# The (un)spoken facts: On-line space as a medium for developing undergraduate students' speaking skills

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## Abstract
The onset of Covid-19 has transformed the educational landscape in a manner few catastrophes have; unfolding in the process has been a compulsive reliance on technology to teach and learn. While face-to-face mode has always been seen as an appropriate platform to effectively teach speaking, the efficacy of on-line sessions for teaching the nuances of speaking have not been investigated extensively in an ESL/EFL context, particularly where the groups being taught are large, heterogenous, and spread across the globe. This paper investigated the efficacy of teaching speaking skills online to learners scattered across space and time. Drawing on a framework by Alexander (2018) on the principles of dialogic teaching, the study looked at the challenges faced by teachers in providing practice to learners in speaking skills. The findings indicate that online mode is hardly a conducive space to teach or learn speaking skills. The implications for teaching speaking online are discussed.

**Keywords:** Online Teaching, ESL, Speech Pedagogy

## Introduction
Covid-19 put paid to the rosy optimism of continuing with the chalk-and-talk method as an all-time favourite method of teachers and students. Adapting to the unexpected created chaos and disappointment, partly because teachers and students were ill prepared for the sudden move to replace face-to-face mode with online sessions, more so in courses involving practice in the spoken language.

While "online language education has been around since the advent of the internet and digital communication technologies" (Derakshan et al, 2022, p.60) with courses from *Coursera, MIT Open Courseware* very popular among advocates of online learning, institutionalizing online teaching never seemed a possibility until the onset of the pandemic, since the necessity to go online was not keenly perceived. Once the pandemic set in and stayed on, on-line learning and teaching became viral too!

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In the context of the study, online learning refers to learning that is strictly virtual, unmediated by any in-person interaction or personal contact between the teacher and learners. All teaching/learning is done via the internet through online platforms such as Google Meet, there being remote learning for the duration of the teaching-learning process.

Online learning became embedded in the pedagogical framework of institutions of higher learning once it became clear that online learning is the new normal and is here for the foreseeable future. That and advancements in technology and the ease of conducting classes online following the availability of tools – Google Meet, Microsoft TEAM, Cisco Webex and Zoom - with which to ply the trade in the privacy of one's home, established online mode as a global saviour in the making.

The efficacy of online mode in delivering courses that have been the confirmed province of face-to-face mode is a contested territory, with claims and counter claims about the success or failure in attaining learning objectives. This may be explained by the fact that "planned online teaching delivered by trained, tech-savvy teachers…is totally different from what transpired in the COVID-19 pandemic" (Derakshan et al, 2022, p.60).

'Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT)', a phrase used by Can and Silman-Karanfil (2022, p.58) transformed teachers with little awareness of technology and digital tools into unprepared and therefore unwilling and reluctant users of digital technology overnight. Such a transition and therefore transformation unleashed fresh problems even as it solved the immediate issue of teaching learners.

## Review of Literature

Speaking is an important but often neglected skill. Imparting training in speaking, therefore, constitutes an essential component of L2 teaching. Learners are called upon to perform a variety of communicative functions using English: make project presentations, sit job interviews, interact with colleagues and others in a multinational setting, etc., and do all of this in English, for which they need adequate inputs in the language.

Higher education institutions (HEI) in India and abroad have made provision for teaching English as a second/foreign language ((ESL/EFL) in the undergraduate curriculum, where learners are taught the skills and subskills of LSRW. The aim is to make students industry ready or simply facilitate their ability to use the lingua franca of the globe with ease. Speaking skills are imparted through various communicative activities.

Physical presence of the teacher and the learners has been a given so far in learning an L2 so much so that the absence of in-person classroom makes the speaking process through online mode akin to Hamlet without the (speaking) prince.

Teaching learners speaking skills and face-to-face mode of interaction have been spoken of together that having to transition from physical meetings to virtual meetings to teach speaking skills came as a putative setback to teachers and learners unfamiliar with tools and technology to cope with online speaking sessions. Even without the looming presence of online sessions, learning an L2 presented its own set of cognitive demands:

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L2 learners are confronted with the daunting task of learning to communicate their thoughts in a language over which they have little command, an experience often described as an emotional rollercoaster rife with both positive and negative emotions. (Derakhshan et al, 2022, p.58)

This was exacerbated by the transition to online mode, a process marked by compulsion and compliance.

