

Online Language Learning Resources: A Feature Analysis

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Abstract

The onslaught of Covid-19 pandemic has made the current year the least effective as far as academic activities are concerned. Concerns and doubts are looming large on proper impartation of class room teaching, right from elementary to higher education. Inquisitiveness in us is exploring virtual mode of education and there is no better time to ponder upon the method and the medium than now and access it's potential. Numerous websites have started providing virtual classes and courses in varied subjects and are turning more and more creative and interactive to the users. The present paper tries to explore the language teaching and learning as being presently provided by various on-line resources across the globe including India.

This article aims at evaluating the online language learning websites and looks into the availabilities of linguistic contents and materials. It also looks into the techniques and activities used as a part of language instruction practice by the websites. This study has used the secondary sources to do the qualitative analysis with quantitative expressions. For the current study, multiple websites have been assessed on the basis of certain parameters such as, number of languages

available for learning, conduction of placement test, accessibility, learning purpose, learning level, language activities, linguistic contents, language assessment and user friendliness. Following are the elaborations of the mentioned features.

Keywords: Virtual Classes, Online Language Courses, Online Instruction, Language Websites, Linguistic Content and Material, Online Resources, Placement Test.

1 .Introduction:

Whenever, a review is done of any material in printed form such as book or article etc., the analysis generally refers to certain instruments such as structural lay out, conceptual details and contents covered. Similarly, the current research, which looks into the online resources have also taken the help of the above stated factors. The only additions to the mentioned instruments are accessibility and user friendliness. There are multiple resources available for e-language learning and the interest of the present study is in the language learning websites. Most of the websites are offering courses in multiple languages and the languages which are offered the most are English, Spanish, French, Russian, Chinese, Italian, Arabic, German, Korean, Japanese. Similarly, amongst Indian languages, Hindi is the most offered language for learning in national as well as global websites.

2. Elements used for feature analysis:

As mentioned earlier, this research paper has focused on various interactive language learning websites and has evaluated fifteen language learning websites¹ following certain

¹ The websites used for evaluation in this article are for bona-fide and fair use for academic and research purpose only.

parameters. The parameters chosen for the feature analysis of the websites, has given emphasis on both linguistic contents as well as extralinguistic information.

2.1 Extra linguistic features:

The extra linguistic feature presents the structural and functional aspects of a language learning website, which are as follows:

a. Number of languages available for learning:

It provides the total of the languages available for learning in a particular website. This feature shows the linguistic diversity carried by a website². However, numerical strength is not the sole decisive factor of a language website to be good, rather the content provided for learning should reciprocate it.

b. Conduction of placement test:

Placement test deals with the general abilities of the learner rather than specific skills. This test is brief and quick for identification of learners' abilities, to allocate them, beginner, intermediate or advanced level (Nagaraj, 1996:204). Preliminary test lets the instructor become aware of the strength and weaknesses of a learner. Hence it become important to test it. This feature enquires, whether a particular website conducts any preliminary test to identify the current level of a learner, before initiating the teaching and learning process.

Yes/No dichotomy has been used for presenting the research data.

c. Accessibility:

Accessibility has been judged by the website's convenient interface. The idea is to scroll through the pages and contents of the website to check whether people with diverse abilities can utilise its resource to its fullest potential. However, the current work looks into the

² The sum of the languages provided during feature analysis of a website, is as per the latest data available on a specific website

accessibility, whether it provides free or paid service. The services provided by a particular website has been recorded under three categories such as free, freemium and premium. The free service is devoid of any charge and provides an open access to all its linguistic content and material. The Freemium language service supply free learning content up to a certain level and then demands a fixed amount for furtherance of the learning process and level. The premium services are those which can't be accessed, without taking a paid subscription.

d. Learning Purpose:

Learning purpose has already been proved to be a major determiner for learning outcome. Website's set up and content is analysed to see whether it imparts training to users, usually in an education setting, to use language appropriately. This feature differentiates the learning purpose under three categories such as academic, non-academic and professional. If the website purposefully stresses on achieving classroom-based goals, it can be categorised as website with academic purpose. On the other hand, if the website and its content on language teaching is about informal use of language in an informal set up without systematic classroom inspired goals/tasks of learning, the website is categorised under non-academic purpose. Similarly, professional language teaching inspires a learner to get mastery over language to accomplish specific professional objectives.

