Effective Use of Digital Language Laboratory for ELT/EST
It Works.

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Abstract

This paper sets forth to establish the fact that computer- aided leaning of English by means of network software in a digital language laboratory would help learners hone the various types of like listening skills, improve and enhance the speaking skills in life- situations and job situations. With simulation- based writing workshop method, the teacher could facilitate learners unlearn the unwanted language habits and enable self learning. Intensive reading skills can also be developed by means of Dictation cloze, which enables the teacher to assess the reading speed and accuracy of the learners. A language lab also aids learners improve their Study skills like note- taking, note -making and summarizing which integrate the receptive and expressive skills of English language learning .The author takes Tamil Nadu Agricultural University as a setting and illustrates the concepts from undergraduate students of technology- based courses and cites examples from the practical sessions of curriculum-based English courses of the institution which focus on language skills and soft skills like telephone skills for Placement and higher education in India and abroad, the two being the mandate of the Directorate of Students Welfare where the author is working. With a balanced positive attitude, he, however, points out the limitations of digital language lab also, a common characteristic of any other mode of teaching.
It is a common sight to see language labs getting established in many professional institutions. In fact, it has become a fancy or buzzword in the context of infrastructure available under the banner of state-of-the-art labs. There was a time when people were amazed over the very term called “language lab”. However in the present era of science and technology, in Multi national companies, needy banking institutions soft skills are demanded from the young graduates. Though there are than sixty and odd soft skills, language skills play a dominant role in the plethora of them. Certain receptive skills, especially the genre of listening skills can be effectively imparted in the digital language lab. Certain expressive skills of the students, speaking and writing can be learnt in the digital language lab by using network software. Hence the million dollar question is to what extent language could be utilized to develop the various skills of our graduating students.

In recent years, the sweeping changes of globalization and industrialization have impacted several fields including education and the echoes are heard in many spheres and countries. Consequently, the approaches to teaching in the academia and training in the industry have changed as well. The need for a new perspective of communication and the growing necessity to show more and varied set of soft skills in workplace has, therefore, become a matter of urgent concern for all educators and managers and industry executives. In this context, teachers have to cope with the change in the perception of the learners and to take a close look at the new roles of teachers in the light of the enormous importance being given to soft skills. They need to focus on these areas.

Communicative Language Teaching and soft skills.

An interesting thing is some of the similarities between Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the skills required by the employers from the young graduate. The CLT, briefly speaking, is based on the following principles. It

1. focuses more on using forms than studying about them.
   The employers also expect the young graduates to use English meaningfully in different contexts of business and professional contexts. In other words, our students must be trained to apply their knowledge in practical situations.

2. teaches grammar implicitly rather than explicitly;
   The employers want their young graduates speak and write in contexts.

3. Aims at motivating the learners to write in their own style.
   The employers expect the young graduates to be original in thought and expression and not mimicry the old theories especially in drafting a resume or motivational letter. They encourage graduating students and graduates to generate original utterances rather than just manipulate prefabricated language.

4. Avoids telling students they are wrong and is flexible to a variety of student responses; Soft skills demand politeness, euphemism and a person with good soft skills avoids displeasure.

5. Uses the target language exclusively and creates an environment in which using the target language feels natural, both on and off the screen. Any text, even a newspaper advertisement, or a flight ticket can be a text.
The skill-based activities of CTP are:

- Role play
- Interviews
- Information gap
- Games
- Language exchange
- Surveys
- Pair work
- Learning by teaching

This paper sets forth to establish that many of these skills could be imparted in the digital language lab better than a traditional class room.

3. The Setting

The Digital Language Laboratory of Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Coimbatore established in 2007 by Development Grant from Indian Council of Agricultural Research, is managed by the English teachers of the institution. It has 41 work stations with two teacher consoles, one for networking and another one, a supportive one for the associate teacher when students work with the 41 computers. The lab has, apart from the Hitech network software, has a number of software on English learning, career skills and soft skills- and the latest CDs related to Higher education abroad like TOFEL, GRE GMAT and IELTS. The English curriculum has only practical -- sessions-- running to a 21/2 hour duration when the teacher facilitates learners hone their communication and career skills. The author of this article imparts- the skills with the aids mentioned and establishes that the lab could be a congenial climate to develop the four skills of language by means of peer-group learning and self-learning.

Importance of writing skills.

