

E-Learning and Social Media for ELT — Teachers' Perspective

Gayathri Paliath

Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Tamil Nadu, Chennai, India

Marie Evangeline

Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Tamil Nadu, Chennai, India

Abstract—English as a foreign language poses many difficulties to teach and to learn; the problem gets further intense when English has to be used as a medium of instruction to teach other subjects. There is a definite need to support foreign language learners by extending the learning and instruction outside the classroom. There is a growing realization of the role of social media in learning / teaching, especially of English language. Handheld devices like mobiles and tablets, laptops and desktops are all possible means to access social media apps. Such social media apps, along with search engines and conferencing apps form an essential toolkit for learning and instruction outside the physical classrooms. Mobiles and internet have become popular for e-learning due to their features such as ubiquity, interactivity and portability. A lot of research has been done globally on the students' perspective for the use of extended English language learning outside the classroom through social media apps and audio/video conferencing. A study on the experiences and observations of the teachers on teaching through such means revealed that teachers perceive social media and e-learning very useful and effective for English learning and instruction. Teachers find such means definitely useful for the preparation and conduct of the classes. While social media and e-learning for teaching English is not without some drawbacks, the positives of such means for ELT far outweigh the negatives. This paper describes the use of social media in English classroom and proposes a practical way to make the best use of it.

Index Terms—E-learning, ELT, social media for language learning, mobile assisted language learning

I. INTRODUCTION

It is universally accepted that English as a foreign language has many advantages as well as disadvantages. Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is difficult for any student and there have been a number of studies from around the world. Sidhu et al. (2016) observed this in the Malaysian context, Hashemi (2011) explained the problems among the English language learners in Iran, Aldarasi (2020) described a similar situation among Libyan students, Luo (2013) portrayed concerns in the Chinese context and Songbatumis (2017) elaborated the challenges faced by students and teachers in Indonesia. There has been a detailed study in Vietnam (Tran & Moni, 2015) – which involved investigation of EFL students' and teachers' perspectives and experiences of managing foreign language anxiety (FLA); Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004) described the difficulties for students in Japan to study English as a foreign language and categorised different strategies that such students use to cope with the anxiety in the learning of English.

While foreign language anxiety is a globally accepted problem for learners, the anxiety is especially more for English as a foreign language, as learning English is considered very important in most parts of the world from their career as well as social status points of view. Difficulties in learning English as a foreign language and the associated anxiety of the students having to study the same are universal in nature and any technique to make such learning / teaching easier and less stressful is indeed a welcome development for the students as well as for the teachers of English.

While learning English itself is an unnerving task for many, the challenge of moving to an English medium classroom and learning new subjects in an unfamiliar language is even more daunting. Learning new subjects in a foreign language, and not being able to raise any queries for fear of making mistakes in English, make the students withdraw into themselves and perform poorly in their academics. Students fear the rebukes and reprimands from their teachers and the possible shaming by the classmates. As Huang (2012) observed, the reduction of FLA necessitates the involvement of both the student and the teacher. Students play an active role by acknowledging their anxiety and the teacher has to be supportive, focusing on positive reinforcement and normalizing mistakes rather than focusing on the negative errors.

Classroom teaching may not be the only solution for effective teaching of English as a foreign language. It is important to find innovative ways to support foreign language learners by extending language learning and instruction outside the classroom and providing opportunities for more exposure to the foreign language. E-learning and social media can definitely help in this regard.

A. Social Media, Conferencing Apps and Mobile Usage for English Learning

Internet revolution has virtually changed communication styles across the world. The boom in mobile usage (especially smart phones) and social media users have been a concomitant phenomenon. India is among the top countries in terms of internet penetration. The penetration in India has been unprecedented (Statista, Feb 2019). Bulk of the internet users have become social network users, whose numbers are estimated to reach nearly 450 million by 2023 from a level of 351 million in 2019; it was only 142 million in 2015. Thus, in just 8 years, the growth in the number of social network users is more than three-fold, or a cumulative average growth rate (CAGR) of 15.4 per cent. As such, the scope for mobile apps and social media for English language learning in India is huge and still growing.

