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Using Communication Skills Laboratory in Enhancing Speaking Skills of Engineering Students

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Abstract

In language learning speaking is considered to be one of the important skills. It is important because through this skill we convey thoughts, information and share ideas with others. The students in the Engineering and technology colleges find it hard to practice it, because most of the students were from rural and Tamil medium background. In this age of technology many students are expected to speak in English to get a good job but they find it hard because they do not have adequate speaking skills. There are many factors which affects them to develop the skill. The study was undertaken to help students of third year Electronics Communication Engineering course to develop better speaking skill. The main objective was to know the effectiveness of Computer-Assisted Language Learning in the development of communication skills in English. The findings show that computer assisted language learning is helpful in developing speaking skills.

Key words: Computer, Speaking Discussion, Activites

Introduction

Speaking has always been regarded as one of the important skill in teaching and learning English as a Second Language (ESL). It becomes an important skill because in India we use this

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language to convey thoughts and share ideas in official work. Many students are culturally influenced and psychologically discouraged from speaking English because of their rural and social backgrounds. The role of English teachers is a challenging task to make them to speak English. Most ESL teachers are perplexed and do not know how to overcome the local cultural psychological constraints of the students, and enable them to speak. Many teachers are not aware that computers can be used to develop speaking skill.

This study was undertaken to know the effectiveness of the computer in teaching of English. The computers are treated like other visual aids, tape recorder, VCR, black board, etc.

Computers play a great role in major sectors like health care, industry, administration, commerce, and education. Using computers as aid in learning English may thus not only help acquisition of English, but it will also help get acquainted with the use of computer for future functional purposes. In language teaching computer can be used for many purposes including word processing presentation packages, guided drill and practice tutor simulation, problem, solving, games and multimedia. CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) lays strong emphasis on student-centered learning and permits learners to learn on their own using structured and or unstructured interactive lessons.

Theoretical Framework

This study builds on an emerging interest in developing speaking skills in ESL/EFL research. Many language scholars observe that the speaking skill needs cognition and social interaction. In cognitive theory, learning is seen as a constructivist process in which learners select and organize information input, relate it to prior knowledge and retain what is considered important information to reflect their learning efforts. The target language demands for the application of new tasks, whatever theoretically learned. It is because of this intricate set of mental process that ESL/EFL learning has been construed as a complex cognitive skill (McLaughlin, 1987).

Sierpinska (1998) observes communication as interaction, learning by the subjects arises from interactions between the individual and the culture including the interactions between students and the teacher. Communication is characterized as a process of social Interaction, which permits the subject to identify himself/herself with the other, and at the same time, express and affirm his/her singularity, and has the function of creating and maintaining understanding between individuals. Thus, teaching is understood as an interactive and reflective process, with a teacher continually engaged in differentiated and updated activities for his/her students. With activities, meanings are formed in the process of interaction between the subjects (Yackel, 2000).

Recent studies mostly concentrate on speaking skill, because it is a simple way of communication using which human beings can pass their information easily to others. But speaking skill in the target language (unlike the speaking skill in mother tongue) requires regular practice. Mike & Glen (2008) observe that there are many ways to develop speaking skill and proper selection of material will make learning successful.

The Study

Aim

The present study investigates how computer can be used to develop speaking skill in the ESL classroom. The primary purpose is to help students move from traditional teaching to novel technology based learning.

(1) Does the computer technology instruction lead to more gains in speaking (compared with traditional instruction practice)?

(2) What are the students' perceptions of the use of the computer assisted language learning?

Subjects

The thirty students from the third year electronics and communication engineering class of an engineering institution in a remote village participated in this experiment. Their age group was in the range between 18 to 22 years. They all had twelve years of English education and one year at the tertiary level of education as Technical English subject in their first year of B.E degree program. All these studies have not helped them to use the language in practical ways. The courses offered at all the levels of formal education concentrated only in the written communication.

A student who writes his answers with his own idea in his own sentences is not given good marks in the examinations but the students who answers his questions in the examination reproducing ideas and sentences taken from published notes gets highest marks because teachers look for only grammatically correct sentences. This focus does not encourage students to write their own sentences to express their own thoughts. Most of the students also develop a negative attitude toward learning English because they really may not need to use English in transactions in their immediate surroundings in the rural areas.