What appeared inexplicable in the deal was coming to terms with the idea of teaching speaking effectively through virtual mode – particularly when speaking is aligned with and governed by non-verbal communication of the speakers in terms of eye contact, postures, and gestures.

The reluctance of many learners to turn on the camera and the bandwidth limitations to enable this to happen for those learners who indeed were ready to go live, aggravated the challenges associated with teaching speaking. To determine how well teachers and learners were able to cope with the enforced deal vis-à-vis developing speaking skills, using a mode that was alien to everyone, a study was needed.

In fact, studies across the globe in the pre-pandemic times attested to the numerous challenges and hurdles coming the way of teachers trying hard to teach communication skills to learners – in particular those considered challenged in the spoken language, English in this case.

Linardopoulos (2010) reminds us that online education is not a new phenomenon that descended on humanity all of a sudden. In fact, the globe is no stranger to online based education if one were to go by the number of adults seeking to learn through online sources. That this statistical data is from 2009, a decade before Covid-19 entered the scene makes it all the more remarkable. Indeed, as Linardopoulos (2010) puts it:

Indeed, according to the Sloan Consortium, in the fall of 2007, almost 4 million students in the US were enrolled in at least one online course, an increase of 12% (or about 450.000 students) compared to the year before. (p.198)

It is noteworthy that online education was more sought after in the corporate world than in academia in pre-Covid times while online education became the new normal during and post covid everywhere. Having made an entry into academia – with google classrooms, LMS, MOOCS and MOODLE taking over from face-to-face mode, online based teaching and learning have now come to be viewed as part of the teaching-learning process and it continues to this day.

Linardopoulos (2010) also maintains that "in general, effective public speaking and interpersonal communication skills are considered by many human resources managers to be essential for prospective employees" (p.199) and this is also the case in HEIs where English language communication skills labs prepare students for the industry well in advance so that students who are technically qualified are also enabled to communicate well at the time of job interview and ready themselves for a career in the corporate sector.

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The only marked difference between Linardopoulos' observations and current study is that his study dealt with adult learners seeking out ways of educating themselves in their spare time and honing their skills to align their professional needs with the demands of corporate sector while in the present study, the objective was to explore the efficacy of online space as a medium to teach learners communication skills, spoken skills in specific.

This is exactly also where online medium may fumble since the teacher facilitating communication skills and getting learners to practise spoken English through online activities may find classroom management tough and unmanageable.

Bashori, et.al, (2022) refer to a very widely recognised and acknowledged phenomenon termed FLS- Foreign Language Anxiety. Thus, they maintain that "Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) is a multifaceted psychological phenomenon that many learners experience when learning a Foreign Language (FL)" (p.1058).

What applies to learning a foreign language applies equally to learning a second language , particularly when the language being learnt is one where the learner has very limited or no proficiency , as was the case with teachers handling heterogenous groups of learners from a multilingual and multi-cultural background in the present study, with learners drawn from various backgrounds and types of schooling, ranging from being students of very elite schools to being from very resource-deprived schools.

In the present study, "many students had experience in learning English using computers and/or by online media, but only a few of them were confident enough to engage in conversation with foreigners, whether in person or online," (Bashori et al, 2022, p.1066), for students saw themselves as speakers with limited fluency in English. This phenomenon obtained across the board, whether it was students of HEIs in India or abroad.

If teaching students English as a second language in person is a real challenge, given the truly heterogenous nature of classroom composition and the varying levels of fluency of learners and their levels of anxiety in being able to use it, it is even more challenging to teach speaking online given the numerous constraints at work.

Dialogic teaching posed its own set of challenges not least hurdles of the technological kind, in the form of interruptions, poor internet connectivity, limited learner interaction, long and often ambivalent pauses, etc.

A study reported by Ali, et.al., (2019) in the Saudi Arabian context, looked at the general opinions of Saudi learners towards learning English in general with specific reference to speaking skills and the results were in agreement with what is now acknowledged as a global phenomenon: the necessity to learn the globe's lingua franca in order to advance in one's career.

The study also led to some conclusions that apply as much in the ESL context as EFL context given that many of the conditions that are prevalent when learning EFL are also prevalent in the ESL context.

