

Online English Language Learning: Opportunities, Challenges And Pedagogical Possibilities In Higher Education

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Abstract

Online English language learning has moved from being an alternative mode of instruction to becoming an important part of contemporary higher education. The rapid expansion of digital platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated both the possibilities and limitations of teaching English through virtual environments. Even after the return to face-to-face classrooms, online resources, learning-management systems, video conferencing, mobile applications, digital assessment and multimedia materials continue to influence English Language Teaching. This paper examines the opportunities and challenges associated with online English language learning in higher education, with particular attention to the Indian context. It argues that online learning can provide students with flexibility, wider access to resources, opportunities for repeated practice and greater learner autonomy. At the same time, technology by itself does not guarantee effective language learning. Unequal access to devices and reliable internet, limited interaction, learner motivation, digital fatigue, assessment difficulties and insufficient teacher preparation can weaken the effectiveness of online instruction. Drawing on recent research published between 2022 and 2025, the paper proposes a learner-centred and blended approach in which technology complements rather than replaces meaningful teacher-student interaction. The paper concludes that the future of online English language learning lies not in simply transferring traditional lessons to digital platforms but in designing interactive, multimodal and inclusive learning experiences that respond to students' actual linguistic and educational needs.

Keywords: Online English language learning, ELT, higher education, digital pedagogy, EFL, learner autonomy, technology-enhanced learning, India

Introduction

The way students learn English has changed considerably in the last few years. A language learner no longer depends entirely on a classroom, a textbook and a teacher. A student can listen to an English podcast while travelling, watch a lecture on YouTube, practise pronunciation through a mobile application, participate in an online discussion, submit an assignment through a learning-management system and communicate with speakers of English across geographical boundaries.

This change has made online English language learning an important area of contemporary English Language Teaching.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation. Universities that had depended almost entirely on face-to-face teaching were suddenly required to move lessons online. What

initially appeared to be an emergency measure gradually became part of a broader transformation in higher education. Recent research on online higher education suggests that effective digital learning depends on several interconnected factors, including course design, interaction, student self-regulation, teacher competence, digital literacy and institutional support. □

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English language learning presents particular possibilities because language itself is a skill that requires regular exposure and practice. Online environments can provide students with access to audio, video, interactive exercises, digital texts and authentic communication beyond the classroom.

However, the presence of technology does not automatically create a good language-learning environment.

A poorly designed online English class can become little more than a teacher speaking to a screen while students remain silent.

The real question, therefore, is not whether English can be taught online. It clearly can.

The more important question is:

How can online English learning be designed so that students actually use English, interact with others and develop confidence in communication?

This paper explores that question.

Online English Learning and the Changing Role of the Teacher

In a traditional classroom, the teacher is often the primary source of information. Online learning changes this relationship.

Students can access materials before, during and after class. The teacher consequently becomes less of a lecturer and more of a facilitator, guide and feedback provider.

This shift can be beneficial for language learning.

For example, instead of spending an entire class explaining vocabulary, a teacher can provide a short recorded explanation before the class. Classroom time can then be used for discussion, role play, problem-solving or speaking activities.

Similarly, students can listen to a passage several times rather than depending on a single classroom reading.

Recent research on flipped English language learning suggests that combining pre-class digital learning with interactive classroom activities can offer useful possibilities for EFL instruction, although the effectiveness of such approaches depends heavily on thoughtful implementation.

□

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The teacher therefore remains important.

Technology does not replace the teacher.

It changes what the teacher does.

Flexibility and Accessibility

One of the strongest advantages of online English learning is flexibility.

A student who misses a traditional class may lose access to the lesson. In an online environment, recorded lectures, digital notes, discussion boards and learning materials can remain available.

This is particularly valuable in higher education, where students may have different responsibilities and schedules.

Online learning can also widen access to English-language resources. Students are no longer restricted to the materials available in their college library or classroom. They can access digital newspapers, podcasts, online dictionaries, academic databases, language-learning applications and international educational resources.

Research on online undergraduate and postgraduate education in India has highlighted the growing role of digital education within the country's higher-education system. A 2025 study examining online higher education in Karnataka notes the increasing institutional emphasis on technology-supported education. □

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For English learners, this development creates an opportunity to build learning environments that extend beyond the classroom.

The Importance of Multimodal Learning

Language is not learned through written words alone.

Students hear pronunciation, observe facial expressions, interpret images, watch gestures and respond to visual contexts. Digital environments can bring these different modes together.

A student learning a new word, for instance, can read its spelling, hear its pronunciation, see it used in a video and encounter it in a sentence.

This is one of the strengths of online English learning.

A 2024 systematic review of multimodal English learning in higher education examined 34 studies and found evidence that multimodal approaches can support vocabulary, reading, speaking and writing as well as broader communicative ability. □

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The implication is important.

Online English learning should not simply reproduce the printed textbook on a screen.

The digital environment becomes meaningful when it uses what digital media can do well.

A video discussion is different from a written paragraph.

An interactive quiz is different from a worksheet.

A recorded speaking task is different from an examination answer.

The teacher needs to choose the mode according to the learning objective.

Developing Speaking Skills Online

Speaking is perhaps the most difficult skill to teach effectively through online learning.

In a crowded physical classroom, students already have limited opportunities to speak individually. The problem can become more pronounced online when students keep their cameras and microphones switched off.

