



Teaching and Learning English with Digital Systems: Challenges and Prospects

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Available online at: www.isroset.org

Received 01/Nov/2017, Revised 15/Nov/2017, Accepted 20/Dec/2017, Online 31/Jan/2018

Abstract- The scenario of teaching learning of foreign language has been advancing with the usage of digital systems in the educational field. The maximized use of Internet and Digital Systems has modified the traditional Language Laboratories into Digital Language Labs. The Computerized Language Laboratory as an audio-visual installation of technological tools has been used as an effective aid in English language teaching-learning process. Today, both the teacher and student are equipped with computer aided tools that may help in teaching learning of a foreign language. The Digital Language Lab is the multilingual computing and assessment hub, offering reliable audio and video recording capability, digital media content and software images to support computing in multiple foreign character sets. A Language Lab with Digital systems provides physical and virtual cross-cultural encounter environment to the students at one place.

In an India context, it is very difficult to provide these advanced systems in schools and colleges where the primary needs are not offered to the students. Though there is a space and prospectus of Language Lab equipped with Digital Systems; there are challenges too. The present paper highlights the prospectus and challenges in concern to Digital Systems used in Language Laboratories.

Key-words: Language Lab, Digital Systems, foreign language, audio-video aids, CALL

Introduction

With the turning of time, teaching and learning of English and the tools used for it are developed and advanced through and through. Mehmet Faith Urun rightly comments, "Today, nobody can claim that a language class that does not use some forms of technology serves for effective language learning/teaching. Recently, starting from kindergarten and reaching to higher education, technology has been used both to support and to enhance language education." (76)

Nowadays various tools including audio-visual aids are brought together forming and setting up an advanced practical classroom for the language learners. Various systems have been developed for this purpose. Foreign languages like English are being taught with the help of computer software forming the Language Laboratory. Thus, teaching and learning of English has been made effective due to computer assisted language learning technology. The term, CALL (Computer assisted language learning) has been used for the teaching/learning with the help of digital systems using audio-visual aids and computer based software. M. Levy defines CALL "as the study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning." (Levy 1)

The language laboratory is an audio or audio-visual practical classroom with Computer aided software installation used as an aid in modern language teaching. "CALL is widely used to refer to the area of technology and second language teaching and learning." (Chapelle 3)

Initially, language laboratories were tape-based systems using reel to reel or cassette. Today, there are drastic changes occurred and the installations are generally multimedia PCs software. The original but outdated language labs allowed a teacher to listen to and manage student audio via a hard-wired analogue tape deck based systems with 'sound booths' in fixed locations. The modern language lab provides the learners with not merely two way communication, but also calling and video conferencing.

Revolution in teaching learning a foreign language

In the traditional type of language lab, the system generally comprises a teacher console electrically connected to a number of rows of student booths, with a student tape recorder and headset and a microphone. The teacher console is usually fitted with master tape recorder.

The most simple or first generation language laboratories allow the teacher to remotely control the tape controls including recording, stopping and rewinding of the students booths from the master desk. This allows the teacher-controller with easy distribution of the master programme material which is often copied at high speed onto the student positions at their own pace. Once the master program had been transferred onto the students' tape recorders, the teacher would then hand over control of the decks to the students. By pressing the record key in the booth, the students simultaneously hear the playback of the program whilst being able to record their voice in the pauses using the microphone. This is known as an audio active-comparative system. From a technological point of view, this overdubbing was made possible by use of a two-channel tape recorder.