e. Learner Level:

Learner's level has always been a key issue in instructional medium, as it directly influences the design, preparation and production of study materials. Therefore, it's crucial to know the types of learning contents available in the websites. Content does differ depending on various level of learning. Under this parameter, there is an attempt to identify,

the type of learning material available on a particular website and its appropriacy for specific learning level. The linguistics contents of a website have been mapped in accordance to three learning level, such as beginner, intermediate and advanced.

f. Learning assessment:

Stassen et al., (2001) defined assessment as the systematic collection and analysis of information to improve students' learning. Assessment is a key component in learning. It helps a learner to know his/ her learning achievement level and which ultimately functions as a motivating factor for improving learning as well as chasing higher academic or non-academic goals in life. The availability of this feature is checked by going through the website's mode of conducting periodic tests, gradual upward difficulty level etc.. Learning assessment has been referred to yes/no dichotomy, in the current feature analysis, for the possible findings related to conduction of learning assessment by a specific website.

g. User friendliness³:

For analysing this parameter, the website is scanned to check the user interface, simple appearance and easy to interact. It has been ranked on the scale of high, moderate and low.

2.2 Linguistic features:

The linguistic features include the actual academic teaching contents provided by a specific website for language learning, which are as follows:

a. Linguistic contents:

Linguistic operates at multiple levels such as phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. However, the linguistic content analysis for this specific study has selected

³ User friendliness has been represented by the researcher's personal interactive experience with a specific website.

three levels such as phonetics, morphology and syntax. Thereby, this feature has undertaken a qualitative investigation of linguistic content with special emphasis on sound, words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs available for learning in a specific website.

b. Language activities:

Language activities do play an important role in effective and substantial language learning. This feature looks into the kind of activities used for language instruction in the respective websites. This linguistic feature enquires, whether a specific website promotes individual or pair/group learning activities.

c. Teaching Learning Material (TLM):

TLMs are always been employed well, to get better learning outcomes during a pedagogic session. Hence, it is necessary to explore the type of TLMs, a website utilises to engage a learner in the learning process and how the content information has been conveyed to its learners. TLM used for language instruction by a particular website has been clubbed under the segments of audio, video, textual and graphical medium.

Table 1

Serial No.	TLM Types	Examples
1	Audio	Podcast, E-Text with Audio, Mp3 Player
2	Video	Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, You Tube
3	Textual	Book, Article, Journal, Magazine, Newspaper
4	Graphical	Maps, Photographs, Designs and Patterns, Family Trees, Diagrams, Architectural or Engineering Blueprints, Bar Charts and Pie

		Charts, Typography, Schematics, Line Art, Flowcharts, Image Forms.
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3. Feature Analysis of the websites:

Henceforth, the feature analysis proceeds with the help of above mentioned extralinguistic and linguistic features. The websites included in feature analysis with the linguistic and extralinguistic data are given below. The following table has got twelve columns and each column except 1st and 2nd, counts for a specific feature. 1st and 2nd column provide the serial number and name of the websites respectively.

Table 2⁴

Serial No.	Website Name	Language	Placement	Accessibility	Purpose Learning	Learner	Activities Used	Assessment	TLM	linguistic content	User-Friendliness
1	duolingo.com	38	Y	FM	Acad., N.Acad.	All	Indv.	Y	All	sound, word, sentence	High
2	open culture.com	48	Y	F	Acad.	All	Both	Y	Aud., Vid., Text.	word, sentence, paragraph	Mod.

⁴ The listed websites used for feature analysis, in this article on bona-fide and fair use for academic research purpose only.

