EFFECTIVENESS OF SOFTWARE TOOLS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING/TEACHING

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INTRODUCTION

With the advent of sophisticated technologies the ability to communicate well in English has become more stark in the midst of even increasing globalization today. Communication skills are an indispensable component for the success of any professional. Language has to be practiced, heard and corrected. If one has to reach out to the people, one has to speak their language. In short, to acquire the sensibility for the sounds and rhythm of a language, one has to hear the best samples of a spoken language. This precisely is the function of a language laboratory. It is a unique synergy of art and technology, taste and craft.

Today, CALL provides highly interactive and communicative support for listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, including extensive use of the internet. In the last decade, there has been a growing corpus of research studies on the ways in which computers can best facilitate language learning. By integrating technology into English language pedagogy, a large number of CALL applications have been designed and developed for the specific purpose of enhancing the English language skills of students.

This paper explores key problems and effectiveness of Multimedia Language Laboratories with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) facilities in institutes in India. In India, language teaching mainly depends upon the chalk and talk method of teaching. But in recent times CALL has become relatively new and rapidly evolving academic field that explores the role of information and communication technologies in language learning and teaching. It includes a wide range of activities and initiatives in materials development, pedagogical practice and research. To realize the full potential of this technology and to ensure its pervasiveness this study provides an overview of technology-related changes for language learning and teaching and to examine how far these changes are actually able to make a difference at the ground level.

It also shows the effectiveness of software tools for language acquisition and discusses

how technology can be a tool to support language learning and teaching in both formal and informal settings.

HISTORY OF MULTIMEDIA LAB:

Although multimedia is possible because of computer technology, its development has been a long time in the making. The idea of integrating multimedia in foreign language studies began in the 1950s when small language schools began to use the phonograph, movies and the tape recorder as tools in English language teaching. In the '70s and '80s, language audio and video courses were improved through the added use of video projectors and slide shows. By the late '80s and early '90s, language labs were part of many of the more expensive language schools throughout the world. However, by the mid '90s many multimedia language programs became available for teachers over the Internet. These programs used the personal computer and were sold at a much more affordable price to even the smallest of English language schools, allowing teachers to bring more interactivity and fun into the language learning process.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:

Many researchers have helped develop the theory and practice the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (Brown, 1987; Brumfit & Johnson, 1979; Hymes, 1972; Nattinger, 1984; Nunan,1987 & 1989; Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Rossner, 1988; Savingnon, 1983; White, 1989; Yalden, 1983). The underlying study showcases the CLT approach towards communicative competence. Students do not simply learn the linguistic structures and grammar rules. They learn how to use the language properly with the ease to visualize the situations. CLT approach with a framework of computer-assisted language learning provides computer simulation into two types: instruction- oriented and fun-oriented. In this wake our study reveals better adoptability and faster learning process of language acquisition in comparison to classroom teaching.

COMPUTER SIMULATION	LEARNING PROCESSES	COMPUTER-HUMAN INTERACTION
Instruction oriented	Conventional learning	Limited
Fun oriented	Motivational and Entertaining	Multiple

PEDAGOGY OF LEARNING THROUGH TECHNOLOGY:

Many modern language teachers have come to accept multimedia as a viable means

of teaching language acquisition. Those who use multimedia as a teaching tool find that it adds more interest to the class, and because students become interested in multimedia and computers, they learn more language skills. The integration of multimedia is more effective than using the teacher center model solely. Multimedia effectiveness lies in the ability to expose students to real situations, language use and pronunciation through video, sound, graphics and computer interaction.

Our studies shows that multimedia tools serve as an important motivator in the language teaching process as compared to classroom teaching, reinforcing for the students the direct relation between the language of the class and that of the outside world. The following comparative study is the brief about the same.

	Traditional Classroom	Multimedia Lab
Teaching Tools	Chalk and Blackboard	Computer Network, Video
Teaching Materials	Text Book	Interactive Computer Software
Communicative Activities	Imaginative role-play	Real Computer based situation
Students teacher	Direct contact with teacher	Less intimacy

TECHINIQUES TO IMPROVE MACRO SKILLS OF LANGUAGE THROUGH LANGUAGE LAB:

Among the four macro skills of language learning, listening and reading are receptive skills whereas speaking and writing are the productive skills. These skills can be improved effectively, when the learner learns at his own pace. With the help of the functional tool- Language Lab with Teacher's Console, language skills can be learnt, practiced and evaluated through the techniques followed.

I) Techniques to improve listening

The primary form of linguistic communication is speech and so listening is the most important receptive (and learning) skill for foreign language students. An ability to listen and interpret many shades of meaning from what is heard is a fundamental communicative ability.

Teaching listening involves training in some 'enabling skills' — perception of

sounds, stress, intonation patterns, accents, attitudes and so on, as well as 'practice' in various styles of listening comprehension.

a) Perception / Pronunciation

Accurate perception of the sounds of the language is the first stage which leads to interpretation and comprehension. When listening to a foreign language, we need to know the sounds, rhythms, tunes and stress patterns of that language. All the pronunciation work such as phonetics, interpretation and listening to words will benefit the students' listening ability.

b) Tools for Listening

1) Acoustics: Our ability to hear is essential to our ability to listen. The first set of ideas concerns the production, corruption, transmission and reception of spoken language.

2) Usage of language laboratory: Earphones and headphones deliver undistorted sound directly to the ears. It is better practiced in a language laboratory with the help of head phones and earphones; this provides ideal conditions for intensive listening.

II) Techniques to improve speaking

Students' speech evaluation is possible through the screen recorder modules in language learning software. Students' audio recordings can be scored or saved for later evaluation. The teachers can record their own voice notes that students can hear later as they review their work.