Method

The study was conducted for three days. The first day was used for pre-test. Learners introduced themselves. The second day was used to play selected audio dialogues. The dialogues covered all the five levels of communication. The third day was used to play another audio CD with a set of questions relevant for their job.

The first day was used for self-introduction. All the learners introduced themselves giving information about their name, previous school, and their native place. This showed their unity of self-introduction.

The second day was used to play a CD collection of spoken dialogues. The main reason for playing the audio CD of the spoken dialogues in the computer was to prepare the learners to speak in the target situation. The students listened to all five levels of communication: Phatic

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communication, Factual communication, Evaluative communication, Gut level communication and Peak communication. The students were highly motivated to listen to the dialogues. The dialogues embraced their culture and the pronunciation was simple.

The learners were instructed to sit in the communication lab and to listen to the collection of dialogues to be played in the audio CD. All the girl students showed a greater interest in listening and all of them wrote all the dialogues given to them. But very few boys had taken the notes of the dialogues. Most of the male students responded by simply listening without taking any notes. All the students were asked to do role play in groups of four, after the completion of playing the CD dialogues.

There were seventeen boys in the class, the first group of four boys spoke well and their selection of topic was about social issues. The first boy spoke about the social issues which were important in the day-to-day situations. From his talk it showed he was more interested to speak on the particular topic he chose. The second boy spoke about the garbage lying around in the streets and how garbage polluted the whole society. The third student spoke about kinds of environmental pollutions he encountered in the society. The fourth student almost accepted the points delivered earlier by others and in some places he added some more ideas. The second group of students spoke about electronics, which is relevant to their fields. The first student spoke many things about electronics and its usage in the society. The second student gave a few points about technology. The third student did not speak a lot, but he shared some points already presented in the group. The fourth student spoke about the recent developments in electronics. The second group of people showed more interest in their subject.

The third group of students was very different from the previous two groups and their topic was about mass media in the society. Only two boys actively participated and the other two used only a few words.

The fourth group consisted of five in number and also they spoke on general day to day happenings; they talked about a meeting between friends. One of men in the fourth group refused to speak in English. The reason behind that was he did not know the basic words to express ideas. The other four students spoke about their village resources. The boys came with their own creative ideas.

The girls who participated in group work were thirteen in number. They were divided into two subgroups. The first group of women students spoke about the different kinds of pollution. The first student spoke about air pollution and the effects of air pollution to the human beings. The second girl spoke about water pollution in the rivers. The third girl spoke about garbage in the streets and the fourth girl spoke about the seriousness effect of all these pollutions. They participated very actively and their discussion was very enthusiastic. Their performance was good.

The second group of women students consists of five in number. The three students in the second group spoke freely from the points they received from the CD. The other two students spoke less than the other. One student found it difficult because she did not speak with all the students very

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freely. Because lack of her interaction among her friends, she found it difficult to speak.

The third day was used to play a set of questions which is useful for them when attend an interview. The questions solicited basic to critical information. It kindled the interest of the students. The instructor prepared a set of the content of what they should say as well as the linguistic forms they should use to speak. William Little Wood (1981) observes that “in a Question and answers activity designed to practice a specific structure, the teacher may often make the learners perceive the interaction as more communicative if he responds to audio CD”. The instructor gave a brief introduction about interview in a job and helped in between their interview session when they found it difficult compose their answers. For example, reason for leaving the job and knowledge about the company website. And they were given some examples from the real life interviews with their friends, teachers, doctors or lawyers. All these kinds of interviews were natural and had smooth flow of steps in an orderly manner.

The main objective of a job interview is to choose a candidate to suitable position. The set of questions are as follows.

1. Tell me about yourself?
2. Tell about the reason of leaving your last job?
3. How long are you working in this field?
4. What kind of salary do you need?
5. What motivates you to do best on the job?
6. What qualities you look for from the boss?
7. Are you familiar with any one of our products?
8. What do you think of our company website?
9. How many hours did you expect to work in a week to get the job done?
10. Are you ready to go to any part of the world for our company if selected?

Many information processing theorists claim that social interaction between teacher and student is important for student cognitive and linguistic development. The students answered individually to all the questions after listening to the questions in the CD.

