E-LEARNING FOR ENHANCING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

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E-learning has been in vogue for more than a decade and includes all technology enhanced learning. It is akin to distance learning with few more advantages for the learner. Today, particularly in the third world countries, where it is difficult to provide on-campus learning for all the learners, it is imperative that e-learning is taken up and encouraged in a big way to make it accessible and affordable for all learners. Students of e-learning rarely or never meet face-to-face, nor access on campus educational facilities. E-learning guides the students through information or helps them perform in specific tasks.

E-learning is capturing a large portion of learning activities both in academics and industry. The use of self-placed e-learning is gaining currency all over the world. Many higher educational institutions are offering on-line classes.

While creating content for e-learning one has to be flexible in one's approach. An educator has to effectively create educational materials while providing the most engaging educational experiences for the student at the same time.

E-learning system not only provides learning objectives, but also evaluates the progress of the student and credit can be earned toward higher learning institutions. This reuse is an excellent example of knowledge retention and the cyclical process of knowledge transfer and use of data and records.

Today many technologies are used in e-learning, from blogs to collaborative software, e-portfolios and virtual classrooms. Most e-learning situations use combinations of these techniques. E-learning, however, also has implications beyond just the technology and refers to the actual learning that takes place using these systems.

E-learning is naturally suited to distance learning and flexible learning, but can also be used in conjunction with face-to-face teaching, in which case the term Blended learning is commonly used. E-learning pioneer Bernand Luskin says that the 'e' should be interpreted to

mean exciting, energetic, enthusiastic, emotional, extended, excellent and educational in addition to electronic.

Information based e-learning content communicates information to the student. In information based content, there is no specific skill to be learned. In the performance based content, the lessons build of a procedural skill in which the student is expected to increase proficiency.

The major benefits of e-learning are that it is eco-friendly because it takes place in a virtual environment and thus avoids travel and reduces the usage of paper. An internet connection, a computer and a projector would allow an entire classroom in a third world university to benefit from knowledge sharing by experts.

E-learning is self-paced and can be done at anytime of the day. Students generally appear to be at least as satisfied with their online classes as they are with traditional ones. Properly trained staff must also be hired to work with students online. These staff members need to understand the content area, and also be highly trained in the use of computer and internet.

The recent trend in the e-learning sector is screen casting. The web based screen casting tools allow the users to create screen casts directly from their browser and make the video available online so that the users can stream the video directly. From the learners point of view this provides the ability to pause and rewind and gives the learner the advantage to move at their own pace, something a classroom cannot always offer.
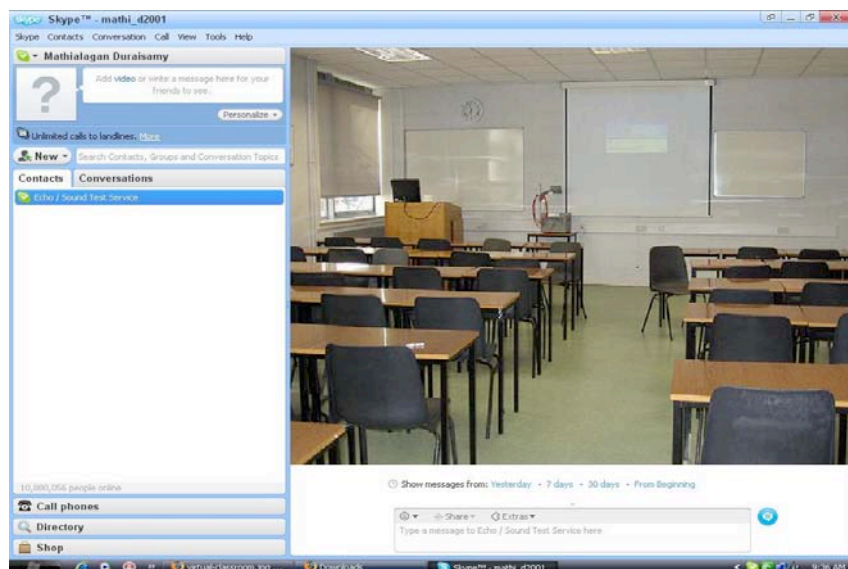
The challenge before the Tamil Diaspora is to make use of technologies such as blogs, wikis and discussion boards to promote the teaching of Tamil language skills. The presenter has experience in creating online content for e-learning course modules of the Tamil Nadu Virtual University. The teaching of Tamil to native and non-native speakers using technology through the internet has a bright future and the potential has to be tapped. The available technologies have to be put to right use.

A catch-all phrase that included any form of technology assisted learning, e-learning is poised to revolutionize the process of education. The sectors which are entering the field of e-learning serve as a testimony to the growth of e-learning. Telecom, banking, finance and government are rapidly moving towards e-learning. The primary driver is not just to decrease cost but also to increase reach. Universities are also looking at e-learning modules to supplement their regular curriculum courses.
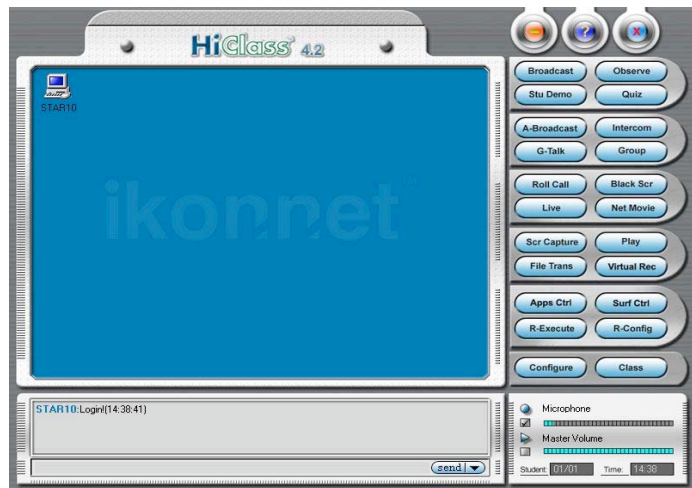
In this context, it becomes necessary to understand how effective e-learning courses are. More simulation-based training based on games are being incorporated in e-learning. And a high level of acumen is required to develop such e-learning modules. And for an e-learning programme to work, it is important to first understand whether something is suitable for e-learning or not. There are two layers to a successful e-learning programme-the technology component and the learning component.

In India, e-learning courses could be made more popular through availability of broad-band connections at competitive rates, regional language-based content for technical subjects, two-way interaction for doubts and performance feedback with students. A shift in mindset is required to adopt e-learning. It is the same barrier that exists with any adoption to technology. But once that is overcome, e-learning would prove beneficial.

As knowledge is socially constructed, learning has to take place through conversations. One of the best ways to learn something is to teach it to others. Teachers of Tamil will have to venture out of the classrooms and move beyond the textbooks to create a conducive environment for the language learners using technology. Students can be encouraged to use Skype, Facebook and Second life, which have become providers of Virtual Classroom environments.

Virtual Classroom environment in Skype

Screen shot of Hi Class Software used for testing Language Proficiency

The paper is an attempt to project teaching of Tamil using technology and keep pace with the changing times.

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