



LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN BANGALORE: BEFORE AND DURING THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract:

With the onset of the digital age, individuals are exposed to an innumerable array of foreign languages, which has led to a shift in the way foreign language learning takes place. This act of learning foreign languages from online sources has proven to have a positive effect, in that, it increases the horizons of many to learn a new language. However, this has also led to a confusion in terms of the rules that a language may have. For example, applications such as DuoLingo do not explain the grammatical nuances that a language has, which is usually explained in language classes. Foreign language institutes usually follow a global or a nation-wide standard of learning the specific language, through prescribed textbooks which leads to a mutual understanding among people speaking it. It is also important to note that these language institutes intend to bring an understanding between people who are foreign to the specific language to those who are native or fluent speakers of those languages. Earlier, the only means through which one could have learnt a language was by going to a language institute and paying a certain amount of money for the course. On the contrary, today, one may learn any language, anywhere for no fee, with the only requirement being a smartphone. Therefore, the focus of this paper would be to study the increased accessibility of learning foreign languages, keeping certain age groups in mind (above forty years and below thirty years). This research also intends to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the shift from an institutional method of learning foreign languages to a smart phone based one. The data may be

obtained from interviews by professionals in the field, as well as from individuals belonging to the specified age groups and through literature review as well.

Key Words: Smart Individuals, Digital Platforms, Institutional Learning

Introduction:

“At the risk of overstating the obvious, technology is reshaping teaching and learning by supporting, expanding, and enhancing course content, learning activities, and teacher-student interactions.” (Abdous, Camarena and Facer 2009:77) With access to digital platforms for carrying out multiple activities, today, one cannot think of a life without access to a smartphone.

Smartphones have an array of tasks that one may engage in, one of them being Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL). Today, applications such as DuoLingo, Busuu, Memrise and many other such applications, engage in helping individuals learn a foreign language. DuoLingo itself may be considered as one of the biggest examples of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) technology. DuoLingo gained recognition after being chosen as the iPhone app of the year by Apple in 2014 (Crowther, Kim and Loewen 2014:4). Through this, it may be interpreted that foreign language learning applications such as DuoLingo have become popular worldwide.

However, one cannot deny the drawbacks of learning foreign languages from applications such as DuoLingo. “One of them is the accuracy of its translations, which may not always be exact or which sometimes do not accept other versions. In the browser app, you can discuss your answer with other learners to try to negotiate meaning in a way, but this is not possible in the mobile version” (Munday 2016:96). This paper seeks to explore the difference in quality of foreign language learning before and during the digital age. It has been assumed that individuals belonging to the age group of forty years and above may be able to give a comparative understanding between learning languages through applications and through institutional learning. It is assumed that

individuals belonging to the age group of thirty years and below would be able to give an in-depth perspective on learning languages from online platforms.

Importance of the Study:

While digital technologies seem to be the future of most spheres in the human life, one must understand how digital technologies also, in its own way, keep humans away from socialising. While learning a language that is foreign to one's culture, it is very crucial to have constructive interactions with teachers who have credible and extensive knowledge about that culture. Language learning is not only about learning something new, but it also revolves around the interchange of cultures. In the foreign language institute studied in Bengaluru, it was seen that not only does the teacher of the specific language talk about his or her culture but the students too talk about their own respective cultures. It is about the intercultural exchange and process of socialisation that also goes into learning a language. The nuances of any language may be lost if not learnt the right way, and more importantly, if the cultural nuances are not understood.

This study seeks to understand if individuals belonging to the older age group and individuals belonging to the younger age group agree upon these ideas in relation to learning foreign languages.

Methodology:

The data collected in this paper is through interviews with professionals, in the field of teaching foreign languages in institutes (belonging to both age groups) and with students (belonging to both age groups) who engage in learning foreign languages from institutes, applications or both. The analysis is based upon the qualitative analysis of the responses given by the respondents. Five professionals and five students were chosen for interview. The case of one foreign language institute teaching multiple languages was chosen for study. However, all student respondents do not belong to the same institute. The identity of the respondents, professionals and the institute has been kept confidential.