Writing skill is a key to professional circles. Written communication includes writing of various reports, technical proposals, rejoinder, and letter writing, and so on. In all the forms of writing the basic knowledge of language is necessary. Technology provides a right kind of platform which helps develop the writing strategies and skills. Online publishing, word processor, blogging, etc. are some of the tools that help develop the skill. Technology makes writing interesting. Moreover, the consciousness that their writing is going to be assessed by people could caution and inspire them to write in a better way. However, the intervention of a teacher is highly required. It is the job of a teacher to give them tasks that could motivate them to write and communicate with the other students using technology. For instance, asking them to organize an event, i.e. planning a trip and to fulfill this task they have to follow the guidelines such as using only computer technology as a medium for communication among the group. Here an instructor has to monitor their discussions and guide them if necessary. In addition to this, there are multiple software that can be incorporated so as to develop the writing skills among students.

Bob Collins, a corporate manager, puts it in this way:

*The most critical skill required in today's business world is the ability to communicate, both verbally and in writing. Effective communication has a direct impact on one's potential within an*
The writing task is discussed first due to the following reasons.

Writing skill is developed by practice and the students who are fluent in speaking need not be so in writing. There are students who are good in spoken English but they are not able to write well with coherence and cohesion. Moreover, in business and professional circles formal writing has become need of the hour.

In an essay task such as the civil service exams or Bank Probationary Examinations, whether the time is of one-hour or three-hour duration, meticulous planning of the task and providing sub-titles are necessary.

In the international competitive exams, where computer-based or paper-based option is given, it is better to resort to the former, for the corrections can be made while revising and they will be legible to the evaluator. On the other hand, corrections - whether over-written or erased - will affect the overall presentation of the essay.

The methodology

The learners discussed here are second year biotechnology students who have undergone a basic course of English for Speaking and Writing skills. The following context Bt. Brinjal is not new to them as they have the schema/prior knowledge of genetically modified seeds. However the teacher in order to give them a prompt, broadcasted the following letters appeared in The Hindu, one supporting the cause of Bt. Brinjal and the other taking a neutral stand.

Bt brinjal may pose a serious risk to human and animal health. It will impact the country's food security, health, farming and environment. India is the home of brinjal, and it has been cultivated here for years without the help of fertilizers or pesticides. When there are so many indigenous varieties of brinjal in each region of India, there is no need to borrow Bt brinjal from other countries. India is once again being turned into a guinea pig to make profits for biotech.

As seen from the Bt cotton experience, a mere approval of genetically modified crops is not sufficient. Farmers should be taught about the adoption of transgenic hybrid varieties. They should be informed of the implications and cultivation methods of GM crops. Agri-biotechnology has a great future in our country and we need it more than anyone else because we have an ever-increasing population to feed.

Assume that you are a qualified seed scientist working in a seed science laboratory. Analyze the merits and demerits of Bt. Brinjal. The students were divided into two groups one supporting the cause of Bt. Brinjal and the other group, staunch supporters of natural farming who are against the use of Bt. Brinjal They were asked to write a five paragraph essay to a popular Daily.

1) State your option in the first paragraph.
2) Write three or four supporting paragraphs.
3) Summarize your ideas given in the last paragraph.
4) See that there is a link of ideas between the first paragraph and final paragraph.

5) The word limit could be 250 -300 words in length.

The teacher or the facilitator was able to see the process of writing by means of the application, **Observe** in the network software from the teachers console than going round and watching them which is liable to make them self-conscious and block their fluency in writing.

The teacher at the end of the thirtieth minute, instructed the students to change their workstations. Now the writers became editors. He gave them the following check list for evaluating their friends output: He took a sample of two well written essays, one from the pro Bt. Brinjal group and another one from the anti Bt. Brinjal group. He was able to take the pick of the bunch based on his application of **Observe** which facilitates the teacher to observe their process and product of writing.

Then the teacher asked the other students to evaluate their essay based on the following questions

**A Checklist for self-editing or peer-group editing of an essay**

**INTRODUCTION**

Does the essay contain a good introduction, probably a quotation, a relevant anecdote or preferably a simple sentence?

Is the introduction concise and precise, which motivates the reader to read further?

Does the introduction focus the readers' attention on the topic?

Is the introduction related to the body of the text?

**BODY**

Is the essay segmented into appropriate paragraphs?

Is the first sentence of each supporting paragraph intended to show the organization?

Does each supporting paragraph have only one idea?

Is there a topic sentence in each paragraph? If so, is the topic sentence clear?

Are all the paragraphs well developed with specific information?

Do the paragraphs contain enough supporting details?

Are all supporting details relevant to the sub-topic or 'road map' of each paragraph?

Are the ideas grouped together in an appropriate manner?

Has the author used thought - extenders such as so, therefore, hence etc. and thought reversers such as but, however, still, yet, etc.