Yet digital platforms can also create useful opportunities.

Students can work in small breakout groups, record short presentations, participate in online debates or submit audio responses.

A shy student who is reluctant to speak before forty classmates may feel more comfortable recording a two-minute response.

This does not mean that recorded speech should replace live communication.

Both forms are valuable.

Recorded activities allow students to prepare and reflect.

Live activities encourage spontaneity.

A well-designed online course can combine both.

Recent research on collaborative online EFL learning reviewed 37 peer-reviewed studies and found positive effects associated with interaction, feedback and personalised learning, with writing receiving particularly strong attention and speaking also benefiting. □

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The lesson is simple: online English learning becomes more effective when students are active participants rather than passive viewers.

Online Learning and Learner Autonomy

Online English learning can encourage students to take greater responsibility for their learning.

A learner can decide when to revise vocabulary, repeat a listening activity or practise pronunciation. Digital platforms can provide immediate feedback and allow learners to monitor their own progress.

However, autonomy should not be confused with leaving students alone.

Many students need structure.

They need clear deadlines, achievable tasks and regular feedback.

A student may have access to hundreds of English-learning videos but still make very little progress without knowing what to watch, why to watch it and how to practise what has been learned.

This is why the teacher's role remains essential.

Effective online learning combines freedom with structure.

Challenges of Online English Language Learning

Despite its possibilities, online English learning has serious limitations.

Digital inequality

Not every student has access to a reliable device, high-speed internet or a quiet place to study.

In India, this issue is particularly important because students come from different socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds.

A learning strategy that assumes every student owns a laptop and has uninterrupted broadband can unintentionally exclude the very learners who need educational support most.

Therefore, online English courses should be designed to work reasonably well on mobile phones and with limited bandwidth whenever possible.

Reduced human interaction

Language is fundamentally social.

Students learn not only from exercises but also from conversation, misunderstanding, clarification, humour and spontaneous interaction.

An online course consisting mainly of recorded lectures can therefore become isolating.

Digital fatigue

Long periods of screen-based learning can reduce attention.

Students may attend an online class physically but not mentally.

This makes lesson length and activity design important.

Shorter explanations followed by interaction are often more useful than long lectures.

Assessment

Assessing language skills online also presents difficulties.

A written examination may test knowledge, but language proficiency involves more than grammar and vocabulary. Speaking, listening, interaction and spontaneous communication also need assessment.

Online assessment should therefore include multiple forms: quizzes, written tasks, recorded speaking, presentations, discussions and project work.

The Indian Higher-Education Context

The Indian context deserves particular attention because English has a distinctive social and educational position.

For many undergraduate students, English is simultaneously an academic subject, a professional skill and a language associated with employment opportunities.

This can create considerable pressure.

Students may understand English but hesitate to speak because they fear making mistakes.

Online learning can either reduce or increase this anxiety.

A supportive online environment can give students opportunities to practise privately before participating publicly. At the same time, a poorly designed environment can make students feel even more disconnected.

Research conducted on online teaching in Indian universities during the pandemic found that students' experiences were influenced by factors such as access to platforms, affordability, interaction and their ability to understand and apply what they were taught. □

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This suggests that technological access alone cannot be treated as evidence of successful learning.

The quality of the learning experience matters.

Towards a Blended Model

The most practical future for online English learning may not be completely online education.

It may be blended learning.

A blended approach combines the strengths of face-to-face and online instruction.

For example:

Before class: Students watch a short video or complete a vocabulary activity.

During class: They discuss, debate, role-play and receive teacher guidance.

After class: They complete an online writing or speaking activity.

This structure allows technology to handle activities that can be completed independently while classroom time is reserved for interaction.

Such an approach is particularly appropriate for language learning because students need both individual practice and human communication.

A Human-Centred Approach to Online English Learning

The success of online English learning ultimately depends less on the platform and more on the people using it.

Teachers need to ask simple questions:

Is the activity meaningful?

Will students actually use English?

Can all students access it?

Does it provide feedback?

Does it encourage communication?

Does it respect students' different levels of proficiency?

These questions are more important than whether the lesson uses the newest application.

A technologically sophisticated lesson can still be pedagogically weak.

Conversely, a simple online discussion can produce valuable language learning if students have a genuine reason to communicate.

The focus should therefore remain on learning rather than technology.

Conclusion

Online English language learning has become an important part of contemporary higher education. Its value lies in its ability to extend learning beyond the physical classroom, provide access to multimodal resources, support flexible learning and create additional opportunities for language practice.

At the same time, online learning should not be romanticised.

Technology cannot solve problems of motivation, inequality or ineffective teaching by itself. Students need interaction, feedback, encouragement and meaningful opportunities to use English.

Recent research suggests that online and multimodal approaches can support English proficiency, particularly when they incorporate interaction, purposeful activities and appropriate feedback. □

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For Indian higher education, the most promising direction is therefore not an absolute shift from classroom teaching to online teaching. It is the development of flexible and inclusive learning environments in which digital tools complement human interaction.

The central principle should be simple:

Technology should make language learning more accessible, active and meaningful—not merely more digital.

When online English learning is designed around the learner rather than the technology, the digital classroom can become more than a substitute for the physical classroom. It can become a space in which students practise at their own pace, communicate with others, receive timely feedback and gradually develop the confidence to use English beyond the classroom.

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