Learning Language through Interactive Language Laboratories: An ESL Perspective

Jyoshnamayee Moharana

Assistant Professor, English

C. V. Raman Global University, Bhubaneswar

Running Head: LEARNING LANGUAGE THROUGH INTERACTIVE LANGUAGE   2

Abstract

English is taught as a second language in India but it is widely used in the length and breadth of the country. The English curriculum is highly text based which focuses on the writing skills. This results in the poor speaking skills of the students in English. Good communication skill in English is the need of the day. The students need to be given enough exposure in the natural atmosphere to practice English communication skills. With the advent of technology this has become very easy. The language laboratories provide various interactive activities in the audio-visual mode that attracts the attention of the students and keep them engaged in learning the language in a natural atmosphere. The educational institutes should provide this facility to the students to help them enhance their language skills. This paper discusses the advantages and disadvantages of the language labs and compares the facilities of various language lab softwares.

Keywords: ESL, school curriculum, language laboratories, audio-visual aids

Introduction

English is the associate official language of India and is widely used in official communication. It is mostly taught as a second language in the school curriculum. Most of the students learn English after mastering another language(Mother tongue). As a result their English is highly influenced by theirprimarylanguage.In some casesEnglish is even taught in the local language. This highly affects the quality of their languageskills. Another reason that affects the ESL (English as a Second Language) learning of the Indian students is the teaching method. The school curriculum for English is highly text based and the focus is on the written form. Students are trained to memorise the rules of grammar and apply them in writing. There is very less or no emphasis on practicing the oral form of the language in the English curriculum. The evaluation process also completely focuses on assessing the writing skills of the students. There is no provision to test the oral proficiency in English language. As a result, although the students pass the language paper, they fail to communicate in English.

These students face a lot of problem when they go to higher studies as the higher studies in India is completely imparted in English and the students are required to communicate in English. Moreover, they have to possess good communication skills in English for employability. But they fail to possess it owing to the faulty teaching learning process.

This problem gives rise to the necessity of the inclusion of practical sessions for English. English is mostly taught as a theory paper in India without any provision of practical social interactions. The empiricist theory and interactionist theory of language learning suggest that language is learnt through social interactions. Skinner (1953) emphasizes, language learning occurs through the principles of learning, including association and reinforcement. Bandura (1977) believes in observation and imitation as language learning tools. These theorists believe that language is learnt

Running Head: LEARNING LANGUAGE THROUGH INTERACTIVE LANGUAGE   4

through the environmental interactions. Speaking skill is the crucial and fundamental skills of any language. In order to foster fluent speaking skills in the second language learners of English, they should be exposed to more and more practice in natural atmosphere.

The Role of Language Laboratories

There have been a lot of innovations in the field of language teaching. The problem of providing exposure and practice to the second language learners of English can be addressed in a language laboratory with the use of technology. Language labs are audio and audio-visual systems that help students improve their communication skills in the target language with the help of specially designed multimedia materials and practice activities. There are various software programmes available which can be used in the language laboratories to provide practice in a natural atmosphere to the students in the target language. These labs are the need of the day. Hence, a lot of educational institutions, mostly the professional colleges have set up language laboratories to foster better language learning of the students.

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Language Labs

Advantages

1) **Audio-Visual Mode of Teaching-** The language labs mostly use audio-visual mode of teaching and learning. It is well-known that audio-visual materials stimulate and facilitate creative thinking and learning in language classrooms. Students learn better in multimedia mode of teaching as it attracts their interest.

2) **Provides a Natural Atmosphere-** According to Gilakjani (2011) the difficulties faced by foreign language learners in the classroom are lack of exposure to the target language, lack of

emphasis on pronunciation by teachers and the mother tongue interference (MTI). The language laboratories address this difficulty by providing audio-visual materials featuring the native speakers. The ESL learners get an exposure to the native pronunciation and learn in a natural atmosphere by imitating the native speakers.

3) **Individual Attention and Practice-** In the labs, each student gets to access the contents from a computer system assigned to them individually. They can work individually with their own pace. The teacher controlling from the server system can check each student's activity and pay individual attention as and when required. They can assign different tasks to different students according to the progress of the students.

4) **Standardised Content-** As the software programmes are used by institutes worldwide, the contents are developed and graded very carefully. Hence, the content and materials of these programmes are generally of high standard which ensures that the students learn the correct way.

5) **Focus on all Four Skills-** The contents of these programmes are designed to address the need of all the four language skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing (L-S-R-W). As it uses audio-visual mode of learning, students get an opportunity to practice all the receptive and productive skills of language.

6) **Practical Training and Self-evaluation-** The activities of these labs enable the students to evaluate themselves as they can track their own performance by recording their voice. They can record their own pronunciation and match that with the original pronunciation. They can repeat the activities as many times as they want till they are satisfied with their achievement.

7) **Appropriateness of Accent-** It has already been mentioned that the audio and video materials in these programmes normally use the native speakers. When the students try to imitate the pronunciation of these speakers, they get to learn the native speaker's pronunciation. Hence, these programmes ensure appropriateness of accent.