3	babbel.com	14	Y	PM	All	All	Both		Au, Text.	word, phrase, sentence	Mod.
4	busuu.com	12	Y	FM	All	All	Both	Y	Aud., Text.	word, sentence, paragraph	High
5	living language .com	28 ⁵	N	FM	All	All	Both	Y	All	word, sentence	High
6	memrise.com	16	Y ⁶	FM	All	All	Both	Y	All	All	High
7	live language .com	8	Y	F	Acad.	All	Both	Y	All	word, phrase, sentence, paragraph	High
8	learn a language .com	19	N	F	All	All	Indv.	N	All	word, phrase	High
9	fluentu.com	9	N	FM	Acad.	All	Indv.	N	All	All	Mod.

⁵ Living language.com offers 28 languages for learning which includes 1 sign language.

⁶ Memrise stresses on self-assessment

10	omniglot .com	NS M ⁷	N	F	Acad.	All	Indv.	N	Aud., Text., GRF.	All	High
11	swan tutors online.co m	13	Y	F	Acad., Pro.	All	Indv.	Yes	All	All	High
12	dwibhasi .com	10	No	F	Acad.	Beg., ,	Indv.	No	Text, GRF	word, sentence	Mod.
13	ciil.org	4	N	F	Acad.	All	Indv.	No	Text	All	High
14	coursera .com	37	Y	FM	All	All	Both	Yes	All	All	High
15	language home.co m	39	N	F	Acad., N.Acad.	Beg.	Indv.	No	Text. Aud, Vid.	sound, words, sentence	High

The list of abbreviation used:

Yes= Y, No=N, Freemium=FM, Free=F, Premium=PM, Academic=Acad., Non-Academic= N. Acad., Professional=Pro., Beginner=Beg., Intermediate=Int., Advanced= Adv., Individual=Ind., Audio=Aud, Video=Vid., Textual= Text., Graphical= GRF, Moderate= Mod.

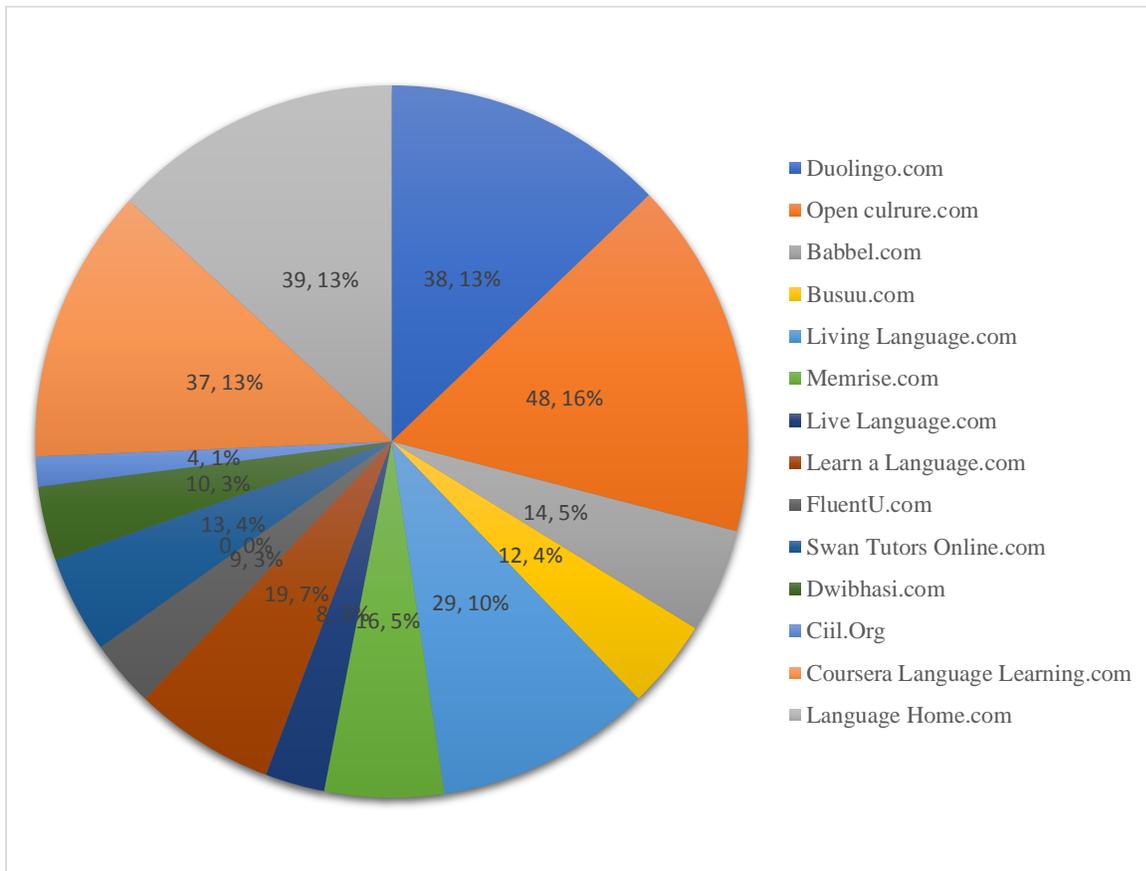
4. Findings:

This section is highlighting the principal outcomes of the undertaken study. The mode of data representation is graphical. Each column represents a feature starting from column number 3

⁷ NSM=No Specific Number Mentioned (more than 1300 languages)

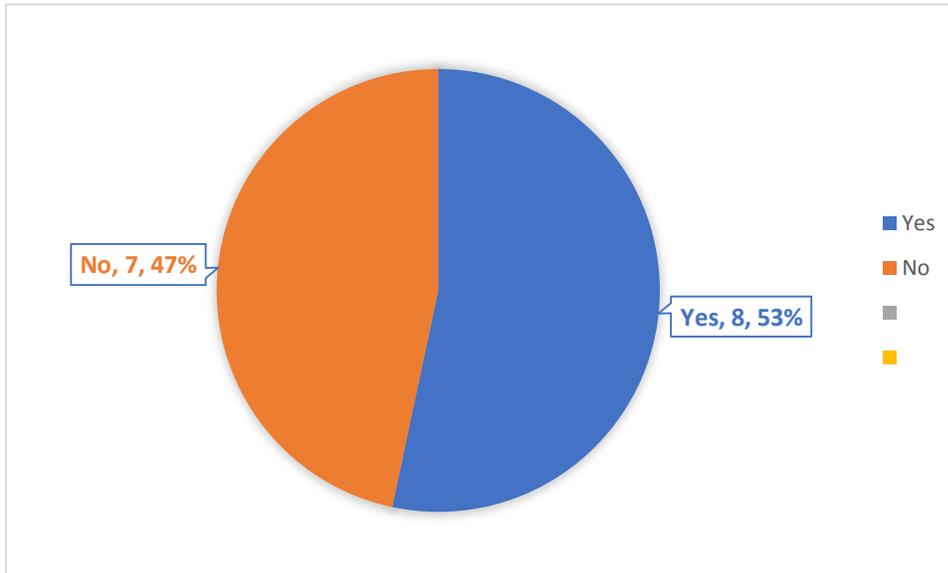
to 12. Against each website, its features are analysed assigning findings in different form. The graphical representation of the finding corresponds to each feature under the column. The Columned feature is named C₃ to C₁₂ and the corresponding findings are numbered as F₃ to F₁₂. The findings are numbered according the column numbers.

C₃. Number of languages available in a specific website for learning:



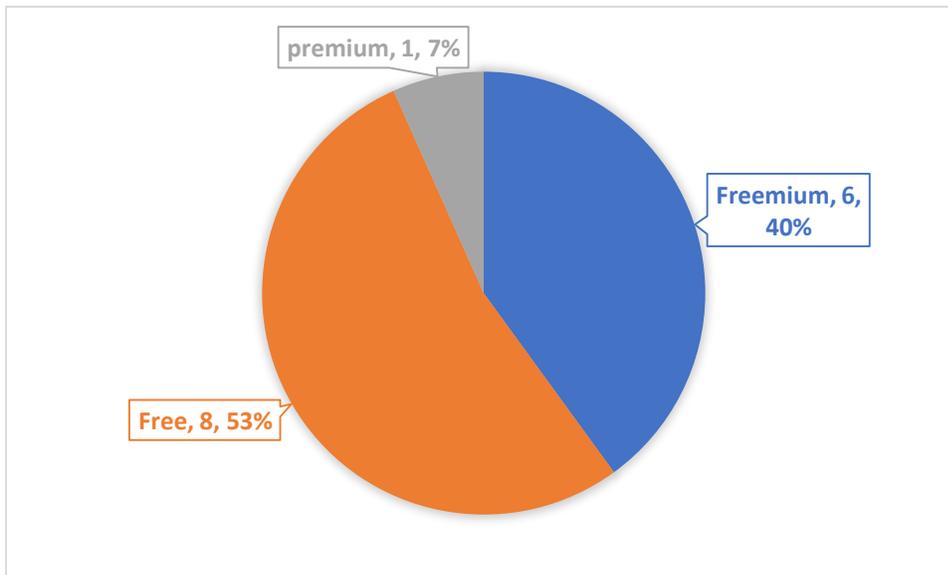
F₃. Omniglot.com provides the highest number of languages for learning but there is no specific number mentioned. Hence, it has not been included in the graphical presentation. the numerical data count shows that Open culture.com and Ciil.org has got the highest and the lowest contributory percentage respectively in the language count.