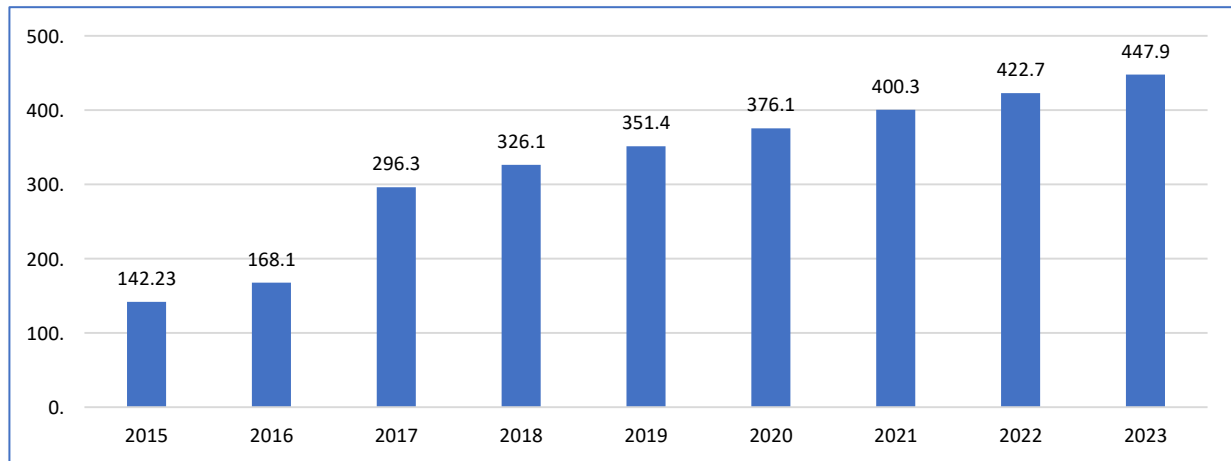


Figure 1: Number of Social Network Users India 2015-2023 (in Mn)
Statista Digital Market Outlook February 2019.

The goal of language teaching today is to teach communicative competence, which is a learners' ability to be able to produce the language for different settings, for maintaining the communication (Pratiwi, 2020). Unlike the past, the aim is not so much on mastery of classic literature, grammatical perfection or use of bombastic vocabulary. Now the focus is on the practical communication skills for different kinds of situations.

There is immense potential to use technology to make English teaching more effective. Yadav (2012) describes the vital role that social media plays in getting English Language skills because of the immense opportunities that it provides to adult learners to improve their listening, speaking, reading, writing skills. She explains that the ease and affordability of smart phones and other electronic smart-gadgets installed with the latest Apps have enabled social media to reach almost every nook and corner of the world. It provides a wide range of authentic materials for teaching, helps in getting clarifications from a wide range of global resources at the tip of one's fingers, at any time, and from any location. Teaching can be made exciting through the use of audio, video and documentary materials, presented in innovative and exciting ways. Teachers need to be willing to learn the developments in technology sufficiently and to adapt their teaching style to be effective. Effective use of technology for teaching requires a mindset to constantly update teaching methodologies and social media developments.

There is a growing realization of the role of social media in learning / teaching, especially of English language. The concept of social media has been attracting the attention of academicians, politicians, business executives and consultants for decades. In the business context, social media is seen as a powerful means for advertisement, marketing and sales promotion; LinkedIn is found to be a useful tool for attracting human resources and for building an image of an organisation. In politics, it is widely used for building opinions. However, the focus of this research is in the academic context, where social media as a tool for English language teaching.

However, despite the high interest, the term social media has not been fully understood by many. Social media allows "creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2015. p.197). Tools of social media such as websites, web links, and networking applications (Apps) for social networking and microblogging are all forms of electronic communications "that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Heinlein, 2010. p.61).

Handheld devices like mobiles and tablets, laptops and desktops are all possible means to access social media apps. Globally the top 5 apps in 2020 were Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Instagram as shown in the next page (Table 1). Other popular social media apps including TikTok, Snapchat, Reddit, Pinterest and Twitter also have global revenues in excess of USD 200 million.

Such social media apps, along with search engines like Google and Bing, and conferencing apps like Zoom, Google Meet and Microsoft Teams form an essential toolkit for the modern generation to learn outside the physical classrooms. There are also specific apps for English language focusing on dictionary, thesaurus, quotations, word games, and so on. Let us look at a few examples: English as a Foreign Language University (EFLU) in India launched in 2020 an exclusive app "EnglishPro" for English language learners in India. This is a free Mobile App for learning English pronunciation. Grammarly is a freeware app to help users write grammatically correct sentences with proper

punctuation. The app teaches English pronunciation and “helps the organic transitioning of beginner level English users from their mother tongue to English”.

