

Technology and Teachers

Ms. Deepti Jindal

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Language Education and Second Language Acquisition

The field of education has changed much in the last few decades. Traditional ways of education are giving way to newer, more innovative ways of thinking about how we learn, teach and acquire knowledge.

Language education, the teaching and learning of a language, which includes improving a learner's mastery of her or his native language, is more commonly used with regard to second language acquisition, which means the learning of a foreign or second language. Learning a second language has become very important today as we are in a world where globalization and cultural diversity are becoming part of our daily lives. People need to learn a second language as they need common languages in business, tourism, technology, media, science and other fields. Whereas in countries like Japan and China, teaching of one foreign language at primary and secondary level has been made essential, the countries like Malaysia and Philippines, Singapore and India, have made English a second official language.

Impact of Software Development

The upcoming of software industry has changed style and movements of life. The field of teaching is also getting so much affected by technology that debates have started on replacing classroom teaching to online instruction. Technology serves as a storehouse of contents that a learner can access from anywhere and at anytime.

With the coming of technology, Language education has also been changing at a very high rate. Technology is opening up many new possibilities for language learning, and the internet has come with enormous potential. We see many technological tools for language learning today. The types of technology include social networking tools (where one has screen capture, audacity,

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Technology and Teachers

slide share, social bookmarking, polling, blogs and discussion groups); applications and games for learning; and other activities that use technology.

Chatterbot

One area the internet has opened up lately is the use of chatterbots for language practice. A ‘chatterbot’ is a computer program designed to simulate an intelligent conversation with one or more human users via auditory or textual methods. As far as the teaching/learning of a foreign language in schools and colleges is concerned, so far language labs are considered most useful. Modern day language labs or language learning centers empower teachers to organize activities where the students are able to practice all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in an interactive, personalized fashion.

Language Learning and Language Lab

Language Learning is an interactive process. To learn a language, all the four skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing (LSRW) are equally important. Among these four, Listening and Speaking skills are paramount. It is an open fact that in Indian context, Listening and Speaking are grossly neglected. Modern language labs with their powerful multimedia and interactivity capabilities help a lot in enhancing Listening and Speaking skills. They also provide an ideal way for teachers to connect with their technology-savvy, new-generation students.

The language laboratory is an audio or audio-visual installation used as an aid in modern language teaching. Different teachers will describe a language lab in different ways depending upon their own individual experiences. Most would probably think about a dedicated room with desktop computers at each student station, with some type of control console at the teacher’s desk. Those without a dedicated room might describe a portable system with laptops that can be wheeled to room, often referred to as a COW (computers on wheels). Teachers with younger students might envision a system where students don’t even have individual computers. The teacher simply plays audio-visual materials on a single station connected to a projector or large screen TV. In universities and colleges, there might not even be a room at all. Perhaps students

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Technology and Teachers

work on a self-study basis and communicate with their instructor via e-mail, or perhaps students do work synchronously with their instructor but using a virtual classroom, where everyone connects from home or dorm rooms via the Internet. But no matter what the physical format of the lab, the common bond that separates the *lab* from the *classroom* is that students are equipped for hands-on practice of their language skills. What does *hands-on practice* mean for language learning? In a language lab, students do not play a passive role.

A Digital Language Lab

A digital language lab is a network of computers plus appropriate software. It provides most of the functions of a conventional (tape based) language lab along with integration of video, word-processing and other computer applications. A Digital Language Lab incorporates the following basic objectives – Listen, Speak / Respond, Read, Write / Type, Recording and Evaluating. A digital language lab provides:

- ⊙ **Versatility**- Text, Images, Audio, and Video can easily be integrated and the teacher can remodel and alter materials.
- ⊙ **Interactivity**- Students can record their own voice and play back the recordings, interact with each other and the Teacher, and store results.
- ⊙ **Teacher Intervention**- The teacher has control of students' computers via Teacher's Console, track student work etc.
- ⊙ **Independent Learning** - Access to resources beyond the timetable encourages independent learning.

