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Second or Foreign Language Learning in a Digital Age: Exploring and Reviewing Newer Possibilities

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Abstract: Though digital intrusion of technology into the teaching-learning process is not a recent development and we have been occasionally (weekly/monthly/quarterly) sprucing up multi-media in our teaching pedagogy along with regular classroom teaching in the past also. However, the real potential of digital technology has never been fully explored and put to use before the recent Covid-19 pandemic. The 'new normal' has offered us an opportunity to explore, discover and eventually apply consistently, the newer digital tools into the pedagogy. The present paper explores, identifies and enlists newer, interesting and trendy ways of second or foreign language learning in a digital age. It scrutinizes the potential of new media towards second and foreign language learning, specifically English through Blogs, social networking, educational and vernacular sites namely Face book, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, Amazon Kindle, Slide Share, Canva etc. Besides this, the study undertaken interweaves the challenging areas of digital learning and its future implications in its text.

Introduction

The onset of the twenty-first century has made digital revolution accurately comprehensive and global to the extent that cell phones have almost substituted computers. The ever-spending research in the fields encompassing language pedagogy, learning and assessment, discourse analysis, socio-linguistics, computer-assisted language learning bears the testimony to the scope of learning a new language through the formal and informal use of new media. The access to internet along with a possession of a smart phone not only surpasses users' identities, cultural/social/regional differences, literacy levels and language learning proficiencies round the globe but also opens up new vistas in the field of effective language learning and social networking.

Let us understand the concept of new media. It is a comprehensive term which engulfs a wide variety of

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electronic communications that are feasible due to innovation in computer technology. With the twin assistance of internet and computers/mobiles, new media has re-defined the channels of communication across the globe. Indisputably, it has almost transfigured the contemporary life and living."Television, film, computer graphics, digital photography, and virtual reality: our culture recognizes and uses all of these technologies as media."(Round hand et al., 1999)New media denotes the digital media which is interactive, user-centric and can be easily processed, stored, transformed, retrieved, and hyperlinked and, perhaps most radical of all, easily searched for and accessed. (Logan, 2016).

Objectives of the Present Study

Undeniably,Covid-19 pandemic along with social distancing, quarantine and the new normal have devastatingly eroded the ages old belief that man is a social animal. Interestingly, new media appeared as a magic wand which ensured our virtual social connectivity even without actually socialising. SLA is essentially a social activity and therefore, the present paper gains a well-deserved emergency. The key objectives of the present study are:

1. To explore, analyse and review the intrusion of new media in Second Language Learning (SLA) and Technology Assisted Language Learning (TALL).
2. To analyse the overlapping of formal and informal modes of

language learning in the present context.
3. To explore and employ newer, trendy and cost-effective tools of new media to ensure SLA.
4. To assess the tools on the parameters of functionality, feasibility, practicality and access to the teachers and learners alike.
5. To analyse the hurdles in between and the future prospects therein.

Methodology

The present paper is expository in nature and adopts an interdisciplinary approach to explore and review newer possibilities in the arena of Second or Foreign Language Learning, especially English in the post-pandemic digital age.
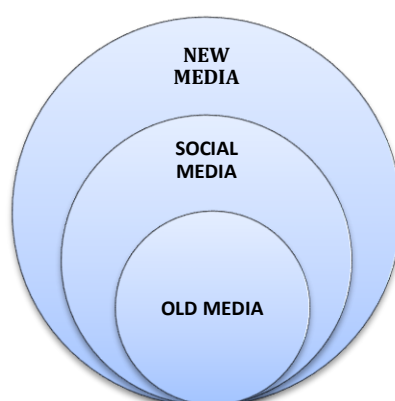
New Media and its Impact

The successive evolution of communication and media proclaims that invention of press offered only one facet of cultural communication, namely- dispersal of knowledge; photography catered to another parameter of cultural communication i.e. static pictures; telephones assisted dissemination of a spoken word to a limited audience; type writers added a professional flavor to the official/personal writings but "computer media revolution affects all stages of communication, including acquisition, manipulating, storage and distribution."(Logan, 2016)Undoubtedly, new media quite imperatively engulfs social and old media into its territory and gives its creator and the consumer anexciting experience. The more we penetrate into the realm of new media,

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more are the occasions and openings to access and learn new skills in the field. It thrives on computers, websites, human-computer interface, virtual world, virtual reality, multimedia, computer games, computer animation, digital videos, special effects in cinema and interactive computer installations. (Manovich, 2001).

Figure 1: A Venn diagram evidently illustrates the relationship of new media with social and old media.