TABLE 1
TOP GLOBAL SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES, JANUARY 2021

Rank	Network Name	No. of Users (in Mn.)
I.	Facebook	2,740
II.	YouTube	2,291
III.	WhatsApp	2,000
IV.	Facebook Messenger	1,300
V.	Instagram	1,221

Source: Statista.com/statistics

The British Council has been in the field of promoting English language learning for almost 80 years. BBC Learning English app is very useful to study grammar, improve pronunciation, or learn the latest phrases to use. HelloTalk is a free app which is useful to practice English language speaking; it also has the option for text and voice recording, alongside tools for translation and pronunciation.

The above is only a sample of useful apps in this field and is by no means exhaustive. Many such apps are available from around the world for a teacher who is interested in self-learning and innovative teaching, as well as for a student of English as a foreign language.

B. Mobile Assisted Language Learning

One of the ways to extend English language learning and instruction outside the classroom is via mobile-assisted language learning (Mindog, 2016). Mobile technologies and mobile apps are becoming an indispensable part of learning, including foreign language learning (Gangaiamaran, 2017). Learning languages with the assistance of mobiles is referred to as m-learning or Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL). MALL can be considered as a part of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Mobiles and internet have become highly popular and the key features such as extensive availability, interactivity and portability make such learning highly popular and effective. Teaching vocabulary through MALL breaks the traditional model of teaching and does not limit teaching to the classroom alone (Sherine, 2020). The features such as personalized learning, independent of time and place, and collaboration with peers and teachers in both formal and informal settings, make m-learning efficient (Klimova, 2019). M-learning helps to enlarge the scope of e-learning “by promoting independent and active learning” (p.837) by the students and by making schools and colleges into any-time, no-barrier educational centres (Kuimova et al., 2018).

Sharples (2010) described mobile learning as the next generation of e-learning. According to Miangah and Nezarat (2012), “mobile learning is characterized by its potential for learning to be spontaneous, informal, personalized and ubiquitous” (p.309). The learner is in charge of his or her learning process and the development is based on his or her cognitive state.

The two main characteristics of mobile devices, according to Huang and Sun (2010), are portability and connectivity. The characteristic which enables learners and teachers to move their mobile devices and get their learning materials anywhere is referred to as portability. Klopfer et al. (2012) describe the properties of mobile devices such as portability, social interactivity - exchanging data and collaboration with other learners, context sensitivity, connectivity, and individuality - activities platform can be customized for an individual learner.

M-Learning has some definite advantages; however, it also has its own set of constraints: for example, reading is difficult on such a small screen, data storage is limited and so on. Kukulska-Hulme and Traxler (2005) advise that teachers should choose or adapt resources compatible to such tools that the learners have.

The classroom need not set a boundary for the students to study a second language. Technology enables teaching or learning English from any location, at any convenient time. MALL refers to the use of mobile tools and technology in language learning. Application of mobile-based language learning includes vocabulary, listening, grammar, phonetics, reading comprehension, writing, etc.

As per Yannick (2007), mobile learning for speaking is “as significant as textual aspect, as it enables learners to comfortably speak with a system recording and replay their voice. Then, they can compare their voice with an ideal pronunciation and make an improvement in this skill” (p.314). Yamaguchi (2005) compares a computer with a mobile phone for educational purposes; while the former is better for use of different types of data such as video, audio, and documentary information, the latter is portable and hence more convenient.

A lot of research has been done on the students’ perspective for the use of extended English language learning outside the classroom through social media apps and audio/video conferencing. The recent Covid 19 pandemic made classroom teaching impossible and forced many schools and colleges to resort to e-learning in a major way. Despite initial reservations, both teachers and students started using this technique, slowly gaining comfort and reasonable mastery for meaningful education. The experiences and observations of a sample of teachers studied by the authors on teaching through such means are described in brief below.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The research was conducted with three key research questions. These were as follows:

Q1: Whether teachers perceive social media and M-learning as useful and effective tools for English language learning?

Q2: What are the specific areas of English Language Teaching where teachers find social media and M-learning useful?

Q3: What are the positive impacts of social media and M-learning as perceived by the English language teachers? What are the negative impacts?

III. METHODOLOGY

Primary data research involved collection of specific feedback from a number of English language teachers. A total of 108 responses were collected from various teachers of English. Structured questionnaire was chosen as the main tool for primary data collection. Some of the questions were deliberately kept open-ended rather than multiple-choice to get individual insights, which could be grouped together later for analysis. Questionnaires were administered, mostly through the use of social media and Google forms. The respondents' preferences and usage of different types of social media and their feedback on the influence of social media on English language teaching were collected. The specific areas where a teacher finds use for social media in teaching, and the effective ways to use different social media were collected. In addition, the advantages as well as disadvantages from their perspective were also collected.

