

The Role of Language Laboratories in Effective English Language Teaching

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Abstract

The field of English Language Teaching is a dynamic one. It is of an enraged by numerous research inputs and teacher experience imports. Besides this, the use of technology in providing effective English language teaching is also very popular. There is a general perception that the use of technology enhances the effectiveness of delivering English language courses to Indian students. The state policy also leans towards establishing infrastructure that has information and communication technology ICT features. Teachers are also provided adequate training to utilise technology in the classrooms. Almost all institutions at least in the state of Tamil Nadu if not in the entire country have language laboratories in which English courses are taught using technology. In spite of the increasing awareness about the effectiveness of using technology in teaching English, there are still a considerable number of teachers and discourses that show incredulity towards the use of technology in the language classroom. In order to answer and alleviate such mishaps that prevail in the minds of the English language teachers, this paper aims at enumerating and elaborating on the importance of language laboratories in delivering effective English language courses to students of English second language in India.

Introduction

English language teaching has received a fillip in the form of technology enhanced learning. The advent of new technology has revolutionised many fields and English language teaching not is not an exception to it. The use of technology has always been encouraged by researchers as well as readily adored by English teachers down the decades. Even when there were audio playback devices such as turntables and cassette players, English language teachers were utilising these technologies to deliver effective English courses. Later when the computer was introduced, English language teachers readily employed computers as a teaching tool for teaching English. On the other hand, advancement in mass media such as Radio and Television were also utilised by English language teachers. "Learning English as a second language can be challenging and difficult for the student and so here the teachers' innovative technique is required to create interest among the students. Learning English language is thought to be important by students as it truly connects them to the whole world" (Thompson 362).

Utilising the features of various technologies available, language teachers often established laboratories in which English was start using these technologies. There were language laboratories

when there was analogue technology such as cassette recorders and cassette players alongside VCR and VCR players.

The history and evolution of language laboratories show that the standard and nature of language laboratories have been improving from level one to level five varying from simple audio playback capable language laboratory to a modern computer enhanced Internet enabled language laboratories. The use of language laboratories in teaching English received wider recognition and appreciation, there were equal number of English language teachers and research scholars who are sceptical about the effectiveness of using language laboratories in teaching English as second language. In countries like India, where technology is always looked upon sceptically, and where the availability of infrastructure has always been a challenge, majority of teachers did not wish to incorporate technology in their teaching.

As India in contact with the information revolution that was happening around the world, technology and the infrastructure related to it had a rapid development in all fields. In education as well, infrastructure facilitating the use of technology was encouraged. Sooner, through various policies, technology was introduced into school education as well as college education in India. Today there are rarely a few colleges or schools that do not have technology enhanced language teaching and learning capabilities in the classroom.

At this juncture, it becomes very important to conduct a survey on the role played by language laboratories in teaching English effectively. It is high time that those teachers who look at technology sceptical, they realise the importance of language laboratories and the roles in delivering effective English language courses for students of English second language in India.

The world is ever-changing. People, purpose, society, economics, politics and all other fields under the sun are constantly changing. New fields are evolving out of old ones. Old ones are refreshing themselves and becoming new feels. English language teaching is also a constantly evolving field of education. Therefore, it is very important to keep in track with the changing scenario. We are in the world of information revolution. Information is key to any business. The use of technology and communication has become paramount in everyday life. Therefore, it becomes important for an individual especially a student who is seeking job opportunities to have adequate competence and performance in using electronic devices for communication. Therefore, it places new challenges on the English language course as well as the teacher to teach students acquire necessary skills to use technology in communication.

New challenges in the field of English language teaching requires new strategies. It requires new infrastructure in the form of teaching aids that are digital in nature. We need electronic devices to teach English such that students get enough exposure to use English in ICT enhanced environment.

This necessitates the establishment of language laboratory as part of language curriculum. English language courses should be designed and delivered that not only focuses on developing

students skills to meet new challenges but also utilises the established infrastructure in terms of language laboratories.