New Media and its Intrusion into SLA and TALL

After reviewing the overall impact of new media on our lives, let us now focus on its influence in TALL and SLA. While tracing down the history of language learning, a couple of decades before, teachers and students relied upon books and black-boards for formal learning and newspapers, magazines, cinema, radio and television for informal and/or formal learning. While comparing the components of old media with the newer additions to media, one discovers an unbridgeable fissure between the segments. Old media is essentially non-interactive while on the contrary new media; to name a few, websites, blogs, internet telephony, web advertisements, online education, online videos/audio streams, online forums, online communities etc. have revolutionized the experience of teaching and learning. One can seea considerable and growing body of research in a variety of fields, including language pedagogy and assessment, second language acquisition (SLA), discourse analysis, literary studies, computer-mediated communication (CMC), and sociolinguistics (Reinhardt, 2019). Unquestionably, internet technology has stimulated language teaching over the past two decades.

Figure 2: Table visualising the overlapping, blending and blurring boundaries of media in the digital age.

OLD MEDIA	SOCIAL MEDIA	NEW MEDIA

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Newspapers	Facebook	Websites	Mobile Apps
Television	Twitter	Blogs	Web advertising
Radio	Snap chat	Chatrooms	Virtual reality
Books	LinkedIn	e-books	Digital cameras
Letters	Instagram	Online communities	YouTube streaming
	WhatsApp	Social media platforms	

As new media has been accelerating social communication and connectivity in the present times, the present paper gains a well-deserved urgency. Hence, in the light of these findings, we must acknowledge the fact that new media is a vital component of contemporary education and learning. Online courses, online classes/coaching/tutoring, webinars, presentations, live streaming, live sessions, online educational games, online tests and evaluations are some of the essential components of contemporary educational set-up. New media has not only become an essential tool in teaching pedagogy but it plays a key role in the field of evaluation and assessment in the present times.

There has been a continued and sustained contribution towards research and practice in TALL all over the world. Linguists and psychologists have been emphasizing that language acquisition is essentially a socio-cultural phenomenon and human-beings acquire a language through a continued and sustained practice in the target language. People communicate and interact through a language and language ultimately connects people, communities and society. Undeniably, language and society dwell on each other. It is here, where the socio-linguistics intervenes and investigates the interdependence between language and social contexts. While incorporating various socially-informed theoretical contexts namely "sociocultural theory, situated practice, language socialization or socio-cognitive frameworks";rightly confirms that language development is an "essentially social phenomenon" (Block, 2003).At this moment, it is very relevant to register a couple of facts. Firstly, language is dynamic and ever-evolving in nature and secondly, mutual communication is intricately woven in the matrix of the society. Certainly, socio-cognitive approaches to CALL shift the dynamics from learners' interaction with computers to interaction with other humans via the computer (Kern & Warschauer, 2000).

Let us now acknowledge the fact that learning does occur outside the formal frame work of education. Digital literacy, learner's autonomy along with virtual learning environments (VLEs) have contributed towards TALL. However, it is very relevant to quote a fact here that ever-growing technological novelties, make us feel confused and exhausted at times. Amusingly, some

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digital tools become obsolete even before people get accustomed to it. That is why, the present paper explores a chosen few trendy tools which have come of age and generally speaking, people are familiar with these platforms.The subsequent sections of the paper explore some trendy tools of new media which enable a learner to acquire second or foreign language through TALL, as including all the existing tools is definitely beyond the scope of the paper.

Innovative and Trendy Tools for ESL

Social media exploits the innate human tendency to connect and communicate with each other. There are four important purposes behind social media and social networking and these are to connect to others and build relationships; to collaborate with others; to present or broadcast an identity or to express creative activity (Reinhardt, 2019).

1. Blogs

A blog (a truncation of weblog) is a personal online portfolio or a journal where a blogger documents his/her opinion and experiences on issues of his/her choice. The blogs are interconnected to other blogs by their authors and ultimately, generate networked communities. These blogs are not only platforms for expression for their authors but also create a virtual space for readers to gain knowledge and insight into the fields of their choice. In the framework of English as a second language, blogosphere recommends access to a "wide variety of topic and registers" and enables ESL students to gain proficiency in the skills like "skimming, scanning and critical reading." (Ward, 2004)

In the context of ESL, there are evidences that blogs enhance critical intercultural consciousness especially because the students experience how their own perceptions have transformed when their most recent entries are compared with the older ones. In the same context, learners can create a blog-based customized 'personal learning environment (PLE); while making the most of learner's autonomy these blogs could act as a space for accumulating, archiving, and handling online learning resources. (Guth, 2009)

2. Face book

Facebook is a social networking site which facilitates its users with an online connectivity with family and friends. Owing to its world-wide popularity and acceptance, academia too, has taken interest into this vernacular site to explore the possibilities of "collaborative and participatory learning communities as well as opportunities for informal and unstructured learning." (Reinhardt, 2019)

Latest trends and researches in the fields namely Internet socio-linguistics and new media studies has revealed considerable possibilities in the methodological innovation in the field of ESL. Internet socio-linguistics acknowledges multilingual and multicultural diversity of the online language used therein where user "considers the various repertoires

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and resources as an integrated system, and the SNS serves as an intertextual space for self-presentation and identity performance." (Schreiber, 2015)However, self-motivated and intentional ESL through Facebook cannot be negated at all. Teachers may share motivational quotes, videos or stories through closed Facebook groups/communities meant for the learning and educational purpose. This will not only make ESL interesting and engaging but will also promote learning through observation.