In addition, focused discussions were held with a couple of English teachers to validate the findings and also get insights not possible to collect effectively from a structured questionnaire. Given the restrictions during the Covid pandemic, physical meeting with the teachers for administration of the questionnaires was virtually impossible. However, telephonic contact was resorted to in addition to mails and Whatsapp. The perceptions of the respondents and the impact of the various factors were analysed in detail to arrive at meaningful conclusions.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The feedback of the teachers selected for this sample study on the effectiveness for learning by the students, and the usefulness to the teachers for teaching English was analysed. At the time of this research and writing of this article, the Covid 19 curfew had necessitated the use of social media and conferencing apps by the students and the teachers for a significant length of time. Given this background, the feedback of the teachers carries more credence.

Research Q1: Whether teachers perceive social media and m-learning to be sufficiently useful and effective for English learning?

Result 1: Teachers were obviously of the opinion that social media is useful for the students for English comprehension as well as communication skills in the students.

The teachers were clearly of the opinion that the communication skills of the students improved with the use of social media for learning. Only 5 per cent perceived a worsening of such skills (Figure 2)

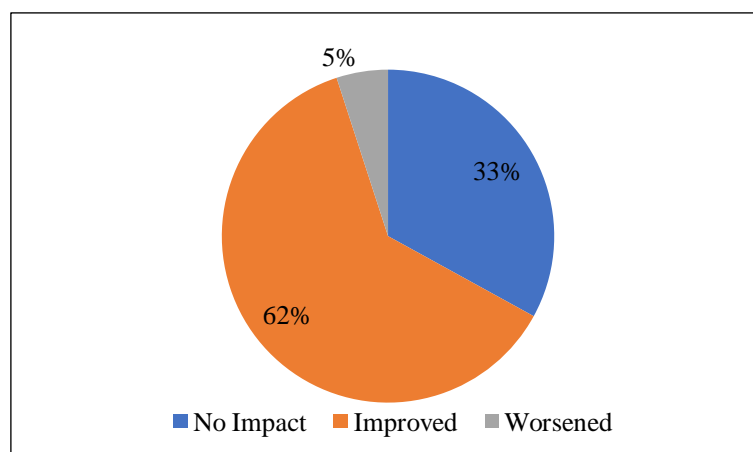


Figure 2 Effect of Social Media on Communication Skills of Students

A similar response was received regarding the effect of social media on the improvement in the comprehension skills of the students (Figure 3). Hardly 2 per cent felt that the use of SM has worsened the comprehension skills of the students, whereas 66 per cent felt a definite improvement; roughly 32 per cent did not notice any distinctive improvement. In other words, the use of social media was perceived to be definitely useful for improvement of English language comprehension skills.

Research Q2: What are the specific areas of English Language Teaching where teachers find social media and M-learning useful?

Result 2: Teachers found social media quite easy to use for ELT, especially for preparation as well of conduct of the classes.

The second part of the responses collected was with regard to the usefulness of social media for the teaching of English, as well as the ease of usage for preparation or teaching of English (Figure 3).

An overwhelming majority (85 per cent) of the teachers found social media useful for English language teaching. Almost half the respondents (46 per cent) found it very useful.

To remove any possible biases, it was decided to study the profile mix of the faculty sample and analyse whether any of their profile classifications had any correlation to the findings in terms of their views on social media and English language teaching. In terms of age profile, 37 per cent were in the age group of 30-40, 42 per cent were in the age group of 40-50, and the rest were above 50. This is quite understandable as they were all post graduates or doctorates to qualify for their occupation.

In terms of their basic schooling, 55 per cent of the faculty sample had a village background, 31 per cent were from towns and only 14 per cent from city schools. Only 21 per cent were not from English medium schools.

