Sustaining Communication Skills Development of ESL Learners through the Effective Use of Computer - Mediated Communication – an Opportunity during the COVID–19 Interruption

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Abstract - The COVID-19 pandemic, better termed as a "transitional period", has interrupted most of the sectors in the world, whereas Education is the only industry that still sustains its locus by shifting into an Emergency Distance Education (EDE) setting, which poses a significant challenge for teachers in teaching "communication skills". In this way, this study sheds light on the current position of communication skills in ESL e-learning context and explores the ways in which Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) can be effectively used in a way to promote fluency and accuracy that leads to effective communication skills on ESL learners in Sri Lankan context. To this end, about 50 tertiary level ESL students were selected. Further, this study uses TBLT and CLT principles, and some Computer-Mediated Communication Technologies. For data gathering, questionnaires, a pre-task and post-task and their language use in selected CMC applications were used. A set of 15 ESL teachers were interviewed to shed light into the current position of communication skills in language instruction. The data gathered was analyzed through mixed method. The findings indicate that, teaching communication skills is, for the most part ineffective in the present context due to the lack of learners' active participation and it is highly neglected in e-learning. Besides, the findings show that the students participated actively and more interactively in CMC environments. Further, it helps in language "acquisition" and other soft skills development. Thus, CMC environment would be an ideal choice for students with low proficiency levels and high anxiety levels in the present-day context. Hence, the paper suggests raising awareness on the appropriate use of CMC technologies would be critical to overcome the future linguistic challenges.
Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Emergency Distance Education (EDE), Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

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