

Teaching English through Mobile Phone: Bridging Teachers and Students in Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

Managing English classes in Bangladesh like many other developing countries is difficult because most of the classrooms are overcrowded. So many learners lag behind as their teachers cannot monitor their progress along with the competencies. To overcome this gap, the privileged groups of students take many other extra supports where as the learners from the underprivileged areas suffer a lot due to the scarcity of the supports outside the classroom. According to the recent report of education ministry on the result of the public exams, the students of rural areas are always far behind the students of urban area. Additional help or private coaching is one of the reasons which make this difference when quality English teacher is a dire need and teaching turns to commercial service rather than professional. Teaching English through mobile can be a supplementary method to first generation learners in remote area who are excluded from regular services of mainstream education. 'mEducation' is an intervention of BRAC and BRAC Institute of Languages (BIL) to address of this problem. This study reflects the voices of the beneficiaries and stakeholders of a project that aims to ensure the access and cater the services for inclusion of the outreach children and teachers which is almost free. This study also shows how mEducation includes the excluded community through a very simple feature phone with intellectual minds creating substantial learning network and knowledge transfer.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In recent times, mobile technologies are helping people to leapfrog over old barriers of access to resources removing the obstacles of service delivery in education sector. The recent experiences of distance education are also encompassing their mode of education in resonance with the advancement of technology enhanced classroom. Unfortunately, in developing countries the challenges are still hovering around the delivery of quality education, particularly in rural and remote regions. On the other hand, in most of the developing countries where English is considered as foreign language students are still far reach of the global standard because of the quality infrastructures to accommodate overcrowded students, teaching materials and especially quality teachers. In Bangladesh, we have experienced the similar kind of results.

For this reason, despite years of learning English language, in Bangladesh the students fail miserably in English communication and in their academic life (Hamid, 2011). Research studies show that the examination system of Bangladesh is responsible for this setback. Because of the evaluation patterns, students and teachers consider English as a subject not as a language to be learned. In line with this assessment system, many students are entrapped with the commercialization of education (Private tuition) which again is putting a demarcation line of inequality between urban and rural, poor and rich. To reduce these, BRAC, one of the largest NGOs in the world and BRAC Institute of Languages has taken an initiative to launch a programme, mEducation to reach to the outreach children with a pool of good teachers to deliver a better education service in English and Math through a distance technology like mobile. Both BRAC and BRAC Institute of Languages believe that this attempt will bring the excluded community to the mainstream and set an example in Bangladesh and in the world how to address the unaddressed issue. This study is an attempt to show how this service is being delivered bridging the existing gap between teachers and students. “mEducation” is the process of learning around the familiar, open and easily accessible technology where learners are not fixed or predetermined, or where there is no barrier of location for learning by mobile technologies. In other words, a device like mEducation encourages the learner who wants to learn through general portable devices with almost free of cost.

2.0 IMPORTANCE OF TECHNOLOGY IN WORLD EDUCATION

Over the few years, the world of education has been going on with different kinds of experimentation. Technology is playing an important role to change the shift of the education highlighting the learners’ need, their autonomy and preferred learning styles. Within this purview, educators around the world have been testing different technologies. Emphasizing the effectiveness of the currently most used platforms like web 2.0, blogs, (Greenhow et.al.,2009) claimed that it is personally meaningful, collaborative and socially relevant. (2009, p. 249). According to some critics, to date the transferability of the language skills of learners from the technology intervened has been disappointing. (Terras et. al.,2012).According to Kennewell et. al. ‘ICT cannot (yet) provide the sustained, contingent, reciprocal and reflective qualities of classroom interaction that we associate with improvements in learning’.(2004,p.1).On the other hand , people who support technology, emphasize that the technology enhance learning may complement face-to-face learning, through blended approach to leverage the best service delivery. (Hui et. al.,2008). Even a competing view holds that the ‘conventional, face-to-face, classroom-based learning’ can be substituted with the technology assisted learning (Zhang et al. ,2004) . However, when the concern is to deliver the better services of education vis a vis to ensure the access of the learners from the excluded community for proper education,technology enhanced classroom, Computer Aided Language Learning (CALL), Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) can be a strong tool with the functionality and acceptability.

