marks he/she achieved in the marks. The over-emphasis on quantity rather than quality further aggravates the quagmires.

Teaching is a continuous process. Due to the fast-pacing world, the needs are also changing. A teacher needs to be updated and must acquaint him/herself with new ways and methods of teaching. The educational institutes located in urban areas are often replete with advanced gadgets to address the needs of the changing world. On the contrary, the institutes in rural areas often lack even basic facilities. Contrary to expectations, even a well-trained ESL teacher ends up with textbooks. Many under-trained teachers resort to using poorly made 'help books.' However, such steps are condemned by the governments but perhaps, due to the lack of competence or motivation in teachers, teachers find themselves compelled to use such illicit means. Such precarious measures often add to the malaise of the students as well as their parents. As the avidity of parents to provide their children with a wholesome education ends up sending their wards to such institutions where English is not taught as a skill. Unfortunately, the teachers themselves are not fully geared up with the knowledge and skills required. There have been many instances where the focus of both parents and students is more on passing the exam rather than mastering the language. As a result, they continue to carry the lapses in their successive classes. Eventually, when they enter higher education, they find it troublesome to understand the advanced level of the English language. This shows how some lapses at the level of school education can mar the future of the students.

Here, the lack of students' educational as well as intellectual progress should not be considered a fault in students' efforts, rather it should be considered the failure of the education system. Despite providing all sorts of aid on paper, the governments, so far, have not been able to address the root of the problems. The deteriorating situation of the English language in rural areas is inexcusable. In such a scenario, the role a teacher plays becomes all the more imperative.

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