The interview questions asked to professionals were:

- Do you feel that the scenario of foreign language learning has been affected with the onset of applications? If yes, how?
- Have you seen a change in the number of people coming to the institute to learn foreign languages in a day like today where foreign languages are available to all for free?
- To what age group do a majority of your students belong, approximately?
- In your personal opinion, do you believe applications that deal with learning languages are the future?
- Do you feel that the quality of learning a foreign language is retained in applications?
- Do you feel that applications such as Busuu and DuoLingo have affected the number of students who come to learn in your institute?

The interview questions asked to students were:

- Would you prefer an institutional set-up when it comes to learning foreign languages or would you prefer to learn from applications on your phone?
- In your opinion, how does an institutional set-up differ from that of learning through applications such as DuoLingo?
- If you do prefer learning from applications on your phone, which applications would you suggest?

- Do you feel that the cost of learning has anything to do with individuals opting for learning languages through applications?
- Do you feel that convenience has anything to do with individuals opting for learning languages through applications?
- Do you feel that language learning through applications is the future?

Findings and Analysis:

Professionals:

Out of the five professionals interviewed, four stated that the onset of applications that deal with learning foreign languages have changed the scenario but only to a certain extent. One of the respondents stated that "...in fact it has made our job easier. We give our students some homework and advise them to do some exercises from applications like DuoLingo. They come back with questions and it makes the process of learning and teaching more holistic."

All of the five respondents stated that they have not seen a change in the number of students going to their institute. This is because, those making the effort to go to an institute to learn, are focused about the specific foreign language, be it for passion or for the purpose of work. These individuals according to one of the teacher respondents "... are serious about learning languages and would not rely on applications to learn a language as they are well aware of the shortcomings that applications have." These shortcomings may include almost no face to face interactions while learning a language, absence of grammatical or cultural nuances and absence of a teacher-student experience while learning.

The five respondents stated different age groups came to learn different languages. Spanish had a varied age group with individuals belonging to forty years of age and above and thirty years of age and below being students. In addition, even as far as teachers of these languages were concerned,

they too had a varied age group. Out of the three Spanish language teachers, one belonged to the age group of forty years and above and two belonged to the thirty years and below age group. The respective teachers accounted, that the German language students usually range between twenty to thirty years of age.

In the opinion of the teachers, language learning through applications would play a role in the future, however, individuals seeking to learn a language in a holistic manner would still prefer learning languages in an institutional set-up. This is because of the advantages that learning a language through an institutional set-up has to offer.

The teachers accounted that the quality of learning a foreign language is not retained in any application as of yet. Language learning through applications, in the words of one of the teachers interviewed, “only teaches you words while classes in an institutional set-up has more to offer”. Learning languages in an institutional set-up also creates a more lively environment as compared to learning from applications.

The teachers also stated that the emergence of foreign language learning applications have not affected the number of students who came to learn from the institute. This is because, institutes provide legitimate certifications, which the student may later use for the purpose of higher education and career prospects as well. Applications do not provide this kind of credibility. Apart from those individuals who learn for the purpose of higher education and career prospects, those who come to learn as a result of passion have also been seen to prefer institutional learning to digital learning. One of the teachers stated that “...those who may wish to visit a country and converse only for those number of days as a tourist, or those who are not very serious about learning a language but do so simply to kill their time may be the crowd that prefers digital learning through applications over institutional learning”.

On interviewing the professionals it was seen how most believed that applications were a value added activity while learning a foreign language. One could not completely depend upon these

applications for learning a specific foreign language. In fact, the professionals stated that if an individual was looking forward to learning a foreign language with an in-depth understanding of it, the suggested means would be through institutional learning. This is because, through institutional learning, individuals may engage in conversations with classmates in the language being learnt, there may be intercultural exchange simultaneously during the process of learning the language and most importantly, an in-depth understanding of the grammatical and cultural nuances while understanding the language holistically.

Students

From the responses of the students, it was seen that they preferred institutional learning, as an institute would teach grammar more accurately. One of the student respondents stated that "...while listening to the specific language being spoken all around you, one gets more accustomed and conditioned to the language spoken". One of the other students interviewed, stated that "...in the beginning, institutional learning is a must in order to get a good understanding of the grammar. However, after the grammar has been learnt, one may learn from applications as the individual would now have a good hold over the basics of the language."