3. Twitter

Twitter is a multilingual social networking service which facilitates its users to post and communicate through short messages called "tweets." Often labeled as micro blogging, it was purposefully created with a pre-conceived objective of swift spreading of main news captions or gossip to trail and surf information using hash tags. It boasts of allowing its subscribers to follow the tweets of people whom they may not know personally. Amusingly, Twitter has started resembling Facebook and vice-versa as Twitter has relaxed the characters limit, allowed inserting images and videos into the tweets while Facebook has freshly assimilated the idea of hash tags and followers. Twitter can be incorporated into the teaching pedagogy by sending images; pictures to the students encouraging them to create a short story/character sketch/assign an appropriate title etc. Teachers may utilize Twitter for informing students about the

deadlines for their projects/assignments/exams or for sharing inspirational quotes or retweeting significant feeds of international/national personalities.

4. YouTube

YouTube is an established website for sharing videos. The platform not only facilitates the user to upload one's own videos but one can also view videos uploaded by other users. YouTube videos can be embedded and shared on other sites also. Educators can recommend some informative videos related to language learning to the students so that they may pursue learning in their own comfort and privacy zones. The next day, teacher may conduct a discussion on the watched videos in the class. In addition to this, students can subscribe to informative channels for informal and unstructured SLA.

5. Whats App

WhatsApp is a mobile messaging application which connects its users through voice calls, face-to-face calls or text messages. Photo/document sharing and group chats and one-to-one chats are some of the popular features of WhatsApp. Recent researches have revealed that students prefer WhatsApp as an "extended learning platform"(Ahmed, 2019). It is a very effective tool for upgrading reading and writing skills in SLA. Educator can share photograph(s), video(s) or text(s) to begin a discussion in the group. It is an integral platform for informal official communication in organizations and

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lately, it has now gained acceptance in the field of education also. Evidently speaking, almost every teacher has created WhatsApp group(s) for his/her respective classes for sharing important information, recent updates, online class links etc. during the online teaching sessions and eventually, this practice is going to stay in future also.

6. Amazon Kindle

Amazon Kindle empowers its users to download, access/read e-books, magazines and other digital media. Keeping in harmony with the user-friendly approach, Kindle devices enable its reader to access dictionary and Wikipedia for browsing difficult words during reading. In addition to this, font size and margins of the e-book can be tailored according to the personal choice/need of the user. Text to speech for reading the text aloud and an MP3 player playing music in the background during reading are some exciting and user-friendly features of Kindle. Though carrying actual books or carrying books through Kindle depends exclusively on the concerned person. Speaking particularly, of the present generation and the contemporary times, youngsters prefer reading e-books than the paperback books. The new mobile technology coupled with computer-based smart phones has made audio books readily available as well as user-friendly than ever before, we find evidence that the target groups of audio books are growing due to the amplified flexibility and prevalence of the medium.(Have & Pedersen, 2015) Passion for reading e-books necessarily adds to informal and unstructured SLA.

7. Video Conferencing (Zoom, Microsoft Teams,Google Meet, etc.)

Video Conferencing through Google meet, Zoom and Microsoft teamssanctions its users to initiate and contribute in text, voice or video chats. These platforms debar the geographical limitations and connect people online in a virtual world. The communication can be one-to-one or it may take place in groups. The platform brings learners and teachers virtually face-to-face to each other and the situation culminates from "in front of your teacher" to "in front of your computer screen" assert (Wang& Winstead, 2016). Videoconferencing, in addition to offering virtual platform for collective learning also encourages collaborations and reinforcement among students and teachers while disabling the geographical, political, regional and communal barriers. These platforms facilitate the users to execute a project/assignment/presentation collaboratively without the constraint of time and place. The participants may contribute as per their personal engagements is-à-vis time and place towards the collective project. Subject-specific and topic-specific virtual meetings can be planned by the teacher and/or students. This platform in addition to ensuring team work, also keeps a check on the individual performance of the learners.Unquestionably, this tool has

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been extensively utilised across the world to ensure the dissemination of education and learning through online classes even in the testing times of the recent Pandemic.