Has the author taken care to avoid grammatical slips, redundancies, self-contradictory statements, paragraph-like quotations and too many exclamation marks?

Has the author used synonyms in relevant contexts and do they fulfill the principle of idiomatic use of the situation?

Are the ideas and paragraphs logical?

**CONCLUSION**

Does the conclusion clearly summarize all the ideas given in the main body?
Is the conclusion related to the introduction?

Does it link the main idea of the text to the future, or to some broader issues not covered in the essay?

On the whole, has the author adhered to the principle of giving a comprehensive treatment to the essay task?

The students were very interactive and as mentioned before, the teacher and author of this paper was able to see the enthusiasm the discussion/interaction could generate language from the students.

-The essay task promoted.

(i) Planned writing i.e. brainstorming on the task.

(ii) Detailed reading of fellow learners' output

(iii) Critical reading in terms of the strategies/tips given.

(iv) Speaking skills while pointing out the merits and demerits of the writing samples.

(v) Process-based writing of prewriting, rewriting /redoing and post writing ,

(vi) It also promoted active and keen listening.

One wonders whether these learning strategies outcomes could be achieved in a chalk and talk method or in a traditional classroom. This writing workshop method enabled the teacher to achieve self learning by means of simulation, role play, language exchange, leaning by doing, doing and learning and doing for learning.

In order to enable the students to internalize the strategies of writing a good essay, the teacher gave them a web exercise of searching for a good essay in web sites like www.essay.com, www.writefix.com and analyze and give examples for every principle mentioned above. To the pleasant surprise of the teacher, many selected essays like which one you like: traveling alone or traveling with friends, Should rich countries help the poor countries, Parents are the best teachers. The students were asked to upload their selected essay in to their system. The facilitator broadcasted one of the essays and other students evaluated based on the strategies mentioned above. Thus search, find, analyze and apply evaluate, more or less similar to cognitive skills, viz. knowledge, understanding, application, synthesize, analysis and evaluation could be accomplished in the two writing tasks mentioned.

Listening

Listening has many genres like active listening, passive listening, selective listening, accurate/ keen listening and interactive listening. In the English practical classes, the author, as a course teacher of the course, English for Speaking and Writing Skills allows the students to do pre listening related to the text by means of using the speakers for collective listening. This is followed by the application of intercom in the software which enables one to one talk, this sets the stage for listening to a prerecorded audio CD where the he leaves out certain words (Dictation cloze of rational type) The text is played twice and they have two tasks. One is to identity the missing words and second is replacing the words which are grammatically correct and lexically appropriate and restore them.

In a dictation class in the language lab, the students have to apply their attention span and the concentration span in a classroom situation. As the Biotech students of our university is a mix of
independent, instructional and below borderline levels, he chose a, a popular article on Tea which was published in The Hindu.

**HEART-HEALTHY** Tea especially benefits women

Tea is considered to be a good beverage by many scientists in view of health reasons. Now they have come up with yet more evidence why it is good for your health. Drinking three cups a day can help prevent a heart attack or stroke... unless you're a man.

A team of researchers in France has out a study and found that women who three cups of tea daily are less likely to have plaques dangerous build-ups of fat and cholesterol in their arteries, British newspaper Daily Mail reported recently. According to them, the same is not true in case of. In fact, researchers at the Institute National de la Sant Et de la Recherche Medicale in Paris came to the after examining a group of 2,613 men and 3,984 women with an age of 73. They measured the level of plaque in their carotid artery ultrasound. Carotid plaque was found in 45 per cent of who were not tea-drinkers, in 42.5 per cent of women who one or two cups of tea daily and in only 33.7 per cent of those reporting drinking three or more cups a day.

Even with high blood pressure appeared to gain protection from tea males who are regular tea-drinkers did not reap the same health benefits, the researchers found.

The teacher left out certain functional words and certain lexical items. A text which has only functional words will not be challenging. On the other hand, a text that has only lexical words may be too difficult. Hence, to a great extent, an equal number of both categories were deleted.

After 20 minutes the teacher broadcast text on the LCD screen to facilitate learners learn the appropriate use of the deleted worlds. Subsequently, a discussion takes place on the lexical words. For a blank number 2 for instance, many words like took, drank, consumed were given. The strength and weakness of the cloze text is students coming out with near equivalent words to the answer. The teacher used the intercom component to answer the queries and give explanation.
Study skills/integrated skills

The learners were asked to listen to a lecture on the utility of Applied Sciences delivered by Albert Einstein before the student body of California Institute of Technology. They were asked to take notes while listening and make a summary of his speech. The lecture was broadcast by the teacher from the teachers console for the second time. The learners were asked to listen to the speech by using headphones. The text of the eminent scientist's speech is given below:

**THE UTILITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES**

My dear young friends,

I am glad to see you before me, a flourishing band of young people who have chosen applied science as a profession.