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The conclusions arrived at by the study point to the appreciation shown by learners for learning English because they would need it in future, though the factors causing hindrance to learning it remained in the picture, namely, "lack of interest or motivation, lack of supportive environment and peer criticism." (Ali, et.al., 2019, p. 361)

The Saudi Arabian context closely parallels the Indian context in many ways: despite there being English medium schools across the length and breadth of India, proficiency levels of learners continue to remain a cause for concern. While Saudi Arabia is a monolingual country with the official language being Arabic and its dialects, India is multilingual with several codes and languages operating in the ESL classroom. Saudi Arabia has plenty of resources and a large expatriate population speaking English but the general proficiency levels of learners remains low and the motivation to learn English absent.

Likewise, Alzamil (2021) conducted a study in which he discovered that students welcomed the idea of online classes though they much preferred face to face mode for the convenience and comfort it offered.

Alzamil's study with Saudi students learning EFL revealed that students a) "had positive attitudes towards the importance of speaking English; b) appreciated the benefits that online learning offers but felt it could not replace face-to-face learning." (2021, p.19). This was primarily because students expected immediate feedback on their performance in speaking which did not seem to happen while communicating via e-mail with their teachers. Also, students wanted to perhaps interact with the teacher and seek out ways of improving their body language as well as communication skills and two-way communication by meeting the teacher in person and learning all this in face to face mode, all of which was thwarted when electronic media was employed for teaching - be it e-mail or Whatsapp or Google meet.

In an interesting study by Abdel Latif (2022), which involved the examination of several teacher blogs in detailing their individual experiences handling classes in online mode, the following issues and challenges were recorded by teachers: "technical and technological obstacles, problematic learner behaviours and distraction, reduced classroom interaction, and difficulties in assessing learner language performance" (p.24).

As part of the strategies to enable teachers to cope with the challenges of online teaching and sustaining learner motivation, Abdel Latif (2022) recommended the following strategies:

> Students' language learning engagement and motivation can be fostered if teachers make use of other technologies while delivering lessons on a particular platform. The technologies they mentioned include: presentation software, Google Classroom and Zoom tools (e.g. breakout rooms and commenting features), virtual whiteboards, chat forums, voice recording, and flashcard and game generators. (p. 28)

Though these have been recommended in the general scheme of things, it needs to be kept in mind that the recommendations seldom work for everyone and at all times in all places. In a resource limited or deprived context, as is generally the case with classrooms in many developing nations, classrooms of the type surveyed in the present study came with their quota of severe restrictions.

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It was in such circumstances and under cases of severe constraints the study sought to explore the views of teachers handling communicative sessions involving a heavy dose of speaking, among other skills.

## The Study

To investigate the exact nature of interaction occurring in online mode between the teacher and the learners and the challenges faced in teaching speaking skills via the online mode, the study was guided by the following questions:

1. Is the online mode effective for creating conditions conducive for developing speaking skills of L2 learners?
2. What are the challenges to teaching speaking skills online?

When training learners in spoken English, learning is expected to be dialogic, involving participation between and among the learners and between the teacher and the learners, ideally contributing to a dialogue. Learners are expected to become autonomous in the process.

Alexander (2018) argues that "four main components – justifications, principles, repertoires and indicators" (p. 564) – are crucial for a reasonably comprehensive understanding of dialogic teaching. As part of *justifications*, he lists several functions that form the raison d'être for talk, these being:

- Communicative
- Social
- Cultural
- Political/civic
- Psychological
- Neuroscientific
- Pedagogical

The principles outlined by Alexander (2018) as part of the framework for dialogic teaching were adopted for the purpose of the study since they deal comprehensively with aspects of oral communication – collaborating, turn taking, initiating, moving the discussion along, summarising, intervening, etc.- that learners are expected to engage in from the time they attempt to use an L2 (English in this case) to communicate.