8. Slide Share

If YouTube permits its users to upload videos, Slide Share licenses its users to upload slideshows/presentations. Slide Share is a slide hosting service which empowers its users to upload files namely PowerPoint, Word, PDF or Open Document presentations. One can view these presentations on the site itself or these can be rooted to the other sites as well. It is this feature which makes Slide Share, truly, a component of new media. Primarily, the platform was created for the business organisations with a pre-defined purpose to share information with employees but currently, it has flourished much beyond its original being. Today, it has succeeded into a reservoirof presentations related to a variety of segments, to name a few; education, life style, tourism, internet, spiritual, social media, technology, self-improvement, career, food etc. One can find a plethora of presentations on grammar, syntax, vocabulary, sentence structures and likes on the site. One can not only peruse these presentations for learning rather one can draft, design and upload one's own presentations. Hence,SlideShare offers tremendous opportunities for formal and informal learning.

9. Canva

Canva is an online graphic designing and publishing tool which aims at enabling its users to design and publish a variety of things namely photo-collage, book-cover, mind-map, magazine cover, poster, work-sheets, post-cards, letter-heads, flyers, comic strip, class schedule, planner, concept maps, lesson-plans, book-marks, desktop wall-paper etc. Canva is free to use but can be upgraded to Canva Pro for additional features. Teachers can not only use this tool for designing their lesson-plans, class-schedules, talking presentations and videos to enrich their pedagogy but can also propel students to design posters, invitations, letter-heads for various upcoming online/offline activities and events. Interestingly, teachers of English have been teaching letter-writing, poster/advertisement designing, notice-writing etc. Now, with Canva, students can conveniently get hands-on training of creating and publishing a variety of things. Not only this move will enrich their business communicationbut hands-on practice on such projects will result enhance their life-skills.

Incorporating New Media in ESL: Facing Challenges and Dealing with Threats

Irrefutably, SLA through new media is student-centered and TALL invariably expects a teacher to be a planner, a facilitator, a mediator, a controller, a regulator, an enabler, an organizer who initiates, motivates,

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stimulates, inspires, persuades, encourages, inspires and stirs the students to accomplish the desired goals of teaching/learning process. Planning lessons/lectures/sessions; designing content for structured classes; choosing online tool for additional information and learning;impartingmorals/ethical values; instilling life-skills; designing, assigning and scheduling tests/assignments and eventually, evaluating academic performances of students; planning online/offline curricular and cultural activities are the top-most priorities of a teacher. Undoubtedly, TALL expects teachers to be exceptionally competent in integrating digital tools in their teaching pedagogy.

TALL has unquestionably, the potential to disrupt the outmoded and stiff barricades of classroom language learning but everything comes with a price and this platform of learning is not an exception. Here are some pre-requisites for the smooth and unfailing TALL:

i.   Consistent and reliable institutional support system regarding technology assistance to meet the learner's needs, namely software and/or hardware necessities, internet band-width and connectivity.

ii. A high-level competency in digital literacy is a pre-requisite for the teacher and the taught alike.

iii. A dependable support system for trouble shooting of software and hardware failures.

iv. Dependable and unfailing digital opportunities for teacher and students for effective communication amongst them.

It is obligatory to document a very relevant fact here that no tool or device can ever replace the educator who propels the learners towards the desired goals of learning. These innovative and trendy tools of learning may act as a catalyst towards efficient learning but in no case can defy a teacher. Though the informal individual language learning may not be controlled but the structured language learning needs to be controlled and supervised by a teacher, especially for unsuitable and incongruous content or comments while using new media. On the contrary, these innovative and creative tools may culminate into distractions, disturbances, cyber bullying or even criminal activities on the part of students. Definitely, we should stay mindful but we should also not get influenced by the potential of ever progressing technology. (Wang & Winstead, 2016)

While turning to the threats involved in TALL, one jiggles with a plethora of problems, namely-surplus information, constraints of technology, individual digital literacy, addiction towards social media, online bulling, trolling, isolation, self-centeredness, individual privacy concerns, disinterest towards face-to-face

communication and a penchant for virtual presence. The tendency of students to shun away from interactions and face-to-face dialogue with people in reality, is another area of concern.

Conclusion

While pulling all the threads together towards the conclusion, it is very appropriate to acknowledge that new media has undeniably stimulated the mode of teaching and learning of English language in this digital age. SLA through new media is indisputably learner-centered which tends to diminish the cultural gaps, literary competencies, social and geographic diversities. While supporting and promoting autonomy of learners, these innovative and trendy tools of new media have noteworthy potentials and possibilities. Earlier, the tools discussed in the present study were facilitating informal mode of learning but they have essentially intruded into the formal teaching pedagogy in the post-pandemic period. The blurring boundaries and overlapping contours of such differentiated fields like education, technology, digital literacy, new media, discourse analysis,applied linguistics, digital humanities, comparative and contrastive linguistics, global citizenship and above all, the ongoing inter-disciplinary studies in these fields assures us that new media will continue to play a pivotal role towards modern language proficiency in future.

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