3.0 BANGLADESH AND THE ADVENT OF “mEducation”

With the advent of mobile technology around the world, people of Bangladesh are very much likely to get the access of this facility. Referring to Asian Development Bank, Gronlund and Islam asserted that, there is a mobile phone in every family (2010). Almost 90% of the urban people possess a mobile; on the other hand, almost 70% rural people are under the umbrella of

mobile services (Rahman, 2007). Though mobile networks cover almost 97% of the country, the extreme low penetration of internet technology sometimes deferred the expectant service in Bangladesh. In addition, since the rural people live below poverty line and their income is less than a dollar per day, most of the rural people possess a simple feature phone. Considering all the issues, mEducation is designed to cater the service of education in such a way so that the number of rural, outreach and excluded children get access to the services from their own family phones. Again, another challenge was to address the excluded community's need where students are frequently dropped out because of either being first generation learners or no assistance and motivation from the formal or informal source to continue the education (UNESCO, 2006). So, mEducation aims to change the repetitive pedagogy that is practiced in traditional institutions (Andersson, 2008; Burn & Thongprasert, 2005) through 'virtual tutors' (Mitchell, 2003) where it gives the learners an opportunity to build up a network with the cheapest and widely available mobile technology to provide maximum services in future with almost free of cost. NSHU (2007)

The present intervention of mEducation is providing its service through a call centre like a platform every day in the evening for a certain period of time. In the pilot phase of this intervention, students were told and made aware about its service. Students, when they feel the urge of the assistance, call to a certain number. This design is shown in Figure 1.

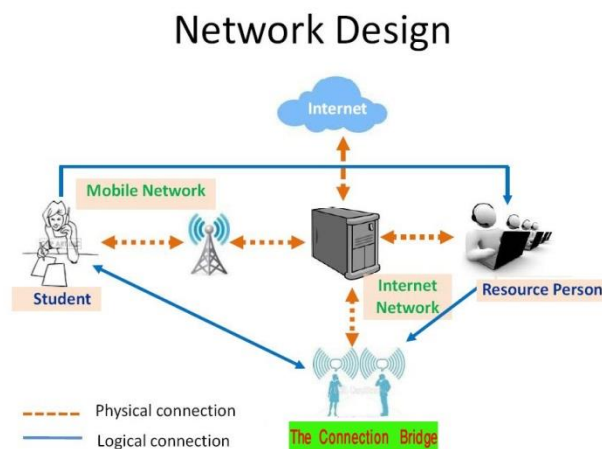


Fig. 1. The network design of mEducation

Thus, in mEducation, mobile devices are brought to communicate person-to-person in a synchronous platform to help learning to be acquired as “cognitive artifacts” (Norman, 1991) to access informal learning opportunities and language skill across different contexts. The word ‘interactive’ exposes itself in new way in teaching and learning process in ‘mEducation’ in terms of its service delivery and impact.

4.0 METHOD

This study investigates the teaching learning process and the impacts the beneficiaries, the students from the outreach community of the mEducation project and the tutor who extended their help to deliver the services. It also determines the pattern of interactions between the learners and the instructors to understand the actual use and the benefits. For this, several

interaction session were observed and even the researchers were directly involved in some of the lesson delivery where they synchronously interact with the learners and tried to solve their queries. Later, 40 students and 10 teachers were interviewed and two FGDs were conducted respectively with instructors and with the students to comprehend the effect and impact of the intervention. The data was collected by visiting to institutions, discussions and interviews compiled and analyzed through both qualitative and quantitative method. The results are discussed in terms of the benefits of the services, the interaction patterns and also of the different dialogical patterns focusing on the objectives of this study.