I could sing a hymn of praise with the refrain of the splendid progress in applied science that we have already made, and the enormous further progress that you will bring about. We are indeed in the era and also in the native land of applied science. But it lies far from my thought to speak in this way. I am reminded much more of the young man who had married a not very attractive wife and was asked whether or not he was happy. He answered thus: If I wished to speak the truth, then I would have to lie. So it is with me. Just consider a quite uncivilized Indian whether his experience is less rich and happy than that of the average civilized man. I hardly think so. There lies a deep meaning in the fact that the children of all civilized countries are so fond of playing Indians. Why does this magnificent applied science, which saves work and makes life easier, bring us so little happiness? The simple answer runs: because we have not yet learned to make a sensible use of it.

In war it serves that we may poison and mutilate each other, in peace it has made our lives hurried and uncertain. Instead of freeing us in great measure from spiritually exhausting labour, it has made men into slaves of machinery, who for the most part complete their monotonous day's work with disgust and must continually tremble for their poor rations.

You will be thinking that the old man sings an ugly song. I do it, however, with a good purpose, in order to point out a consequence.

It is not enough that you should understand about applied science in order that your work may increase man's blessings.

Concern for man himself and his fate must always form the chief interest of all technical endeavours. Concern for the great unsolved problems of the organization of labour and the distribution of goods, in order that the creation of our mind shall be a blessing and not a curse to mankind. Never forget this in the midst of your diagrams and equations.

The students were instructed to make a summary of the text in their system within fifteen minutes. The next step was to enable them give in speech their summary. Some students left out cretin points which were pointed out by her peer group. At least 20% of them wrote more than what was required. The students were enthusiastic as they actively involved in **focused listening** than **casual listening**. The teacher could also pinpoint the intonation and the word stress in the text.
A traditional classroom may be not be adequate to carry out these study skills of developing note taking and note making and orally summarizing what they have written. Since they were speaking only from their work stations they were not self conscious.

Other applications

In Tamil Nadu Agricultural University there are students who have the aspiration to pursue their students in USA Canada etc. It can be assertively said that for the integrated speaking task in TOEFL and similar tasks in English classes no other place can be a better one than a digital language laboratory. The students when they do an integrated task first read, then listen and answer a question based on reading text and the listening text. The students have a congenial classroom climate. In our lab, ten mock tests were conducted and students got good marks in TOEFL last year.

In the independent task the teacher could listen to the each prospective test taker and this task was performed without causing disturbance to other prospective test takers.

Summing up: Merits and Limitations:

1. In the digital language lab, and in the classroom experiments described above, Technology Aided Language Learning [TALL] is integrated with Classroom Activities Promoting Simple, Useful Language Environment [CAPSULE]

   In the classroom trials mentioned above, learner autonomy could be achieved as the students take responsibility for their own learning, rather than being dependent on the teacher in the writing task. In tune with this concept, the teacher is merely an enabler, encouraging peer group learning, collaborative writing and motivating them to formulate their own learning strategies.

2. Listening could be better imparted in the digital language lab both for curriculum-based English courses BEC courses and tests like TOEFL and IELTS.

3. Speaking at one to one level could be better taught in language lab than the traditional classroom. However, though there are applications like G-talk in our network software, for tasks like Group Discussion, brainstorming, and simulation, traditional classroom is a better place.

4. For developing reading skills, students find reading from the books is better than reading from the web page as the former facilitates speed reading. Hence the traditional classroom continues to be a better place for effective learning.

5. Writing when it is interactive, the lab could be a could be better place for effective learning. skill Unlike the traditional classroom where the students could have the content only from the chalkboard, in the digital language lab, the students were able to get the content right before their eyes in their system because of the facility of immediate broadcast by the teacher from his console.

6. For oral presentation by the students, the lab is better than the traditional classroom because of the broadcasting facilities.

7. If the lab has an internet facility, the teacher can, on the spot, show good websites relating to English learning, BEC courses, career skills and soft skills and international tests like TOEFL, IELTS, GRE
and GMAT. He can also train them in information transfer i.e. converting a nonverbal form of communication into verbal form of communication. Tasks of this kind are given in IELTS.

8. There is always improvement and advancement in any subject and ELT/EST is no exception. We are habituated into the traditional method of teaching. We should try out new techniques and technology in our system of classroom teaching. A balanced mix of traditional classroom teaching and digital language lab teaching has become necessary.

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