Establishment of language laboratory requires proper understanding of the structure and nature of language laboratory. Establishing a language laboratory depends on the purpose for which it will be used. It should also take into account the available financial support which in turn will determine the availability of certain devices. This will ultimately determine the capability of the language laboratory. Modern language laboratories have capabilities that allow both synchronous and asynchronous communication. It allows one to one communication and many to one communication simultaneously. It allows students to perform individual work, pair work, group work with or without the monitoring of the teacher. Modern language laboratories encourage students to undergo self-paced learning. It should also offer individualised learning to the students. The language laboratory should have enough facilities to allow virtual simulation situations. It should have audio-visual play back as well as recording capabilities. Such a language laboratory will go a long way in providing effective teaching of language courses.

A language laboratory can be used to enhance all the four language skills. Both intensive and extensive reading skills can be developed and improved using software applications that cater to the needs of the students at various levels. There are software applications that allow students to develop their reading skills independently, and there are also software applications which allows the teacher to use it as a teaching tool.

The use of language laboratories to help students improve their reading skills can definitely be effective. It can bring to the table some of the features that are not available in the conventional method of teaching reading skills. For instance, the assessment of the students' effective reading speed, as well as the students' ability to answer all questions can be automated using the language laboratory software applications. This reduces the workload of the teacher, allowing the teacher to focus more on helping students concentrate on the minute points regarding developing their reading skills.

The use of language laboratories in helping students improve their reading skills will definitely allow the students read text that is present online. Thereby, it exposes the students to the presence of text information online as digital format. This will also allow the students to get used to the digital screen, which definitely poses the challenge when it comes to reading. Such exposure will allow students to develop their reading skills in line with the demand of the present day scenario.

Language laboratories can also be effectively used in helping students improve their writing skills. There are a lot of software applications that of step-by-step instruction to students in helping them to improve their writing. Such software applications can also be self-paced and individualised learning experience. The students can focus on various types of writing exercises. The teacher will be able to monitor the students' progress in real time. As the software application is capable of analysing the students writing skills to some extent, it reduces the burden of the teacher, and allows the teacher to focus on students who are slow learners. "Teachers are more beneficial by lab in terms

of writing skill. It is a tedious and time consuming task. Computer checks every small error perfectly and give correction instantly. It is also possible to mark any learners repeated mistakes and can give remedial teaching” (Shukla 83)

Furthermore, the internet access that the language laboratory provides to students can greatly allow the students to have a variety of exercises online. Use of language laboratories in teaching writing skills also exposes the students to using electronic communication means such as emails and online writing. This is an added advantage which will not be provided to students who undergo English courses without a language laboratory. “Through the interaction with multimedia, the students become increasingly familiar with academic vocabulary and language structure.” (Paksiraj)

Language laboratories are very effective in helping students improve their listening skills. Language laboratories provide the play back facility of both audio and audio-visual materials which allow the students to have real-time experience when it comes to listening to samples of English use. Without language laboratories, the teacher is the only source of the language use. The students are restricted to listen to the accent of the teacher. By the introduction of language laboratories, students now can listen to a variety of accents with which English is used. Students will not only able to listen to the use of English, but also test their listening comprehension. Software applications are available to offer exercises to the students in improving their listening comprehension. “Learner listen to a word learner tries to match it with the correct picture. The software also provides audio description for any picture and learner follows the instruction like to underline any object or to write names under certain characters. These activities exposes learner to expended listening” (Shukla 73). The software applications also provide comprehensive testing systems to test the students listening skills. Without language laboratories, teaching listening would never have become so effective. Now students are able to develop their listening skills across various actions such as American accent British accent etc.