5.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The project endeavored to take an innovative approach not only in the creation of new, authentic pedagogies for mobile devices but also in the action learning approach adopted for outreach students who don't have any suitable and economical option. Having been piloted to facilitate English teaching over phone, the "mEducation" projects learn its lesson to accommodate best of its practices developing the relationship and bridge between learners and instructors. While interacting with the students, the facilitators not only tries to understand the nature of the problems students are having rather the check students' prior knowledge, probe their understand from their conversations and also ensure require spaces to reflect and construct new knowledge. It is of interest, therefore, to consider the socio constructivist theory that reappears in this intervention of mobile in teaching learning progress. The socio-constructivist theories suggest the comprehensible and motivating production goal that is reorganized in current 'theory, practice and research in mobile learning'. (Cook et. Al., 2011)

The process of facilitating over phone can be described as effectively as a space to bridge the gap between students and their formal classroom. Traditionally, the English learners of the formal schools remain rigid in their English classes. It is because they are afraid of English or they don't have good communication with their teachers in formal class. So, 'mEducation' was started with more flexible mode to address learners' need, their learning styles, the background knowledge of the language learners compared to traditional styles of teaching. It helps to create a learner centered environment. Again, since the facilitation process goes on in distance mode, teachers need to give a lot of motivation to frame the better attitudes in students to take the control of the lesson.

It is, thus, often found that teachers sometimes talk to the guardians or the owner of the phone to provide counseling and guidance to keep the learner in the mainstream. At this point of conversation it is found that some guardians even want to take help from the teachers to understand the lesson so that they can teach their students properly. The teachers of 'mEducation' while their own training programme go through a good number of sessions on how to handle different situations through psychological help. While designing the recruitment process of the teachers and teacher training process these parts were considered with great importance. For the continuous professional development, these teachers sit together in every three months to discuss their success, their challenges and next strategies to be adapted. In addition, teachers need to be very careful on their lectures and meet the demand of the situations as different learners are coming up with different problems.

From language teaching point, the crux of this attempt is to prove that students can learn language anywhere and practice language where they feel easy. As it is told earlier, the quality of education in developing countries like Bangladesh remains a problem. So, 'mEducation' starts with developing a competent resource teachers; to facilitate not only

language skills in the distance mode rather to manage the psychological reading of the learners with their voice as the learners are totally unseen. The grammar points are mostly discussed points where learners frequently seek to solve and understand different grammatical problems. In addition, it is seen that with the recent introduction of the creative writing in Bangladeshi curriculum, the number of writing development assistance has increased in these times where students want to learn and develop different kinds of writing skill.

The most important part of the facilitation is probing the understanding of the learners as the whole interaction goes on with voice, feelings. Teachers while delivering the lessons need to check the understanding of the learners frequently and take feedback from their learning. Teachers do it several times in the lessons before leaping on the different stages of the lesson. So for teachers, being friendly or having a friendly tone with patience to listen and understand the emotions and feeling of the learners are very important. The teachers of the 'mEducation' with hands on training on it perceive these skills before sitting for providing the service. Apparently, the bondage between the teachers and students grows up at this points where it starts with the aim of creating a free and open space so that the learners open up themselves and take the opportunity to learn.

It is found that most of the teachers complained about the networks as the target students' call from the rural area. Teachers need to repeat the instruction twice and thrice to make the learners understand of the part. The administered of the m Education felt that the skill of giving instructions was sometimes very critical which the teachers also often complain. Keeping this issue on mind different simulations were arranged in the experience sharing meeting. The good point is the teachers are learning day by day while they are doing the task. With the hindsight of these limitations, the organizers of this project both BRAC and BRAC Institute of Languages are happy with the increasing phone calls as days are passing.

6.0 CONCLUSION

When phones are gaining in capacity like computing power, in future we might see the control over the class goes to teacher with the help of technology. Mobile is the simplest and a handy gadget of communication. It is the tool of communication which has a number of technical features of teaching and learning. When we think about flexible education and education with entertainment in anywhere or we want to ensure the access to information, it is mobile which plays the role of ambidextrous. If learning a language needs four skills, mobile can help in all those skills. The importance of upholding everyone's feeling comfortable in both end 'mEducation can be a model that simply can be administered. In most cases where education needs good leadership, ownership and personalization this intervention demonstrates a perfect example to stand beside the outreach community. With the current success of this project, another design is also ready to start a network for teachers' interaction where teachers will learn and share their problems and make s compatible solutions. It will then improve the situation of formal schooling to bridge the gap between the learning objectives those are aimed at and the gained learning objectives.

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