C4. Conduction of placement test:



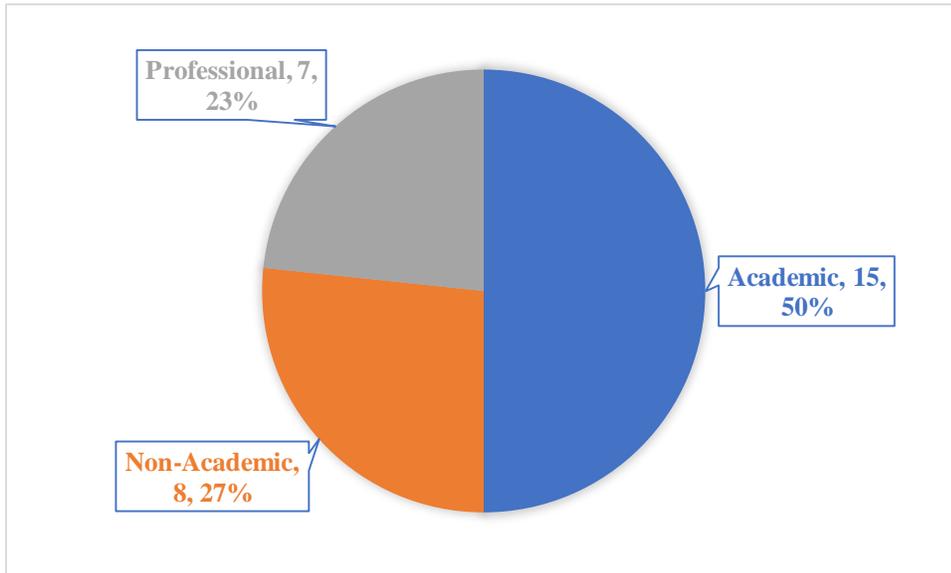
F4: The graph shows that, out of fifteen websites, 53% conducts placement test before out setting the teaching learning process, whereas 47% don't conduct any placement test.

C5. Website Accessibility:



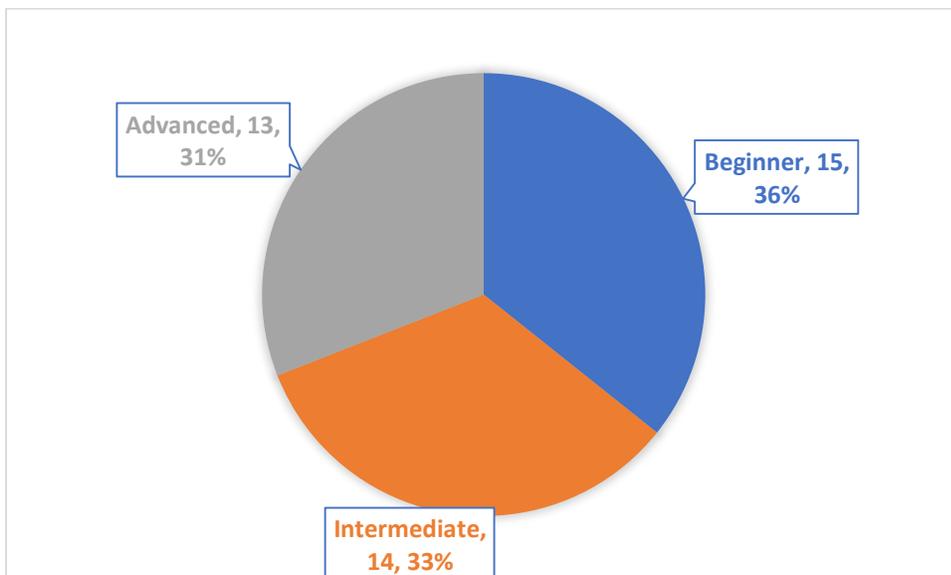
F5. The graphical study displays that percentage count for freemium, free and premium services are 53, 40 and 7 is respectively.

