

What do English Communication Skills Laboratories Really Communicate?

- M. M. Uma Maheswari

The language laboratory had its origin in the United States during post World War II. In 1950s tape recorders were the only medium that provided a scope for recording in the language classroom. However, the users of the tape recorder did not favour its utilization much as it had the disadvantages of heaviness of the machines, poor reach of the sound to the back of the classroom and the pupils' dislike to talk to a machine in a foreign language, particularly at the other side of the classroom.

A solution for the problems caused by these disadvantages was the setting up of the laboratory with a machine provided to each student that was connected up to a teacher's control console. The laboratory offered a range of different voices that the teacher could not provide all by himself and allowed the learners to hear themselves as they speak. It served as an excellent resource for developing listening comprehension.

In Britain, the language laboratories were first set in the early 1960s. The broadening outlook in devising new ways of language teaching around 1965 popularized the use of language laboratory in schools and colleges. Since the installation of the laboratory was expensive a great deal of effort was made to justify the cost and its suitability for the so-called 'Audio-Lingual Method'. Audiolingualism relied almost exclusively on the habit-formation theories of late behaviourism and ultimately the laboratory appeared to be the centres of some of the worst features of pattern practice. Along with the excessive drills the sheer novelty of the laboratory intrigued many learners and led to the subsequent loss of interest.

The utility of laboratory had a fresh breath when its library – like features came to the fore. The equipment was recognized for its easy management and availability to students on individual basis.

About 1970 the use of cassettes in lightweight machines came into vogue and it made the recordings easier and popular. The content of the language tapes was influenced by the abundance of drills in favour of dialogues and listening tasks. A.P.R. Howart and H.G. Widdowson quote that Julian Dakin's **The Language Laboratory and Language Learning** has well- captured this shift from formal drills to more meaningful materials, including listening materials (319).

Teachers are now using computer technology as an aid to create a supportive and effective learning environment in the classroom. The potentialities of computer aided teaching is well captured by Bickel and

Truscello when they elicit that the computer-based activities render the students an opportunity to perform diverse tasks with the computer, which broaden their repertoire of metacognitive, cognitive, and affective learning strategies (15).

The Background for Using Computer Aided Teaching

- The language teacher's interest to learn how to use new tools motivates him to incorporate computer technology in the language teaching.
- The language teacher's feeling of staleness or boredom in the traditional talk-chalk method necessitates an attempt to re-awaken the interest in teaching.
- Student's interest in using technology as a means to enhance their learning might have motivated the teacher to incorporate computer in the teaching.
- Teacher's curiosity about important new developments in the field of teaching.
- The need to consider approaches for teaching that caters to the increasingly diversified needs of the students.

Requisites for the Use of Computer in Language Teaching

In the developed world, an individual is expected to possess basic level of Information Technology literacy along with the basic level of numerals and alphabets. Even in the developing country like India, people are markedly subjected to the use of technology in everyday life. Paul Chin lists out the relative use of computer technology in our day – to –day life as follows:

- People use technology to handle ATM cash machines
- Programming the video is a stereotyped example of technology in the home
- The advent of digital services through the television also means that more people than ever are now able to use the Web and various other computer services such as e-mail (9).

People's reasonable understanding of computerized automation has an impact on their attitudes to technology. This positive impact can be taken into account when using computer technology to support teaching.

Criticism on the Use of Computer Aided Teaching

In the evolution of pedagogies, any teaching approach is subjected to both accreditation and criticism. The communication language laboratories have been subjected to extraordinary polarization between

those who elevate laboratory as a source of encouragement and those who reject it is a sham and a deception. Strevens (**New Orientations**) hints that the heavy dependence of the language laboratory on the following fundamental pre-requisites as the principal reason for the polarity of experience with the language laboratory:

1. Adequate maintenance and servicing arrangements.
2. Teachers' should not only be aware of the mechanical operation of the equipment, but also of its inherent methodological advantages and limitations.
3. Suitable recorded materials or staff with the time, facilities and ability to produce them should be ready in hand (160).

When all these requirements are fulfilled, the teachers using the language laboratories tend to use them enthusiastically. The difficulty or impossibility to achieve success in teaching with the laboratory in the absence of these requirements disillusion the teachers about the laboratories in general.

The skeptics and technophobes vigourously point out that the users of computer aided teaching approach should be technical wizards; the technology would always be unreliable; or benefits are not worth the effort or cost. Their criticism though proclaim pitfalls of using computer to support teaching are nothing but meek excuses in not engaging in modern teaching practices and using equipment widely available in most teaching institutions. Paul Chin stresses in the Introduction that this kind of a 'Luddite' attitude should not be entertained as a valid reason for ignoring the potential benefits that C&IT has to offer (xiii).

Arguments are leveled against the use of computers in teaching, stating the possibility of effective teaching without the aid of computer technology. David Gordon Smith and Eric Baber relate this argument to the feasibility of teaching without a course book, tape recorder or even a black board. However, down the ages these teaching aids are used to make the teaching and learning processes easier as they add a valuable extra dimension to the teaching. Similarly computers and the internet are extra tools, which can open up whole new vistas within the teaching practice (8).

Potentialities of Computer Aided Teaching

Series of recent experiments and research in the field of Educational Technology (E.T.) show how Information Technology can enhance the quality of language teaching. Paul Chin while highlighting the potentialities of computer aided teaching says, "C&IT (Computer and Information Technology) has a lot to offer teaching and learning, and the benefits for both teachers and students are clear" (7). Bush in his "**Interactive Videodisc The 'Why' and The 'How'**", CALICO

monograph Volume 2, has delineated that the majority of the work that investigated into the use of multimedia and computer applications have shown learning gains proving the positive contribution of computer technology to learning.

Watts (17) and Brett (**Using Multimedia**,2) proclaim that there is evidence that the use of multimedia for self-access work is more motivating and attractive than the traditional books and tapes or videos. Krashen in **Language Acquisition and Language Education** stresses that while anxiety and lack of motivation can impede language learning by acting as filters blocking comprehension, the novelty factor or the very appealing features of multimedia renders autonomy and creates greater participation from the students.

While discussing the use of computer technology in its various forms for effective language teaching Mary Ellen Butler-Pascoe points out that, "Through the use of the Internet, word processors, multimedia, hypermedia and drill and practice programs, students can engage in individualized instruction designed to meet their specific needs..." (3).

In "**Multimedia for listening comprehension:- The design of a multimedia-based resource for developing listening skills**" Brett, P.A describes how the computer-based delivery of video, audio, written text, graphics and the integration of these media can be used as a useful tool for second language learning. He also enlists the possible advantages of multimedia applications in assisting the development of listening skills, within the field of Business English by using moving video. Cathy Gunn, in "**Integrated multimedia for better language learning**" has elucidated the high possibility of using the computer technology as an effective supplement in language teaching.

The history of pedagogy has revealed that the teaching methods are evolutionary and are subjected to changes. Different ideas about language teaching have emerged, flourished and declined over the years. In the recent years attempts for delineating a single method as the best suited for teaching a language for all learners in all contexts is losing vigour. David Nunan in his speculation over methods elicits that researchers and teachers are now focusing on the development of suitable classroom tasks and activities that are consonant with the process of second language acquisition and also with the dynamics of the classroom (228). Language laboratories evidently serve as an aid for the development of suitable learning environment in the second language classroom.

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