The table below illustrates the principles (Alexander, 2018, p. 566):

| | |
|---|---|
| **Collective** | (the classroom is a site of joint learning and enquiry) |
| **Reciprocal** | (participants listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints) |
| **Supportive** | (participants feel able to express ideas freely, without risk of embarrassment over 'wrong' answers, and they help each other to reach common understandings) |
| **Cumulative** | (participants build on their own and each other's contributions and chain  them into coherent lines of thinking and understanding) |
| **Purposeful** | (classroom talk, though open and dialogic, is structured with specific learning goals in view) |

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## Method
The study involved 12 teachers teaching ESL/EFL (English as a Second Language/ English as a Foreign Language) in HEIs. The common point was that in all the institutions, learners were imparted (some) training in speaking skills through various communicative activities.

Teachers who participated in the study had teaching experience between 3 and 15 years, and all of them had a PhD in ELT/Literature.

Data were collected over four weeks through a questionnaire mailed to teachers for their responses. Clarifications were sought with regard to their responses through WhatsApp calls, emails, and phone calls to ensure data interpretation was fair and unambiguous.

## Data analysis
A questionnaire developed for the purpose was circulated to the teachers via e-mail. Data interpretation was carried out after collating and analysing the responses. As part of data collection, teachers were first asked to detail the benefits of online sessions since teaching had gone online beginning March 2020.

### Benefits of online sessions
The teacher responses (in italics) gathered from the questionnaire figure below:
- *Online speaking sessions give space to those who are still developing as public speakers. Also in online mode, the teacher has more control over a large class by means of using breakouts and chatrooms functions.*
- *We are able to show sample videos by sharing the screen besides giving our own example through live demonstrations. We are also able to get students' response instantly through online speaking assessments that are framed in such a way that we are able to do it conveniently.*
- *ESL teachers can use latest apps to enhance speaking skills. Students can access the recommended apps because they already used electronic gadgets for online classes.*
- *Learner autonomy will be improved. Students will feel more responsible about their learning.*

It is evident that teachers were not entirely averse to online sessions involving practice in speaking since many saw it as a convenient way to control and monitor large class as well as share videos, PPTs, files and other resources at the touch of a button and in the comfort of their homes. Learners could actually gain some control over their learning and acquire skills at a pace, time and location of their choice. Besides, some teachers also felt that learner independence was fostered through such sessions.

### Drawbacks of online sessions
Teachers were then asked to list the drawbacks of online sessions for teaching speaking skills. A sample of the responses figures below:
- *There is no way to ascertain the efficacy of the online speaking sessions. While student engagement is evident in each class session, it is difficult to measure the improvement in students' speaking skills (low and intermediate proficiency) in the online mode.*

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- *Unstable internet connection can disturb and distort the message. Students may find an easy way to escape putting the blame on technology.*
- *Teaching lab sessions online does not ensure active participation of all the learners and such sessions also lack lively interaction and involvement of the learners. Further, there is little or no scope of socialization with the peer group which is an essential aspect of improving proficiency in English language.*
- *The greatest hurdle is the absence of being mentally connected to the learners. In a remote teaching system, one fails to feel the emotional and mental connection with the speaker. Speaking involves proper expressions combined with appropriate body language. This can't be seen or shown that effectively online. Moreover, the listener's response plays a very crucial role in delivering the speech which is hard to get if it is done online.*
- *We cannot spend much time with one student as other students are getting distracted. They feel like leaving the class if we spend more time to train a weak student.*
- *We have no idea if learners are actually present online when they log in…they may keep the system on and vanish after that…*

While online sessions did carry benefits, there was a flip side to it that teachers were aware of, as manifested in the responses above: online sessions did not provide for any reliable or valid means of gauging learner improvement in speaking; while offline sessions enabled the teacher to gauge the mood and responses from reading the body language of learners, online sessions provided no such guarantee, rendering futile any attempt at finding out how useful the sessions were in helping learners improve their skills. Besides, online sessions brought with them disruption and network issues leading to discontinuity and interruptions.

Once the benefits and drawbacks were ascertained, data analysis was done on the basis of the theoretical framework discussed earlier. The various categories of data analysis figure below under different heads:

**Collective**: Predictably, almost all teachers responded that their success with collective participation was limited by three factors: (a) class size (b) proficiency levels of learners (c) internet connectivity. Only three teachers agreed that they were able to achieve complete and satisfactory collaboration among learners. The primary reason listed by teachers was the huge class size that often had more than 50-60 learners logging in at once, thereby limiting active and gainful participation. There was often chaos.