C6. Learning Purpose (Academic, Non- academic, Professional):



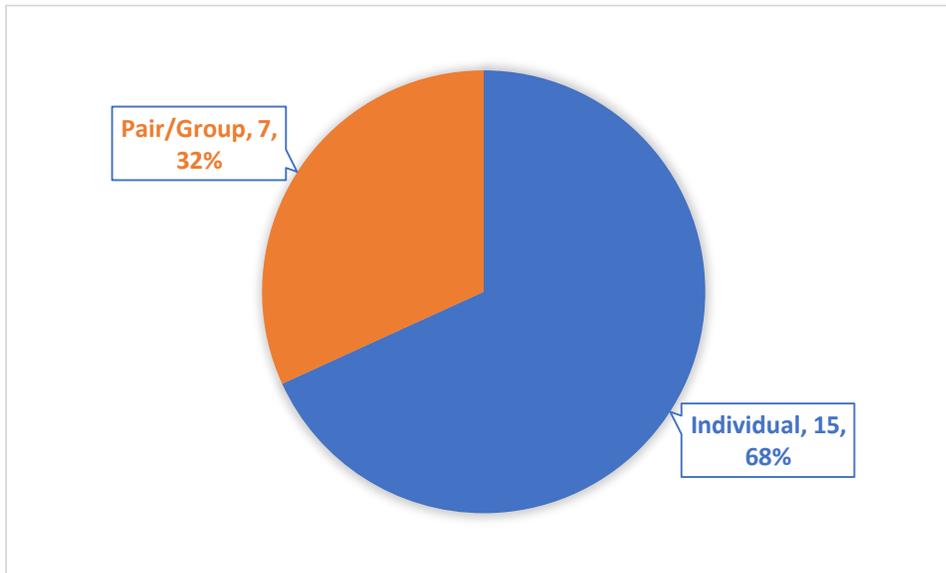
F6: The finding derived from the above data show that all websites majorly contribute towards academic learning. Whereas, the non-academic and professional learning occupies the 2nd and 3rd position respectively.

C7. Learner Level:



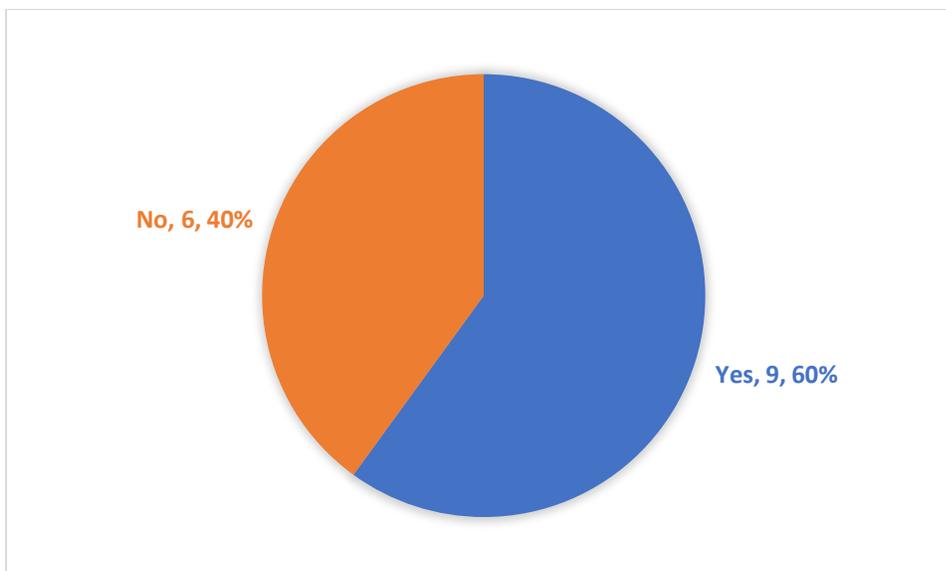
F7. The above data show that the contribution of the websites for instructing beginner, intermediate and advanced level occupies 36%, 33% and 31% respectively.