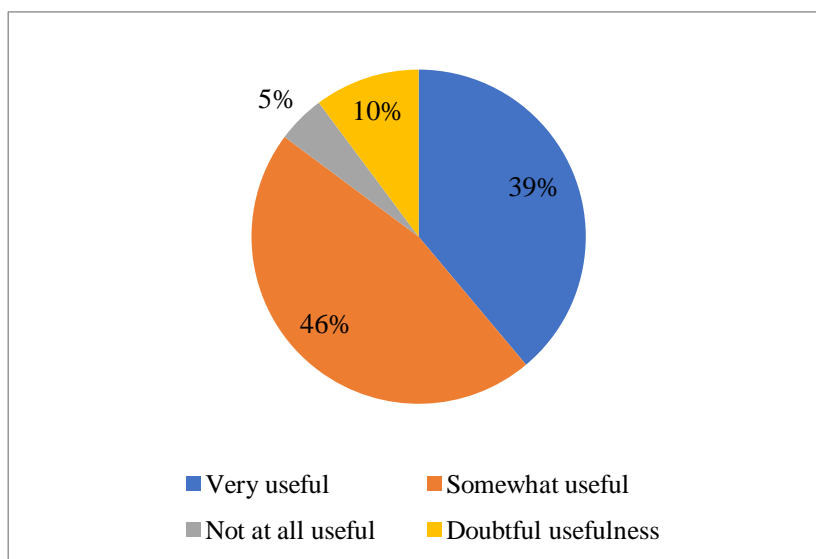


Figure 3 Usefulness of Social Media for English Language Teaching

A correlation analysis of the teachers’ personal background (gender, whether studied in regional language or English medium at school level, and whether from urban or rural background) revealed negligible correlation of these factors with their observations on social media and English language teaching (Table 2).

TABLE 2
CORRELATION COEFFICIENT BETWEEN TEACHERS’ BACKGROUND AND VIEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Factor	Impact of Social Media on English Language on		Use of SM for ELT
	Comprehension Skills	Communication Skills	
Age	-0.08	0.03	0.12
Schooling Location	0.15	0.11	-0.20
Medium of schooling	0.05	0.06	-0.09

Not only did they find it extremely valuable, they found it useful for the preparation as well as teaching of English (Figure 4). Three-fourth (75 per cent) of the respondents found it easy to use, of which 43 per cent found it very easy to use. Only 12 per cent found it very difficult to use.

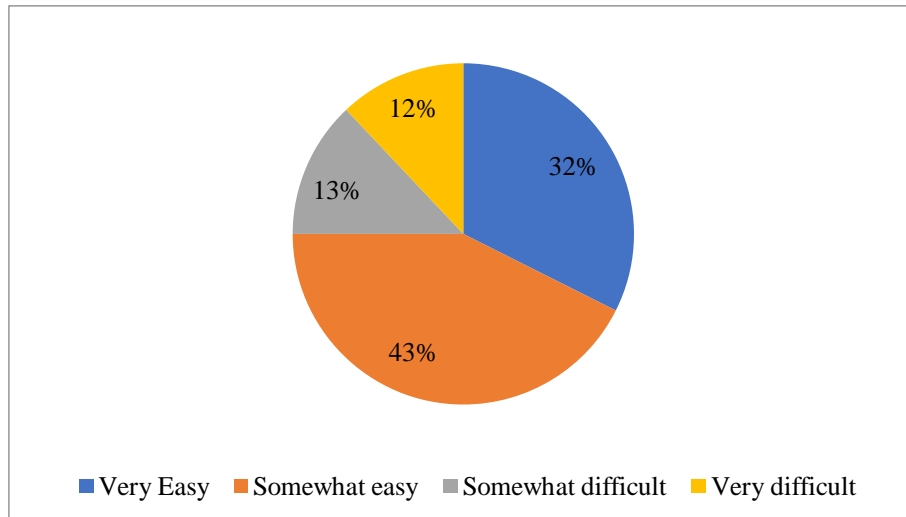


Figure 4 Ease of Usage of SM for Preparation and Teaching of English Language

Research Q3: What are the positive and negative impacts of Social media and M-learning as perceived by the English language teachers?

Result 3: The major positive impacts of social media for English language teaching as perceived by the teachers were as listed below:

- It helps to keep the teacher stay updated on various aspects of the English language, as well as on new methodologies of teaching. The easy availability of relevant topics and presentations from different parts of the world from experienced teachers and convenience for learning anytime, anywhere are perceived as welcome features.
- Learning can be made lively and interesting with audio, video, graphical and pictorial inputs as such inputs help the students in grasping the language lessons better. Many teachers who know their subject very well also fail to attract the attention of their students in the conventional chalk-and-talk method. The attractive audio-visual tools easily available help to keep the classes vibrant.
- Social media provides excellent exposure to a variety of methodologies and content to make the teaching impactful. Virtually, a vast library is available from experienced teachers across the world for a teacher willing to take the effort to search and learn.
- It provides easy access to support materials for teaching. This is especially useful for teachers who are beginning their careers, or even the seasoned teachers who are teaching a new topic for the first time. Even for experienced teachers, social media provides access from around the world to a variety of new styles of presentation, and different perspectives on the topics being taught.
- Social media enables one-on-one as well as one-to-many interactions with students. Audio, video or textual means are available for one-on-one transactions. Conferencing tools facilitate one-to-many interactions.
- Mobiles enable teaching or learning wherever they are (portability). Apart from other occasions, when physical attendance becomes impossible due to pandemics, or transport disruptions, portability becomes a great advantage.