Disadvantages

1) **Heavy Reliance on Technology-** These programmes are heavily reliant on technology as they operate on computer systems and run with the internet. One needs to have sound technical knowledge in order to be able to operate as well as use these programmes. But everyone is not equally efficient in handling all the technologies. Hence, the use of technology becomes an obstacle for some instructors as well as students. They fail to get the desired outcome from the program. Additionally, learning is disturbed, at times, due to technical problems.

2) **Expensive and Requires Special Setup-** These labs cannot be set in any ordinary classroom as it requires the use of computer systems and other hardware and software installations. The labs require multiple numbers of computer systems and air condition rooms which adds to the expenditure making the whole set up an expensive one. Regular maintenance is inevitable to ensure proper functioning of the lab and it is an additional expenditure for the organisations. As the curriculum does not emphasize on the oral communication skills, institutes don't feel the necessity to spend huge amount of money to set up a language laboratory.

3) **Affects Syllabus Completion-** As students get facility to learn with their own pace, there is irregular progress of the syllabus. The fast learners learn quickly and move on to the next activity where as the slow learners take their own time. This affects the progress of the syllabus.

Some Popular Language Lab Programmes and their Features

1. **ODLL-Orell Digital Language Lab**

ODLL is the language lab programme of India based company. This lab platform is widely used across India and in other countries too. It is used in a lab set up which consists of an instructor's console and student's consoles. The instructor is provided with the function to monitor and control

the student's console. Apart from this, the instructor acts as a facilitator by assigning practice materials and instructing the students how to use the materials.

This software provides the facility to pay individual attention to students by interacting with them without disturbing the rest of the class. The programme has been designed under the supervision of language experts. Hence, it caters to the requirements of practicing all four language skills(L-S-R-W). The audio-visual materials featuring the native speakers provide a natural atmosphere to the students. It works in many languages. The lab provides facilities for students of all stages starting from lower kindergarten to post-graduate and professional courses.

2. SANS Language Lab

An USA based company Sans Language Lab caters to the varied requirements of learning different language skills in both synchronous and asynchronous mode. It provides assistance in many different languages. It has two different programmes for online and offline modules.

1) Live language lab On-Demand

It is a browser-based application which helps language teachers guide and engage students in various communication activities provided in different languages. It is used for live online teaching.

2) Virtuoso Digital Language Lab Technology

This is a software based language programme which is used for offline teaching in classrooms. It provides tools for teachers to manage the class, communicate with students, assign interactive activities to develop the communication skills of the students. It works in various different languages of the world. This is mostly designed for graduate students and it can be upgraded as per requirements lents for higher classes.

Running Head: LEARNING LANGUAGE THROUGH INTERACTIVE LANGUAGE   8

Both these programmes are instilled with materials and activities that help the students to practice the target language skills with natural audio-video contents. Both provide facilities for group as well as individual learning mode.

3. SANAKO

Unlike the previous programmes Sanako is an online teaching tool which can be used both in the class as well as remotely from any place. It works on laptops and tablets. So students and teachers can join from anywhere. This programme has different types of programmes which serve different purpose. They are as follows.

1) **Sanako connect**- This programme features all the benefits of language laboratory like; sharing files, materials, dividing students into pairs or groups for activities, create and design exercises, collect assignments and give feedback on student's recording in both real time and remote class. It allows students for self-paced learning.

2) **Sanako Study**- It is an activity based programme. The programme is packed with various unique activities targeting all the language skills with special focus on improving the student's pronunciation. It increases the time students spend in speaking and actively participating in activities.

3) **SanakoReactored**- This programme is specially designed for the evaluation purpose. There are ready made exercises which can be converted into exams saving the teacher's time to create test papers. It also enables the teachers to automatically evaluate assignments and tests. It also provides facility to the students to choose the way they want to learn the selected lesson.

4) **Sanako Pronounce**- This programme is used for pronunciation practice. It transforms any text material into spoken audio file which can be used by the users for learning pronunciation. Students can listen to authentic speech models, record their own voice for comparison and get immediate feedback.

5) **Sanako 100**- This is an offline practice programme which uses audio as a tool for practice. The teachers assign audio files from their computer and the students receive them in their audio panel. They listen to it and practice it. The student's audio can be recorded for evaluation. This programme does not require internet to run.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is evident that language labs offer immense facility to enhance the communication skills of the students by providing them exposure to the natural atmosphere. While it is gaining popularity in higher education, especially in the professional education institutes, it sees a dearth in school education system that lays the foundation of student's learning. The general Science and Arts colleges in India also don't have the language labs. Language theorists of different times have emphasized on the role of interaction and practice in enhancing language skills especially the speaking skills. Littlewood (1981) considered that communicative activities play a vital role in the successful learning of another language. Hence, schools and colleges should explore the language laboratory option to provide students the required practice and exposure they require to achieve high level oral communication skills.

References

Bandura, A (1977). Social learning theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall

Gilakajani, A. B. (2011). A study on the situation of pronunciation instruction in ESL/EFL classroom. *Journal of Studies in Education,* 1, (1), (1-15).

Language development. (2020). Retrieved October 2, 2020, from https://en.wikipedia.org/language_development

Littlewood, W. (1981). Communicative Language Teaching- An Introduction, Twelfth printing 1990, Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.

Skinner, B. F. (1953). Science and human behaviour. NY: Free Press.