C8. Language activities:



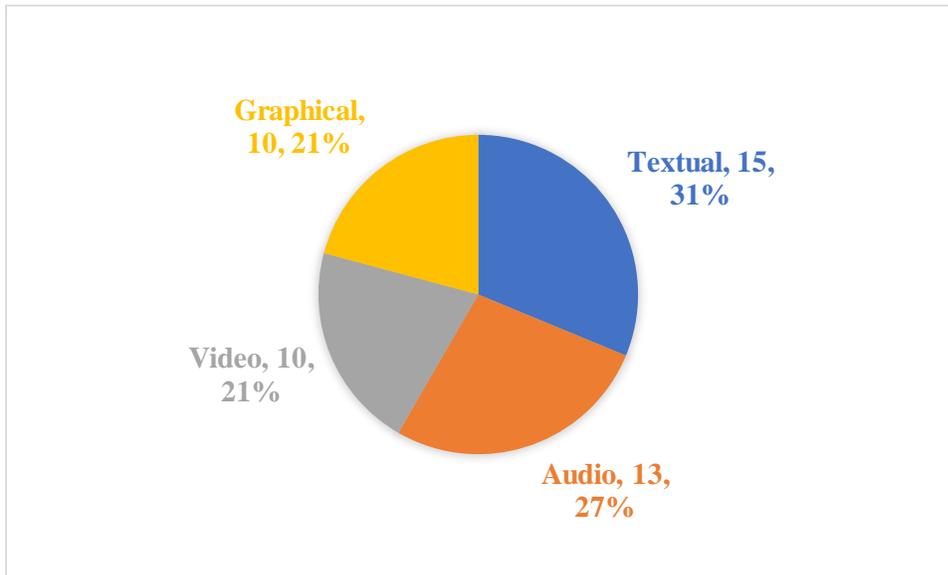
F9. Websites contribute 68% for individual activities. In addition to this, the pair/group activities designed by websites contributed 32%.

C9. Assessment:



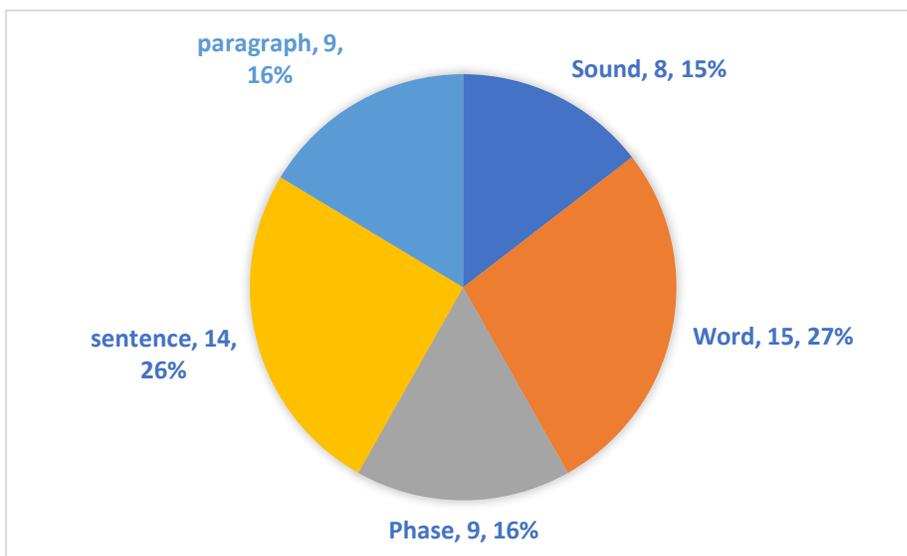
F₉. The above graphical study shows that 60% websites conduct assessment. On the contrary 40% of the websites included in the study do not show any provision of taking assessment.

