

Technology And Project Work: A Study Of Visually Impaired (Vi) Learners In Tertiary Level English Language Classrooms

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Abstract

Project works are those tasks assigned by the course instructors to a group of learners which is to be carried out within a fixed period of time. Now-a-days, in the educational setups, the use of technologies to do project work by the learners has become very much common. In inclusive English language classrooms with VI students, it is important to know how these learners are using technologies to carry out the project works given to them. This will help in addressing the issues related to it. Jameel (2011) views that though there have been researches on 'disability' being conducted at the school level, not much has been done in the higher education level. When it comes to English language teaching to VI learners, it has yet to gain attention. Therefore, the theoretical background concerning this problem is very little. This paper, therefore, aims to study how technology is used by VI learners to do project work assigned in English language classes; look into the advantages and limitations. 5 VI learners studying in College for Integrated Studies, University of Hyderabad will be interviewed. The data will be analyzed qualitatively.

Key words: Technology, language, project work, visually impaired, learners, classroom

Introduction

The 21st century is marked by the use of technologies in the field of education. These technologies include mobiles, computers, television, projectors, etc. "Technology is utilized for the upliftment of modern styles; it satisfies both visual and auditory senses of the students" (Juneja, Mishra, Shinde, 2016). Both teachers and students use technologies to facilitate the teaching and learning process. Students use technology for assignments, presentations and other group works assigned by the teachers. In J.W Thomas' view projects are complex tasks based on challenging questions or problems, that involve learners in designing problem solving, investigating or decision making, give students opportunities to work autonomously over an extended period of time and lead to realistic presentations. (Jones, Rasmussen, Moffitt, 1997; Thomas, Mergendoller, Michaelson, 1999). "Students at all levels can do a project working alone or in a group according to the project scope and difficulty. The project work implies a series of activities that allow the students to study, do research and act by themselves using their abilities, interests, personal experience and aptitudes." In English language classrooms, while doing projects, Haines opines that students have opportunities to "recycle known language and skills in a relatively natural context" (Haines, 1989).

In the context of teaching English to the learners with special needs, the research conducted in the field of disability is very less. Makarova et al finds that though there have been researches on 'disability' being conducted at the school level, not much has been done in the higher education level. When it comes of English language teaching to, it has yet to gain attention. Therefore, the theoretical background concerning this problem is very little. (cited

in Jameel,2011). In spite of the efforts on the focus of inclusion of students, there are less or no studies on teaching English to VI at higher education level in inclusive classrooms. “Blindness is the condition of lacking visual perception due to physiological or neurological factors. Total blindness is the complete lack of form and visual light perception and is clinically recorded as NLP, an abbreviation for —No light perception.” (Pathan, 2012). Visual impairment includes a broad spectrum of conditions from no sight (blindness) to some useful residual vision. Vision loss usually results from incurable eye disease or accident. It is typically measured by assessing visual acuity and field of vision (Wong & Lee, 2010).

In inclusive English language classrooms with VI learners, it is important to know how these learners are using technologies to carry out the project works given to them. According to UNESCO, inclusive education is seen as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion from education and from within education.”

This paper aims to find out the use of technologies by VI learners in doing group project work; look into the advantages and disadvantages of using technology in project work and provide recommendations on the use of technologies for doing group project work.

The data were collected using semi structured interview from 5 VI learners from College for Integrated Studies, University of Hyderabad. The data were analyzed qualitatively.

Discussion and Findings

The VI learners told that they use computers; mobiles and they use projector for presentation of the final project work. For computers, two softwares are used JAWS (Job Access with Speech) and NVDA (Non Visual Desktop Access). For mobiles, screen reader called ‘talkback’ and ‘Google assistant’ are used. This indicates that VI learners use similar technologies like the sighted learners. It is only the ways of using are different.

Advantages

Collaboration and cooperation

VI learners gave their opinion that technologies helps in collaboration as they can stay connected and share their ideas anytime from anyplace. They mentioned that they have their separate project work group and common group for all the students with the course instructor. In the second group, they could take suggestions and clarify their doubts whenever required. The discussions that take place through whatsapp helps in enhancing their writing skill or in other words express their ideas in a way that others can comprehend them. All the group members can equally participate and share their ideas. Collaboration helps in cooperation as proper work division takes place through collaboration.

Access to information

With technologies like computer and mobiles, they said that they can get access to information available online as well as contact people via social media or mail to gather information on the issues related to the topic assigned to project work. They told that they used screen reader to find information. Again, they can gather ideas from different sites to make a good project work both content wise and graphics wise.

Time management

Use of technologies like projectors has helped to save time as they need not have to schedule time to gather in any place for discussion. In the presentation phase, it has also helped in the proper work division and time management in the sense that they can pre decide the areas that they are to present respectively, and know the time required for the presentation beforehand or discuss their areas according to the time allotted by the instructors. It was helpful for the VI learners because they could remember what they are going to discuss in a systematic way. This in a way contributes to the speaking skill of the learners.

Scoring

When doing a project work, it requires lots of effort to make it unique. Uniqueness are required to score good marks for the project. For this purpose, they need to employ various strategies which technology makes it possible in numerous ways. They audio and video record things, take photos of the tasks they do for the project. They used DSLRs and mobile phones for this. This has helped in storing their data. They used online free editors to edit the audio and video clippings. The VI learners told that they shared ideas with the sighted students while doing this.

Limitations

In the opinion of VI learners, searching for materials related to the topic is time consuming if they are not given any information of the sites where they can find the same. Sometimes it is difficult for them to follow the group discussions that take place through whatsapp. They said that if they don't follow the messages, then they face certain difficulties like going back the message from where the conversation started and give respective viewpoints. This indicates that they should be available whenever the discussions take place. Deciding a time for discussion can be one of the solutions, but group members will have to wait for the scheduled time to share their views and it might not be possible for every member to be online at the same time. For the VI learners, they said that if articles are shared in the group, it is accessible only to the sighted students.

The learners told that though they can type, but there may be some mistakes. For this they take the help of their sighted friends. In addition to this, they expressed that if they don't have practice, then they need more time to type. It is such that they need to remember the keyboard as well as have practice in order to type out their part of the project work.

Internet connectivity is one of the challenges. Sometimes the internet cannot be accessed which stands as a hindrance in collecting and analyzing the materials.

During presentation if they are using computers themselves to change the slides are difficult if the computer and projector are not connected to the place where the presenter stands.

There are technological failures at times. Again, for the audios and videos to play different softwares are required. If these are not available, it is difficult to display on the screen.

Recommendations

- Both the teachers and students should have knowledge regarding the use of technologies.
- The sighted learners should know how the VI learners are operating technologies in order to properly divide the works.
- Take help from instructors to find relevant materials online.

- Save multiple copies of files as well as save on google drive.
- Check before the actual presentation if the videos, audios are operating properly.
- Check internet availability (if required for the presentation).

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is found that VI students share technologies like computers and phones which is common to that of sighted learners. But the VI students use different softwares like JAWS to facilitate the mode of learning. In spite of the limitations, the role of technologies in the successful completion of group project work cannot be denied. It also facilitates in including the VI learners in mainstream education. In English language project work, the role of technologies is unique in the sense its use helps in enhancing the different skills of language, listening, speaking, reading and writing.

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