
A STUDY ON ONLINE ENGLISH LEARNING AMONG RURAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The rapid shift to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic transformed the traditional teaching-learning process across the globe. This study examines the impact of online classes on rural English learners, focusing on accessibility, learning outcomes, challenges, and opportunities. Using a qualitative and survey-based approach, the research highlights that while online learning provides flexibility and access to diverse resources, rural students face significant barriers such as poor internet connectivity, lack of devices, and limited interaction. The study concludes that although online classes have potential benefits, infrastructural and socio-economic challenges reduce their effectiveness in rural English language learning.

INTRODUCTION

The integration of technology into education has given rise to online learning, which became essential during the COVID-19 pandemic. English language learning, which requires interaction, practice, and exposure, was significantly affected in rural areas. Rural learners often lack access to digital infrastructure, making it difficult to benefit fully from online education. This paper aims to analyse how online classes influence English language learning among rural students.

Objectives of the Study-

- To examine the effectiveness of online classes in rural English learning
- To identify challenges faced by rural students
- To analyse the impact on language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening)

- To suggest strategies for improving online English education in rural areas

Research Methodology

- **Research Design:** Descriptive and analytical
- **Sample:** 50–100 rural students (secondary/higher secondary level)
- **Data Collection Tools:** Questionnaire, interviews, observation
- **Data Analysis:** Percentage method and qualitative interpretation

Review of Literature

Several studies highlight the unequal impact of online education on rural learners:

- A study on rural students found that lack of internet connectivity and devices significantly affected participation in online classes
- Research comparing rural and urban students shows major academic gaps due to digital inequality
- Another study revealed that rural learners were less satisfied with online English learning due to poor interaction and limited understanding
- Experimental research indicates that digital tools like mobile apps can improve listening skills and engagement if resources are available

Impact of Online Classes on Rural English Learners

Positive Impacts

1. Flexibility in Learning

Students can learn from home at their own pace.

2. Access to Digital Resources

Online platforms provide videos, audio materials, and interactive tools.

3. Improvement in Listening Skills

Use of multimedia helps students improve pronunciation and listening abilities

4. Exposure to Global Content

Students gain access to authentic English content beyond textbooks

Impact of Online Learning on Language Skills-

1. Listening Skills – Improved through Audio/Video Tools

Online learning has shown a relatively positive impact on the development of listening skills among rural English learners. Through the use of audio-visual materials such as recorded lectures, videos, podcasts, and pronunciation apps, students are exposed to a variety of

English accents and speech patterns. This repeated exposure helps them improve their listening comprehension and pronunciation. Unlike traditional classrooms, students can replay audio or video content multiple times, which enhances understanding. However, poor internet connectivity and unclear audio quality sometimes reduce the effectiveness of these tools in rural settings.

2. Speaking Skills – Poor Due to Lack of Interaction

Speaking skills are the most negatively affected in online learning environments. English language learning requires active communication, practice, and immediate feedback, which are limited in virtual classrooms. Rural students often hesitate to speak during online sessions due to lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, or technical issues such as microphone problems. Additionally, teachers find it difficult to engage all students in speaking activities or monitor their pronunciation effectively. The absence of face-to-face interaction reduces opportunities for group discussions, role-plays, and spontaneous conversations, resulting in poor development of speaking skills.

3. Reading Skills – Moderate Improvement

Online learning provides moderate improvement in reading skills. Students have access to a wide range of digital reading materials such as e-books, PDFs, online articles, and educational websites. This increases their exposure to written English and helps in vocabulary development. However, the improvement is not uniform among all students. Those with better access to devices and internet tend to benefit more, while others face difficulties in reading lengthy texts on small screens or due to limited digital access. Furthermore, lack of proper guidance and supervision may affect comprehension levels.