Language laboratories can also be used in helping students improve their speaking skills. Modern language laboratories that belong to level five have the capability of recording and playing back both audio and video. This allows the teacher to help students improve their speaking skills by recording their performances. Students are asked to speak in a virtual environment, and their speech is recorded. Both an audio video and video can be recorded which in turn allows the teacher to comment on the students performance, as well as the student to have self-evaluation. For example, if a sentence ‘Her husband is a shopkeeper.’ is pronounced as ‘Her husband is a soapkeeper.’ It will convey a different meaning. Similar examples are

‘Sheep’ /ʃi:p/ ‘Sip’ /sɪp/ ‘Ship’ /ʃɪp/
‘Pen’ /pɛn/ ‘Pan’ /pæn/ ‘Pain’ /peɪn/
‘Live’ /lɪv/ ‘To Live’ /lɑ:v/ ‘Leave’ /li:v/
‘She’ /ʃi:/ ‘Sea’ /si:/ ‘See’ /si:/

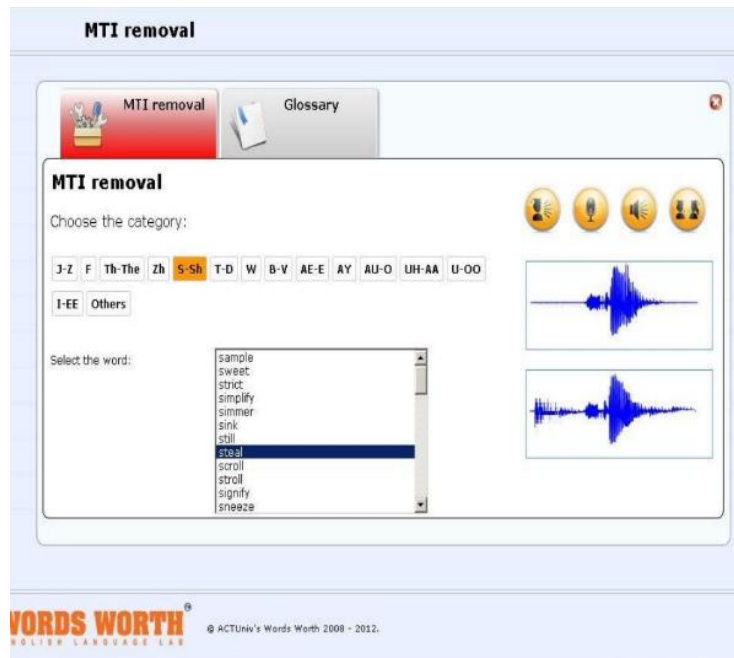


Image 1 – Sonic Visualizer Graph

Language laboratories can offer software applications that utilise the feature of voice recognition which in turn allows students to test the accuracy when it comes to their accent. Students can speak over a microphone and using a voice recognising software, their speech can be converted to text, which in turn can show them the degree of accuracy to which they are able to utter English words. This goes a long way in helping students acquire in a neutral accent which becomes a very important aspect in international communication.

Besides developing the four skills, language laboratory becomes an excellent resource for developing students' team spirit, individual competence, as well as pair work. The establishment of language laboratory offers numerous possibilities to introduce innovation in teaching English as a second language. Some of the latest software applications focus on offering language instruction in both English as well as the first language of the student this becomes very effective in a multi lingual country like India. Language laboratories are very effective in offering bilingual education. This not only removes the stress that is present in the student who is expected to speak in English all the time, but also makes the process of learning easy as the instructions are bilingual in nature.

Salaberry (2001) argues that “videos expose students to authentic materials and voices, dialects and registers other than the teacher’s and provide cultural context”. In the same form, Platforms provide teachers the possibility to add more practice resources, different to those presented in syllabuses such: links with information about a specific grammatical structure, or extra exercises to have more practice, online available test for students to measure their own knowledge, online dictionaries and any other possibilities that teachers consider important to improve students’ proficiency.

Language laboratories have become inevitable in delivering effective English language courses. Therefore, there is a need for establishing language laboratories in all institutions. There should also be adequate training to English teachers to utilise the language laboratories and its features optimally. English language courses should also be designed keeping in mind the availability of the language laboratory. There should always be provisions made in the lessons and exercises provided as part of the English textbook that would utilise the language laboratory and all its facilities that it can offer. If language laboratory can successfully compliment the delivery of an English course, it is definite that such a course would be effective in allowing students improve their communication skills.

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