But these days brought the demise of the traditional language laboratory. Many schools and colleges started transforming their age old language laboratories into advanced software computer suites. However, the advent of affordable multimedia capable PCs in the late 1990s led to a resurgence and transformation of the language laboratory with modern software and hard drives. There emerged a new wave of language teaching, that is, "Communicative language teaching". In this method, interactive and meaningful activities were the key aims for learners to gain. (Richards and Rogers, 27)

The third generation CALL, that is, interactive CALL added new digital, hybrid PC based systems that allowed extended functionality in terms of better 'management' of student/teacher audio-visual with some levels of internet connectivity. In 2000s, computer software, the Internet and multimedia applications appropriated to a language lessons were integrated, thereby exposing the students to "a common lab experience." (qtd. Kilickaya 21)

As far as India is concerned, old fashioned language labs were still being used and that too, only in metropolitan cities. While the remote villages and towns were far away from this advancement. But today, the situation is getting changed drastically. The evolution of the use of audio media in English instruction has provided "interactive and extensive use of authentic listening materials." (Urun 77) And therefore, there is no other option except go for these digital systems for teaching/learning of foreign language effectively.

Prospects

Today, Language laboratories with Digital system and software are becoming highly valued in modern Indian educational system at schools, colleges and universities. It is because this Digital system installed in the laboratories offer students a structured eLearning environment that is successful and reliable. New technologies are increasingly more present in classrooms as they facilitate the teacher's

role in creating a more attractive learning environment for the student and can offer their students more practice hours and up-to-date exercises than can be found in language books. Nowadays information and Communications Technology (ICT) are used as an alternative for CALL. The computer, the Internet, and a variety of common computer applications play a central role in ICT technologies. Moreover, "Cloud, Twitter, Facebook, webquests, games and mobile devices (tablets and smart phones) stand out as the newest ICTs that are used for learning/teaching a language." (Urun 78) The following are the prospects of using these technologies in the English language classroom.

Learning at one's own pace

With functions such as Broadcasting, Screen capturing, Monitoring, Audio/Video Recording, Lesson Assigning/Editing, File transferring, two way communication etc. in the Digital Language Lab system, the teacher console acts as a control board for the educator to instruct and monitor the activities of students while they practise the lessons. The teacher could interact with students individually from the teacher console without disturbing others.

The student console in the digital language laboratory acts as a control board for the students to visualize, listen, repeat and compare the lessons allotted in the class by the teacher. They can interact with the teacher, save recorded files and forward the files to the teacher for evaluation. Since the laboratory gives every learner freedom to learn at their own pace, it is flexible and does not necessarily require a teacher all the time. "Computers enable each individual to work according to his own pace. The user may move freely from one component to another as he wishes and according to his needs. This characteristic makes CALL programs cater for individual differences." (Naba'h 436)

Learning with speed and intuition

Digital system of learning does not require professional technical skills for use in the classroom, the teacher only needs basic computer skills and students will welcome the added technology they are already so adept with. Practice in digital system assisted language laboratories leads to language learning success! Language labs' interactive audio-visual and software aided courses help students learn and acquire a foreign language much faster than in a regular classroom setting. The methodology of the classroom language network uses a progressive model to promote natural learning, where students learn the different concepts of language in an intuitive way. The language lab boosts the motivation of students achieving higher levels of language retention and progress. "Computers instructional programs are interactive. Learners can easily go forward or backward according to their needs and requirements." (Naba'h 436)

Facilitating teacher's role

There is a big fear in the educational world that technology will replace the role of the teacher and the position will become obsolete entirely. The digital language laboratories debunk this myth by facilitating and providing important supplementary materials that only facilitate the role of the instructor rather than compete with it. The teacher can then focus on the important parts of the course rather than waste time explaining everything. The structure of the language lab courses also facilitate the work teacher puts in when preparing lessons and allow them to prepare them in less time and with a greater volume of interactive resources. The course then collects the student information and provides instantaneous reports of the lesson's progress against objectives; the teacher uses this information to guide the direction of the class. Thus, the computers have become the powerful tool of interaction, exchange and evaluation.