Use of the Digital Language Lab for 'Listening' Skill

- ⊙ Learners listen in order to pinpoint the main idea, a segment or listen for specific facts.
- ⊙ The use of headphones gives a sense of isolation, equal clarity of sound and facilities complete concentration.
- ⊙ Authentic, consistent, untiring models of speech for imitation and drill are provided in a Language Lab. Listen-repeat-record pattern is followed.
- ⊙ Students listen to a variety of Native Speakers.
- ⊙ Structured Listening Tests are administered.

Use of the Digital Language Lab for ‘Speaking’ Skill

- ⦿ Dialogues are effectively used in pairs.
- ⦿ Videos play an important role; they can be controlled.
- ⦿ Allows learners to see lip movements, facial expressions and body language.
- ⦿ Also observe stress, intonation and rhythm of target language.
- ⦿ Reducing Mother Tongue Influence (MTI) through voice recording.

Fundamental Role of a Language Laboratory

Practice is essential to understanding and speaking a foreign language. It is very difficult for a live teacher to repeatedly provide the consistently authentic model and carefully sequenced progression of drills. To provide this hands-on practice with the subject materials is the fundamental role of the language laboratory.

The students can improve the basics of grammar and vocabulary by running repeat-after-me drills, but more importantly, students can improve their communication skills by being exposed authentic communication scenarios. This helps them to know how the language skills can be used in a practical fashion.

Portable Language Lab Systems

There are several different types of systems that fall under the heading of portable language labs.

➤ *COWs (Computers On Wheels):*

Typically, a COW is a large lockable box on wheels capable of holding a teacher workstation and console, plus having up to 30 shelves for storing student laptop computers and student headsets.

There are a couple of potential issues with COWs, the first being that it takes a finite amount of time to hand-out and collect the laptops at the beginning and end of class, so there is some lost productivity. Also, students and teachers must be diligent about plugging in laptop power supplies, or one will discover the occasional dead laptop at the beginning of class.

There is also a technical limitation, and this has to do with interconnecting the stations via a wireless network rather than a wired network. Wireless networks – even those compliant with the latest “wireless-n” standards support considerably less bandwidth (as much as 80 times less bandwidth) as their wired counterparts. From a language lab perspective, this severely limits the number of students that can participate in an activity at any given time.

In some cases, the expectation is that students will carry their own laptops, but even when all students are required to purchase a standardized laptop, this increases the potential problems for the school IT department to manage software revisions and avoid conflicts with 3rd party software.

➤ ***LLIAB (Language-Lab-in-a-Box):***

The language-lab-in-a-box differs from the COW in that students are not normally equipped with individual computers. Instead, student terminals comprise a small box that serves as a connection point for their headset and in some cases includes some interactive controls.

LLIAB systems are supplied in both wired and wireless variations. The wired versions include greater functionality, but the student terminals are tethered to the teacher’s console with cables that are typically stored on large spools in the box. The wireless systems offer greater freedom, but are usually quite limited in functionality – often even lacking a basic recording capability. Several manufacturers provide language-learning systems that are sometimes characterized as a *language-lab-in-a-box*. These systems can be literally packed into a large box with casters, and wheeled from room to room.

In some cases, wireless communication technologies are used to simplify the set-up of portable systems in any available room.

Multi-Discipline Labs

Multi-discipline labs are most often implemented as general computer labs, capable of being used to facilitate hands-on activities in several different subject areas. The same lab might be used for Math at 08:00 a.m., for French at 09:00 a.m., and for Computer Science at 10:00 a.m. In some cases, the headsets and interfaces that students require for language activities are mounted in motorized trays that can be raised to the ceiling when non-language classes are in session, or lowered to desk height for language classes.

Virtual Language Labs

For older students in universities, colleges, and even senior high schools, it is not always practical to conduct language lab activities in a fixed room at a fixed time. Instead, educators are often adopting a *virtual* language lab model, in which teachers post assignments for their students on a central *file server*, and students access these assignments from a computer in a self-study lab, a library, or even from home, on an anytime/anywhere basis. Completed assignments are again saved to the file server, and teachers are able to review student work at their convenience.