4. Writing Skills – Limited Feedback Affects Development

Writing skills show limited improvement in online learning due to insufficient feedback and guidance. In traditional classrooms, teachers can provide immediate corrections and suggestions, which is essential for developing writing proficiency. In contrast, online classes often lack personalized attention, and students may not receive timely or detailed feedback on their written work. As a result, errors in grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary usage remain uncorrected. Moreover, some students tend to rely on copying or using translation tools, which hinders their actual learning and creativity in writing.

Major Challenges Faced by Rural English Learners-

1. Lack of Digital Infrastructure-

One of the most significant challenges in rural areas is the lack of proper digital infrastructure. Many villages still face poor or unstable internet connectivity, making it difficult for students to attend online classes regularly. In several cases, students have to rely on weak mobile networks, which results in frequent disconnections, poor audio quality, and interrupted lessons. Additionally, the absence of reliable electricity supply further complicates the situation. Without proper technological facilities such as computers, tablets, or even smartphones, rural learners are unable to access online learning platforms effectively, leading to gaps in their education.

2. Economic Constraints-

Economic conditions play a crucial role in determining access to online education. Many families in rural areas belong to economically weaker sections and cannot afford digital devices like smartphones, laptops, or tablets. Even if a family owns a single device, it is often shared among multiple children, limiting individual learning time. The cost of internet data packs also becomes a burden for low-income households. As a result, students either miss classes or attend them irregularly, which negatively impacts their English language learning and overall academic progress.

3. Low Digital Literacy among Students and Teachers-

Digital literacy is another major barrier in rural online education. Many students are not familiar with using online platforms, applications, or basic digital tools required for attending virtual classes. Similarly, teachers in rural areas may lack adequate training in digital teaching methods. This results in ineffective delivery of lessons, limited use of interactive tools, and reduced student engagement. Without proper knowledge of technology, both teachers and learners struggle to adapt to the online mode of education, making the learning process less effective.

4. Distractions in the Home Environment-

Unlike structured classroom settings, the home environment in rural areas is often not conducive to learning. Students may face constant distractions due to household responsibilities, family activities, or lack of a quiet study space. In many rural homes, students are expected to assist in agricultural work or domestic chores, which interferes with their study time. Additionally, the absence of supervision and discipline during online classes reduces concentration and motivation, leading to poor learning outcomes.

5. Language Barrier (Mother Tongue Interference)-

Language barrier is a significant issue in rural English learning, especially in online classes. Most rural students are more comfortable communicating in their mother tongue (such as Marathi or Hindi), and they have limited exposure to English in daily life. During online classes, the lack of direct interaction with teachers makes it difficult for students to clarify doubts or practice speaking skills. This leads to strong mother tongue interference, where students struggle with pronunciation, grammar, and sentence formation in English. Without proper guidance and practice, their confidence in using English remains low.

Findings of the Study-

1. Rural Students Face More Difficulties than Urban Students in Online Education-

The study clearly indicates that rural students encounter significantly more challenges in online education compared to their urban counterparts. This disparity is mainly due to limited access to digital infrastructure, unstable internet connectivity, and lack of personal devices. Urban students generally benefit from better technological facilities, uninterrupted internet services, and a supportive learning environment. In contrast, rural learners often struggle to attend classes regularly, leading to gaps in understanding and reduced academic performance. This unequal access creates a disadvantage for rural students, widening the educational divide between rural and urban areas.

2. Online Classes are Less Effective for Developing Speaking Skills-

English language learning requires active communication and interaction, particularly for developing speaking skills. The findings reveal that online classes provide limited opportunities for students to engage in real-time conversations. Many students hesitate to speak during virtual sessions due to lack of confidence, technical issues, or fear of making mistakes. Moreover, teachers find it difficult to monitor and correct pronunciation and fluency in an online setting. As a result, students' speaking abilities remain underdeveloped, highlighting the limitations of online platforms in fostering oral communication skills.