In the words of one teacher: *Yes. All are trying to participate but proficient students perform well.* Yet another said: *Yes, mostly during breakouts*. A third teacher claimed that participation worked to a limited extent considering that not all learners seemed eager to take part.

The comments suggest that the collective dimension worked to a limited extent considering that learners were separated in space and time and were therefore unable to take active part at once and with equal enthusiasm. Low proficiency learners perhaps had misgivings about the nature and extent of interaction while high proficiency learners found it easy because they were already familiar with the procedures connected with various aspects of speaking – initiating, turn taking, listening, contradicting, agreeing, supplementing, etc. This led to poor

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participation from those who were expected to take part the most and gain from the exercise: low and intermediate proficiency learners.

**Reciprocal**
With regard to learners listening to each other and then taking turns to respond, only four teachers claimed this was achieved and even here the degree of success seemed to vary. In some classes it was 100% while in others it varied from session to session, the limitations being technology, gadgets used, type of online platforms, task type, familiarity of learners with the task, and the rules of engagement between and among learners, etc.

According to one teacher: *I chose texts from everyday news (for example The Hindu newspaper) which I found students (low and intermediate proficiency) spoke about with greater interest and engagement.* Another teacher said - *Only some students understood and followed the instructions carefully. Others just shared their ideas without paying much attention to their team mates.* A third teacher lamented that there was no participation at all because of the lackadaisical attitude.

No evidence emerged in strength to attest to the success of reciprocity in participation. One major reason could be that reciprocity becomes an unmanageable exercise once the class strength exceeds 10 or 15. Most classes had 50-80 learners and that resulted in the oral practice sessions benefitting only a few. The act of listening, responding, reacting when it was one's turn, adding to the points made before, etc. did not work in online space.

**Supportive**
The supportive environment was largely absent because learners and teachers were operating in a no man's land where teachers had had little contact with learners and learners were unaware of the kind of expectations teachers had of them and the opinion teachers had formed vis-à-vis their competence. The analysis of data reveals that 11 teachers perceived the absence of a supportive environment in group and pair activities. They indicated that learners had experienced virtual learning fatigue, which was also a major reason for the indifference.
- *No. Students were not performing pair activity well, because of lack of physical presence. The togetherness is missing in online classes; moreover a lot of distraction is also happening for students.*
- S*ome learners (approximately 40 to45% of the total) were able to take part in group and pair activities suggested during the lab sessions. The remaining had problems with technology, self-motivation and lack of enthusiasm and irrational fear about communication.*

Only one teacher chose to differ. The learners were attracted by the novelty of what they had been doing and felt fascinated:
- *Yes, my students took part in the given tasks without experiencing any difficulty. They enjoyed themselves, as it was a new experience for them to take part in the activities online.*

This shows that the supportive environment was conspicuous by its absence. Learner distraction, bad network and learners not getting an opportunity to make friends with other learners as they do in offline classes intensified the problem. Neither learners nor the teacher

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was able to exhibit any kind of solidarity or fellow feeling in online mode. This removed empathy and understanding that would have contributed to a very supportive environment.

**Cumulative**
Predictably, cumulative aspect was very hard to achieve because of the limiting nature of technology. The natural, smooth and easy flow of ideas as happens in in-class sessions was difficult to obtain in online sessions since learners were not visible on screen and no learner knew what other learners were doing. In the absence of visual clues, responses in terms of turn taking, listening, responding, building on what others had said became a challenge about which none could do anything. The teachers said:

- *No. hardly the case.*
- *Never. It can never happen.*
- *Sadly, this whole thing* (i.e. building on what learners said, and chaining them into coherent lines of thinking) *is a farce.*

Every time learners tried building on what their classmates had said, they ended up speaking at once or remaining silent, leading to either a babble of tongues or plain silence. Every now and then comments would appear in the chat box connected with the topic of discussion but the comments were not necessarily cogent or coherent because of poor connectivity and issues with the internet or bandwidth. There was a lot of discontinuity since every so often, students would leave a session and re-join it several minutes later, thereby precluding any meaningful attempt at cumulative contribution.

**Purposeful**
The sessions were not purposeful since there were no reliable yardsticks to determine why and how one deemed an activity purposeful.