In applications, the student respondents stated, one does not get the teacher-student experience. This means that the teacher would not be there to check the work being done by the student, clearing doubts would not be possible and a thorough explanation of the language would not be possible. One of the student respondents stated that, "...DuoLingo is for those who are extremely diligent. I always need someone to check on me if I'm doing my work or not."

Most of the respondents stated that they would not ideally suggest any application as it does not help in holistic learning of the foreign language. However, one student out of the five interviewees did state that DuoLingo is a rather reliable application to learn from.

The student respondents collectively believe that cost does play an important role when it comes to learning a foreign language, which may be why many opt for application based learning. One of the student respondents stated that “All international language centres are quite expensive. If it is my career or education, I would invest, but if it is just a hobby I would have learnt it from an application.” Another student stated that “While institutions are rather costly, the learning experience was worth the amount of money invested.”

When asked if convenience played any role in individuals opting for learning languages through applications, the students did not agree. The student respondents collectively felt that if an individual was serious about learning a foreign language, then he or she would do so from an institute, irrespective of how convenient it was. One of the respondents stated that, “I feel that people opt for learning a foreign language through applications as a hobby.”

The student respondents believe that no technology can replace the classroom experience of teaching and learning. They stated that applications do not engage an individual with the specific language being learnt as much as an institutional set-up does. However, a majority of the student respondents stated that if any digital platform were to be the future, it would be through platforms such as FaceTime and Skype as these platforms provide interactivity with the teacher to a certain extent.

It can be seen that students primarily focused on grammar while learning a foreign language and how foreign language learning applications do not provide any space for perfecting grammar. We also see how the students ideally prefer learning from an institutional set-up rather than through Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) technologies. Students consider that nothing can replace institutional learning and that application based learning may be carried out only if an individual has a good grip over the grammar of the language, implying that it may be used primarily to practice the language than learning it. It was seen that questions of cultural exchange from classes was not something that came up from the responses of the students.

Discussion:

There seems to be a relationship between the responses of the students and professionals. For example, both students and professionals believe that institutional learning is more holistic in nature, while foreign language learning applications are not as in-depth. Student respondents believe that language learning through institutions can never be replaced by an institutional set-up while teacher respondents stated that they could see foreign language learning applications as being the future but only if an individual is not very serious about the language or if it was a value added service to a specific course. One of the findings of a study conducted by Munday on “The case for using DuoLingo as Part of The Language Classroom Experience” states that, “... Duolingo can still be a valid addition to any course, online or face-to-face, since students are able to review the language at their own level.” (Munday 2016:97).

While comparing the two age groups, it was seen that both age groups agree upon certain ideas. Both age groups agree that institutional set-ups cannot be replaced. The age group of thirty years and below considered that language learning through institutional set-ups made one more engaged with the language being learnt, even though this age group seemed to be more tech savvy. Hence, it can be seen that prior to the digital age and even during the digital age, there is a common view in terms of learning a foreign language.

Limitations:

1. A larger group of study for both teachers and students was unavailable as only one institute was studied.
2. Due to no available appointments, other foreign language institutes in the city could not be studied.
3. No professionals from the field of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) technologies could be interviewed.

4. Finding studies on other language learning applications apart from DuoLingo was not possible as most studies on Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) technologies were primarily based upon DuoLingo.

Conclusion:

It must be noted that individuals who wish to learn foreign languages in a serious manner still do make the effort of going to institutes that conduct these courses even with the existence of applications. Therefore, the scenario of foreign language learning has almost had no change even after the existence of digital platforms such as foreign language learning applications.

Prior to the digital age, questions of comparison between applications or digital platforms and institutional learning had no relevance. However, in a day like today, we can see that younger generations too prefer institutional learning than application based learning. This is in contrast to the findings by Steel and Levy in 2013 which stated that “Students are using their own technologies both inside and especially outside the classroom to access language learning opportunities and to supplement face-to-face classes” (Steel and Levy 2013:319).

The older age group having more exposure to institutional learning may have had certain difficulties adapting to the new technologies that have come up. Although, we did see how the older (forty years of age and above) and younger (thirty years of age and below) age groups had similar viewpoints. Therefore, in conclusion, we could say that foreign language learning before and during the digital age has not changed. In addition, applications seem to serve as value added services to institution based learning. Today, there is more accessibility to learn any language one may wish to.

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