For the first question, the audio CD had given a brief introduction. The second question created a kind of tension among the students, because they did not have work experience and the instructor gave some ideas and asked the students to take examples from their seniors, friends and well known persons. All the students answered that their goal is to improve their economic status. For the third question, all the students came out with their own answers. The answers were in single sentences. For the fourth question also every student came out with single sentences. It is difficult for these students to perform better than what they did. The fourth question was usually given to both the entrants and the experienced. This was interesting to the students and all the students actively answered what amount they expected as their salary. They were encouraged to speak freely.

The fifth question was very easy for students because all the students answered that they wanted to work for money and seven students asserted that they have special interest to work because of

interest in the field.

The sixth question is more about official relationship between an employer and a boss and the answers were different. Three men students expressed that the boss should be friendly. Fourteen men students said that the boss should be friendly and motivating. Eleven woman students said that “The boss should be kind and helpful person.” Two women students said that he must be a helpful person.

The seventh question was very interesting to students because the students had the opportunity to take examples from the daily life. The students used the name of the products from the advertisements they had seen. All the students participated very enthusiastically. All the men students were able to point out the electronic items available in the market. Only eight women students were able to give the examples of electronics items, while the remaining five women students gave examples from their friends’ answers.

The eighth question was found to be a little bit difficult because most of the students did not know about the company websites and they did not have the opportunity of viewing websites. Only three men students were capable of answering this question while others were not able to produce any answer because they lacked exposure to these websites. Three students gave long explanations for the eighth question, for two minutes each. All the remaining twenty-seven students could not speak anything about the eighth question. The instructor gave some examples of the machines used at home and where these will be available in the websites. The students spoke from the examples given by the instructor.

The ninth question was easy for all the students because all the students were aware of the labor law. All the students answered the question in a single sentence.

The tenth question was interesting to the male students. They were very much interested in working in any part of the world. Three students asserted that they wanted to work in India only. The remaining three students were very much interested to work in their local town. This showed the students’ varying interests. The girl students were very much interested to work only in their own city. These kinds of questions drew individual attention and encouraged the students to speak in the target language.

Group Discussion

The students who were speaking in groups found it easier to speak rather than as individuals making presentation or raising questions. They found it easy because they found that they had three more supporting partners. The group discussion made them to feel that they were in friendly environment. In some groups the students were feeling difficult to speak because they were shy facing the class and some students were not having any practice speaking in English even with their friends. But group discussions helped them to develop the speaking skill. Most of the female students followed the CD contents but male students came out with their own material.

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Individual Interaction

Individual interaction in this paper is entirely different, because they have to answer only to the computer not to the teacher. The individual speaking by the student started after only after playing the recorded interview questions. The students answered to the questions. The instructor had to play a very limited role, he had to explain the difficult questions, which the student could not understand or did not have any knowledge of the subject matter which would enable them to answer the questions.

Results and Discussions

The Experience of the First day

In the first day, the students introduced themselves with their names, and information relating to their previous school of study and native place. All the students followed the same steps. They showed no difference in their self-introduction. They have no idea for self-introduction other than these three points. This kind of self-introduction was used in their schools. They did not know the different kinds of self-introduction until the instructor taught a variety of possibilities.

Responses Given by the Learners

The responses given by the learners showed positive results. All the learners showed great response in the three-day program. The first day of the program had shown their previous experience received from their schools. The second and the third day of the program showed greater confidence in their talk. They showed improvement after playing and listening to the CD containing dialogues. Most of the students came with their own creative ideas. The remaining students managed to follow the conversations from the CD. The third day is a little different from the second day, because the questions were asked by the computer and the students had to answer the questions. The instructor part was very little. He had to give some ideas if the students did not have any information to answer the questions.

Learners' Feedback about the Training

All the learners felt that the program was successful and helpful in motivating them to speak. The learners who were shy felt that they found it easy to speak in the group, rather than as single individuals. This helped them speak individually on the third day. The students asserted that the second day and the third day had motivated them to speak freely.

Advantages of Computers over English Textbooks

The computers are used in language teaching for thirty years in many countries but in our nation it is not used widely. The role of computers is not understood clearly for these long years. In the earlier days the knowledge of computer programs was considered to be important to teach language. Importance was not given to the knowledge of the program by the language teachers in the West. The advancement in computer technology has attracted many language teachers in Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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India. There are various kinds of ways using computers to teach English language. The modern English teachers adapt the new ways of teaching English to suit their technical environment. The study suggests that the use of computer assisted language learning in the presence of the teacher makes a difference and is interesting to the learners.

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