Only four teachers claimed success in achieving purposeful learning. One teacher put it succinctly: *The answer is 'No'. It may be because the teacher as well as students is accustomed to traditional mode of teaching and learning.* Another echoed the view: *No. Not as effective as offline session.* A third said: *Not adequate*. Eight of them felt that the feel and experience of offline classes were hard to capture in online sessions.

What seemed purposeful to the teacher may not have seemed as such to the learners who perhaps gained nothing from the exercise. Teachers were unable to establish with certainty what led to or did not lead to learning: network issues, natural disinclination to participate, low proficiency of learners, distraction, boredom, or the cognitive nature of assignments/activities. This led to the purpose behind the sessions being defeated.

## Discussion of the Findings
In answer to the first question, the findings show that online mode of teaching was not very effective in teaching speaking skills and did not meet with warmth or approval from the majority of teachers. 10 out of 12 teachers were emphatic in their disapproval of online space as an enabling place to teach or learn speaking. The major elephant in the room was the apparent and noticeable digital divide separating the *have slots* from the have nots.

As Pu (2020) rightly contends:

> …in the time of crisis, what counts is not the accessibility of the internet but data quality, which is affected by factors such as the type of digital device, the mode of internet connection, and the bandwidth available (p.346).

The writing on every teacher's digital board was clear: online classes come nowhere close to matching conventional, in-person mode for several reasons: teachers sensed an emotional disconnect from learners who were online but seemed several removes from the scene of action: learning site. This was because learners were unable to see each other as turning on the video meant massive data consumption, loss of connectivity, etc.

The absence of non-verbal communication dehumanised the process of teaching speaking with empathy. Asynchronous lectures were not always successful in achieving the objectives because speaking skills demand practice, not recorded lectures in how to speak!

In answer to the second question, the collective responses of teachers with regard to challenges about teaching speaking online figure below:

| S. No | Number of teachers | Challenge |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 9 | Limited awareness of learner background and the type of help needed for developing speaking skills |
| 2 | 10 | Absence of online platforms enabling simultaneous communication between the teacher and learners |
| 3 | 12 | Constant disruption of the internet because of poor network, power outage, and limited bandwidth |
| 4 | 11 | No guarantee of learners' presence online at the time of teaching |
| 5 | 10 | Absence of reliable mechanism to establish the efficacy of speaking activities |
| 6 | 11 | No way to read body language of learners and therefore perceive learner satisfaction or dissatisfaction with speaking activities |

The responses clearly show that online learning was remote in more ways than one: learners and teachers were remotely connected; learners seemed remotely interested; teachers saw remote possibilities in engaging all learners meaningfully in the learning process. A certain degree of remoteness in warmth developed between the teacher and the learners because of the mismatch between learner needs and teacher expectations.

Learners appeared to develop virtual learning fatigue from sitting in front of the system for long, developing physical and mental issues in the process. Their enthusiasm and concentration levels dipped, leading to progressive decline in participation.

Apparently, the system of teacher as central authority wielding control over teaching and guiding learners through scaffolding and careful observation needed restoring and this found echo in teacher views.

## Pedagogical implications

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The study has the following pedagogical implications:

**Provide for autonomy in learning through meaningful tasks**
To motivate low proficiency/shy/diffident learners, activities that enable such learners to learn in the privacy of their home may be set as assignment. For example, to combat the fear of public speaking, the teacher may ask learners to record themselves making a 3-minute video presentation (introducing oneself) on Google meet and ask the link to be mailed to the teacher who would then provide feedback to the learner.

A group of reluctant learners may come together on Google Meet, turn on the camera and take part in G.D. This clipping can be mailed to the teacher for comments/feedback.

**Employ strategies to handle heterogeneity**
One popular technique that works is to call out the names of learners roll number-wise and ask them to speak for 2-3 minutes. The teacher would then know who the fluent speaker-users are and who need scaffolding. Having identified learners who need help, suitable activities/tasks may be designed and communicated to those learners via mail or WhatsApp. Such learners may work on their language and improve their spoken English skills gradually.

## Conclusion
Online classes will be part of the educational system in future, making adapting to online mode inevitable. Therefore, it makes sense to look for ways and means to adapt and make the experience as painless as possible for learners and teachers.

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