The major negative impacts perceived are as listed below:

- Distraction to students from learning – the easy availability of games, movies, music, pornography and other distractions create problems for the students who are not self-disciplined. Even if the students are looking at relevant topics only, the huge quantities of articles and videos available in the net and obtained through social media from friends as well as strangers sometimes confuse the student and makes him waste precious time; proper judgement on reliable and unreliable sources of information is an essential requisite for youngsters, which is mostly missing in social media. As the search for information is often made by the students without the presence of a teacher or guide, the students end up wasting a lot of time, and often depend on unreliable sources of information.
- For the teachers also, it takes some experience and exposure before they learn to identify reliable sources and to avoid wasting time on irrelevant and distracting sites.
- Possible loss of privacy and misuse. Technology brings its own challenges in the form of malwares, hoaxes, phishing, and other frauds and unsuspecting youngsters can fall easy prey to such unscrupulous elements in society.
- Affordability of smart phones and laptops can be an issue for some of the students in countries like India. The price of such items is quite high for a vast number of students and also peer pressure makes them want newer and costlier gadgets which their parents can ill afford to give them.

e) Technical issues and connectivity issues are common, especially in rural parts of India. Even where connectivity is available, typical issues of slow net speed and disruptions in connectivity make it impractical in some cases.

This research was based on a limited sample of teachers who were mainly teaching English in colleges in two cities of South India, namely, Chennai and Hyderabad. A deeper study with a larger sample with school and college level teachers and a larger geographical coverage may yield further insights.

V. CONCLUSION

The Covid 19 pandemic made everyone realise that classroom teaching cannot be taken for granted. While the advantages as well as disadvantages of e-learning and social media were practically experienced by teachers and students alike, there is hardly any doubt that learning beyond the classrooms is here to stay. Extending the learning process beyond the classroom through e-learning is definitely possible, but it has a number of challenges. Social media and conferencing apps can assist students as well as teachers to mitigate the challenges of foreign language learning and instruction; yet, the challenges cannot be eliminated altogether. While the use of mobile applications in learning English as a foreign language is definitely effective and efficient, it needs to be tweaked in design and during implementation as per the specific needs of the students (Kacetl & Klimova, 2019).

The best strategy involves being aware of the negative impacts and limitations, constant innovation by the teachers, making use of learning support possible through social media from teachers of English around the world, and sincere efforts at self-learning by the students. Both the students and the teachers must realise that more the information and resources available through social media, more effort and care need to be taken to ensure that relevant inputs are identified and utilised. Such a strategy will definitely yield results.

There is scope for further research with a larger sample of teachers; a wider geographical coverage can throw light on the regional nuances. Research involving a study of both students and teachers will help to compare the perspectives from the students and teachers respectively. Moreover, the impressions of the teachers could have possibly been influenced by the Covid-19 induced restrictions on classroom teaching. A study after this pandemic totally subsides could yield interesting differences in perception.

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Gayathri Paliath, belongs to Kerala born on 04/07/1988.

She is a research scholar at Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Rajiv Gandhi Salai, Padur, India. She has attended both national and international conferences and participated in workshops conducted by various colleges at Chennai. She is a member of elt@i journal, Chennai.

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Marie Evangeline, belongs to the Union Territory of Pondicherry born on 12/12/1970. She was conferred Ph.D (Doctorate) in Bharathiyar University, Coimbatore, India, in 2019.

At present, she is working as an Assistant Professor (SG) of English, Department of Languages in Hindustan University, Padur, Chennai. She has international exposure in teaching English Language and also has interest in Tamil Literature. She is a member of elt@i journal, Chennai.

Published two Books: In 2020, when CORONA virus was spreading severely, she wrote about the virus and also about the disease in her first book “COVID-19 AN EYE-OPENER” which was in English. Since she has an abundant love of literature, in 2021, she wrote a novelette ‘Ippadikku Ival’, in Tamil, which was her first creation in Tamil Language.

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