Group Discussions & Role Plays: The students on different workstations can be grouped and put into random pairs or groups to participate in role plays and group discussions. Teachers can listen directly or intervene as when required to control, monitor and evaluate the process. It can also be recorded and saved for later evaluation.

Voice Recognition Technology: This technology is integrated into the Pronunciation module of the software. Using the built in microphone on computer, the learner will be able to repeat words after they hear from a native speaker through computer speakers. The software will analyze their pronunciation and compare a waveform representation of the native speaker's pronunciation with a waveform of their pronunciation. An accuracy scale on the screen will display their voice match to the native speaker on a scale of "Bad", "Acceptable", and "Good".

III) Techniques to improve Reading & Writing

The frequent exposure and use of vocabulary and grammar is the key to learning a language. The average person must be exposed to a word or phrase 100s of times before integrating it into fluent conversation. The major thresholds of gaining language fluency are the learner's ability to: Learn a base vocabulary of approximately 2000 words for day–to–day use; learn the rules of grammar, vocabulary lessons, grammar exercises, interactive stories/situations.

a) Grammar Exercises – Reading, Writing, Comprehension

The goal of these exercises is to build the knowledge of how the words fit together to make sense. Some of the exercises may be translations; others can be designed to teach the learner to think in English by asking them to change a phrase in a specific way. This feature requires to type responses within the exercises, providing a practical and effective form of writing instruction.

Reading Comprehensions can be given in the form of stories, case lets, cases, descriptions and narrations. The learners can be encouraged by allowing them to follow the different methods of reading such as, **skimming and scanning.** They can be followed by activities in groups through exercises on word meanings, vocabulary, fill in the missing information, writing summary / **gist**. **Note taking, thought provoking questions for group discussions, brainstorming sessions** etc.

b) Writing exercises: Writing can be practiced through typing on gap fill exercises and model format for **E-mail, letter, memo, reports and resume.** They can also prepare the **paper for presentations**. These can be observed and edited by the instructor through the Teacher's Console.

Written Assistance: – The teacher can send messages to guide learners with their work and learner can reply. The teacher can also initiate a text chat session with single & multiple learners. In this feed back can be given on the spot.

Track learning progress through Language Learning Software

Language learning software provides teachers with a number of methods for evaluating students' performance and tracking their progress. By using writing, listening, recorded and Web-based activities to stimulate learners to make use of their growing oral and written language skills, store results for comparison over time, so the teacher/learner can measure progress.

Exam module under the Teacher's Console provides a complete interactive and automatic quiz module. This allows teacher to use virtually any media available to create tests and evaluate the learners. Ex. Question types may include multiple choices, true/false, fill in the blanks and essay. Students' working on assignments or conversations in groups can be evaluated. Their audio recordings can be scored in and saved for evaluations.

Reports and statistics for tests are immediately available at the end of the each session, giving the important details of the class, individual student and individual question in tabular, graphical representation or pie diagram model.

Utility of Language Learning Software:

Ø It makes students recognize the sounds of English through Audio-Visual aids & computer software.

Ø It helps them overcome their inhibitions and self-consciousness while speaking in English and to build their confidence. The focus shall be on fluency rather than accuracy.

Ø Enables them to speak English correctly with focus on stress and intonation.

CASE STUDY:

Subject

The survey was conducted in DAVV, English Language Lab 2011 involving 350 students from both urban and rural background. The aim of the course was to test the students learning efficacy through multimedia lab in comparison to traditional classroom teaching.

Setting

The survey was processed for a month in five different stages. It asked how frequently participants made use of language learning materials, such as web based exercises and digitized audio or video materials. The teacher and students met for two hour session every week. They all were assigned different topics for language learning in all five different stages and performance was tested on the spot with the help of quizzes designed.

Design

The design of this study basically covered all the four macro skills of language learning: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

In the first session teaching listening involved training in perception of sounds, stress, intonation patterns, accents, attitude and so on and practice in various styles of listening comprehension. Second, students were given exercises based on speech evaluation. In these activities students were grouped and put into random groups to participate in role plays and group discussion. Listening the assigned group discussion and role playing activities students were monitored and evaluated. Third, unlike other activities, next the students encountered the reading and writing exercises. This feature requires the listening of conversion and then writing as heard and understood .In the fourth stage students were assigned the Reading Comprehension in the form of stories, case lets, cases, descriptions and narrations. This encourages learners to adopt different methods of reading such as skimming and scanning. Fifth and last session conducted in language lab was the accumulation of the above done activities. A master test was conducted under teacher's console. This allows teacher to use media available to create tests and evaluate the learners.

The survey clearly indicates the central role of technology in classroom teaching and in self-directed learning in self-access centers. The variety and frequency of uses, as well as the range of skills developed, is impressive, and it is noteworthy that many of the classrooms appear to be hybrid facilities with easy access to a range of technologies including PCs. Also, it resulted in better user learnability, overcoming the students classroom hesitation.

CONCLUSION:

There is always scope for improvement and advancement in any field and for any subject. It has to be accomplished with commitment and enthusiasm. We are habituated to the traditional teaching methods. It is high time that our teaching methods have to undergo a change. The computer aided training environment act as an essential supplementary need in English language acquisition. The present study has shown the effectiveness of software tools in language learning/teaching without an overlaid conception of replacing good teachers from classroom. This integration of technology into language learning had ensured the successful improvement in communication abilities of students of every regional background and intellect level. Thus, these are a few of the whole lot of techniques those can be used to improve language skills

through technology in the present generation. It can be implemented for a learner of any age at any stage. It will be more effective if technology is introduced from the elementary level. Accordingly this study shows that comprehensive language learning (language along with skills) is possible through both classroom and language lab teaching, as applied for science subjects.

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