What about Teachers?

Language Labs have of course come up as substantial aid in language teaching. Listening to all types of English with its respecting style, pronunciation, and diction is not at all possible in traditional classroom setup. Teachers cannot do that multiple task inside the classroom due to various restrictions like time constraint, burden of syllabus. But, it has not replaced the teachers for various reasons like cost, efficiency, and practicability. The firms that establish language labs themselves believe in manual training to their staff rather than training solely through

technology.

With all the positive features, technology cannot surpass the teachers in providing sensible learning because teaching and learning is connected with human emotions where technology has no role to play. For example, teaching grammar and vocabulary is impossible without using the mother tongue of the students. For creating better understanding, the teacher has to be bilingual since the classroom includes students of different levels of intelligences. The teacher perceives the difficulty of the students through their face reaction and immediately translates the concept into their mother tongue. The students respond to this greatly and become more attentive. However powerful it is, multimedia cannot do this. It is so because for an instrument, all the learners are alike. It cannot bother about the physical or psychological reactions of the learners. The students are exposed to the native speakers of English language but the fact remains that students in India, especially in small towns, do not find themselves comfortable with the native accent of English speakers. Also, in India, there is no uniformity of using English pronunciation. English used in each state varies due to the influence of its mother tongue. In such cases, using native speakers' accent in India or in our native town will appear to be flamboyant. Language is after all a medium of communication and it's not appropriate to imitate and use others style of speaking in the society that is not familiar to such utterances. Only a teacher can guide his students how much to take from the technology.

Other Problems

Then there is the problem of 'monotony' which automatically comes in multimedia lessons as compared to regular class rooms. In a classroom the teacher functions as a facilitator in providing all sort of information by collaborating the concept with current affairs, history, literature, science, psychology, medicine, geography, politics, philosophy, etc. which builds the aptitude of the students in all fields. Moreover, only a teacher can bring live and realistic learning experiences because he can adapt with the requirements of a situation for having the students' attention towards him. According to the need, he can come up with a story, a riddle, a joke, a comment along with regular lessons which definitely brings interest among the students.

And even though the latest chatterbots seem to have their uses, there is as yet no chatterbot designed from the bottom up to meet the needs of foreign language learners. There are a number of directions such chatterbot designs could and almost certainly will take in the years to come.

Manufacturing technologies or establishing Language Labs as per the need is justifiable today but these cannot and never be the substitute for teachers. Teaching involves conversing with the minds. Technology alone can never bring creative and realistic learning environment. Modern and advanced technological tools are just aids for teaching creatively and realistically but the complete innovative component are the teachers themselves. There will always be some students who are able to work individually and master any subject – including the learning of a foreign language. That being said, most students will benefit immeasurably when they have someone to help guide them through the learning process.

Just like nature remains undefeated in spite of the evolution of artificial intelligences because of its longevity, stability and power, all the technology including the modern digital language labs, with its powerful interactive, multimedia capabilities, has not been designed to replace teachers, but rather to provide teachers with a powerful set of tools for orchestrating progressive language learning activities with their students.

The Future

All the advanced technology is and always will be just a teaching aid. It surely can never be a substitute for the teacher. The future of it entirely depends on the teacher because the more effective is the teacher, the more effective will be the technology.

“Soft skills like language learning can be practiced to a certain extent using technology delivery, but final mastery cannot be assured without some instructor interaction.” (Effectiveness of Learning Technologies, Tom Carey, Carole Farber, & Lynn Davie; OISE, et al.)

Works Consulted

1. http://www.robotel.com/en/documents/Whitepaper_LanguageLabsDemystified_2011-01-13.pdf

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Ms. Deepti Jindal, M.A., B.Ed.
Research Scholar, Amity Institute of English Studies & Research
AMITY University
Noida - 201301
Uttar Pradesh
India
malusinghal@gmail.com