Ample Practice in an entertaining and interactive way

Learning a new language just by studying the theory is not enough to guarantee a successful language learning experience. Language Laboratories with Digital systems provide practice in an entertaining and interactive way to acquire and master the four language skills - LSRW: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. Students learn more interestingly and comprehensively through a digital language lab, using more class time instead to achieve these three main objectives:

- a. Self-learning: The student progresses in a self-guided but structured and progressive training to achieve the goals and objective set by an educational institute.
- b. Complimentary: Language labs allow students to reinforce material learned in class by putting them into practice through interactive activities.
- c. Monitoring and Evaluation: Teachers know the progress of each student and receive reports of strengths and weaknesses to better adapt the classroom activities.

Thus, the use of multimedia devices for learning gives students the chance to use many senses during the learning process; thereby it empowers their faculties of retention. (Naba'h 436)

Varied resources and activities

Language Labs assisted with digital systems allow students to practice the language with a much wider variety of activities and exercises based on the computer system. Learning occurs in a structured way, in a real context and visually attractive way that immerses the student in the language learning environment and promotes language use. The students can watch videos, practice and compare

their pronunciation through a speech recognizer, learn new vocabulary, grammar and much more.

Digital system assisted Language laboratories provide teacher attention to students, especially in the case of schools and colleges with different levels as interactive courses of language labs are tailored to the individual needs of students. On the other hand, thanks to monitoring and evaluation in real time, the teacher knows exactly what course objectives pose major difficulties for the students and can reinforce the class accordingly.

Foster and strengthen communication skills

Digital Language labs encourage communication between student-teacher as well as student-student with activities and exercises essential to oral communication and the understanding of the language. The labs include tools for creating groups, host conversations via chat, promote messages on the board, access to a community of students who are also studying the same language, etc.

Optimizing computing resources

Both universities and colleges have classrooms with computers there for students to complete educational works or study other subjects. There are also a number of faculty computer labs or office computers for administration available. Language labs essentially recycle resources an educational institute already has and adapts it to the language course.

In short, Digital language labs are a very comprehensive and cost-effective tool for educational institutions to monetize their language training and also offer students effective language learning via the latest technology and educational content. They are the perfect solution for designing a structured academic curriculum in accordance with the objectives of an educational centre with an international vocation audience that seeks the highest quality in teaching.

Challenges

Though Digital language laboratories are helping hands to both the teacher and the students, they are not very likely to be adopted due to the challenges to overcome. Generally, the teacher community and the concerned are afraid that "it may come to dominate us; we are afraid that it may come to dominate us, we have qualms about dehumanization in a subject which is concerned above all with human communication, and we may even be afraid of losing our jobs." (Nabah 431) The following are a few challenges:

Not affordable: It is very expensive to set up the language lab in country like India where there is no lab syllabus and usually language classes are conducted as theory.

Limited resources: The digital lab can engage maximum of 60 students hence space is also difficult for school and college.

Lack of students' interest: In schools and colleges the students do not have enough patience to listen to the recorded programmes, and practice them. Then naturally, the recording of pronunciation is useless.

Teacher's training: As the teacher listens to students randomly the response can be unorganized and ineffective as there are many students to attend to. The teacher should be well trained in executing the language lab effectively.

Lack of funds: Given the nature of teaching, a language teacher may need an assistant in taking care of the technological part while teacher attends to the instructional components. As technology changes rapidly, there should be a provision for upgrade in the medium of instructions, which can be burden for school in terms of finances. The ministry of education should consider allocating funds to set up as well as maintenance of language lab. If all these basic problems can be solved only then we can think of implementing language lab in our curriculum.

In spite of these challenges, more recently many more educations institutes like English medium schools and engineering colleges have come up and are setting up language labs with digital systems though initially in less number of PCs. As Mehmet Faith Urun observes, "Technology continues to grow in importance as a tool to

assist instruction of foreign languages in facilitating and mediating language learning for the students." (76)

To conclude, computerised language laboratories are converting classrooms into multi-media classes. It has been the need of time as students are positive towards using language labs since this digital environment is motivating and helpful for students' English proficiency. A well-equipped language lab including new trends and technology is a need for students with their comforting and motivating atmosphere. The students are inclined to have separate lab hours instead of using classrooms as multimedia environment.

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