C₁₀: Teaching Learning Material (TLM) used for instruction:



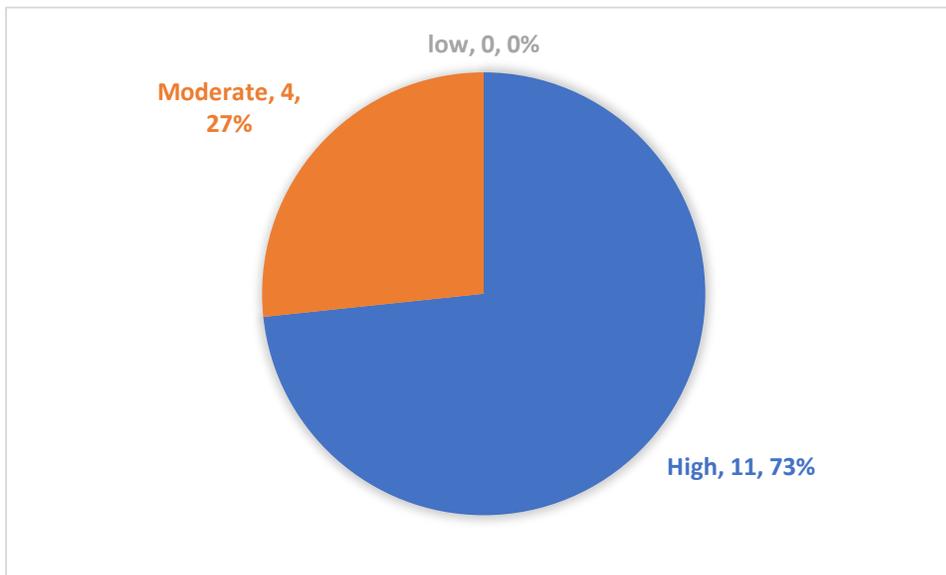
F₉. The share percentage of audio and video-based instruction are 27% and 21% respectively on the virtual medium of the websites under study. Graphical and textual material forms 21% and 31% respectively. However, textual material is found to be the majority contributor to TLM.

C₁₁. Linguistic Content:



F₁₁. The graph on linguistic content displays that the online language learning websites heavily focused on word level and the emphasis on paragraph development is the least of all.

C₁₂. User Friendliness:



F₁₂. The analysis of the user friendliness feature for the mentioned websites show that the user interface of most of the websites have high degree of interactivity.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations:

The feature analysis of the language learning websites has suggested multiple conclusions, which are as follows:

- i. A little less than half websites are not conducting placement tests, hence it needs to be incorporated to their website features, as it provides a better insight into a learner's current level of proficiency. This also helps to personalise language learning experience and thus paves pathway for better learning.

- ii. As per as the accessibility is concerned, most of the global language learning sites provide free services for beginner level, whereas for advanced learning, a premium subscription has to be done.
- iii. Group level community learning should be encouraged, as collaborative learning enhances the ZPD (zone of proximal development), which ultimately gets reflected in a learner's acquired linguistic skills.
- iv. The data of linguistic level analysis has suggested that sound level activities should be necessarily incorporated and encouraged, as most of the studies on error analysis suggests that the first language influences the second language speech. Hence, more is the students' awareness of phonetic level notation and pronunciation of the target language less will be the error production. In addition to it, paragraph level activities should also be introduced and regulated sincerely in order to get good oral or written production at composition level.
- v. Any kind of assessment, may it be formative or summative is a must. As learning and assessment are very intimately and effectively connected for the success of any pedagogical practice. Whether, the learning is online or offline, commencing any type of assessment should be given a priority.
- vi. The website should necessarily take into consideration the requirement of differently abled learners' requirements while designing and executing the learning programmes, which will definitely pave a pathway for inclusive education.

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