3. Digital Inequality Creates a Learning Gap-

Digital inequality emerges as one of the most critical findings of the study. Students who have access to smartphones, laptops, and stable internet connections are able to participate actively in online classes, while those without such resources are left behind. This creates a significant learning gap among students within the same class. Over time, this gap widens, affecting overall academic achievement and confidence levels. The study emphasizes that

without addressing digital inequality, online education cannot be inclusive or equitable for rural learners.

4. Students Show Higher Satisfaction with Offline Classes-

The research findings suggest that a majority of rural students prefer traditional classroom learning over online education. Offline classes offer direct interaction with teachers, immediate doubt clarification, and a structured learning environment, which are essential for effective language acquisition. Students feel more engaged and motivated in face-to-face settings, where they can actively participate in discussions and activities. In contrast, online classes often lead to passive learning, reduced concentration, and lower satisfaction levels among rural students.

5. Online Learning is Beneficial Only When Proper Resources are Available-

The study concludes that online learning can be effective for rural English learners only when adequate resources are available. Students who have access to digital devices, reliable internet, and proper guidance from teachers tend to benefit from online education. They can utilize multimedia tools, educational videos, and interactive platforms to enhance their learning experience. However, in the absence of these resources, online education becomes ineffective and sometimes even discouraging. Therefore, the success of online learning in rural areas largely depends on the availability of technological and infrastructural support.

Suggestions

1. Improve Internet Connectivity in Rural Areas-

To ensure effective online learning, it is essential to strengthen internet infrastructure in rural regions. Government and private telecom providers should collaborate to expand high-speed broadband and mobile network coverage in villages. Reliable internet connectivity will enable students to attend classes without interruptions, access digital learning materials, and participate actively in online discussions. Special initiatives such as free Wi-Fi zones in schools and community centers can further support students who lack internet access at home.

2. Provide Free or Subsidized Digital Devices-

Economic barriers can be reduced by providing affordable or free digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, or laptops to rural students. Government schemes and educational institutions should introduce subsidy programs to ensure that every student has access to at least one personal learning device. Partnerships with NGOs and corporate organizations can

also help in distributing refurbished devices. This step will significantly improve students' participation and continuity in online education.

3. Train Teachers in Digital Pedagogy-

Teachers play a crucial role in the success of online education. Therefore, it is necessary to provide proper training in digital teaching methods. Workshops, webinars, and training programs should be organized to enhance teachers' skills in using online platforms, creating digital content, and managing virtual classrooms. Trained teachers can adopt innovative teaching strategies, use multimedia tools effectively, and engage students more actively, thereby improving the quality of English language instruction.

4. Use Blended Learning (Online + Offline)-

A blended learning approach, which combines online and traditional classroom methods, is highly recommended for rural areas. While online classes can provide access to digital resources, offline classes ensure better interaction, practice, and understanding. This combination allows students to benefit from both modes of learning. For example, theoretical content can be delivered online, while speaking activities and doubt-clearing sessions can be conducted offline, leading to more effective language learning.

5. Encourage Interactive Tools like Video Discussions-

To improve student engagement and communication skills, teachers should incorporate interactive tools such as video conferencing, group discussions, quizzes, and live chat sessions. Platforms that allow real-time interaction can help students participate actively and practice speaking English. Activities like role-plays, presentations, and peer discussions should be encouraged to make online classes more dynamic and learner-centered.

6. Develop Local Language Support for Better Understanding-

Since rural students are more comfortable with their mother tongue, integrating local language support can enhance comprehension. Teachers can use a bilingual approach, explaining complex concepts in the local language (such as Marathi or Hindi) alongside English. Additionally, educational content should be designed in a way that bridges the gap between the mother tongue and English. This strategy will reduce language barriers, increase confidence, and promote better learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Online education has brought significant changes to English language learning. However, in rural areas, its effectiveness is limited due to infrastructural and socio-economic challenges. While it offers flexibility and access to resources, it cannot fully replace traditional classroom

learning, especially for language acquisition. A blended approach with improved digital support is necessary to enhance English learning outcomes in rural settings.

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