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COMPUTER ASSISTED LANGUAGE TEACHING IN INDIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Use of computers and technology for language teaching has become inevitability. Use of technology refers to various uses of computers and computer related applications. This paper discusses uses of computer and computer based applications and programmes for learning language skills. It also discusses uses and practicability of computer enabled language laboratory. Focus of the paper is on relevance of these technological advances to Indian context.

Keywords:- laboratory, computer, language skills, contextual learning.

It is a common phenomenon that most of the language classes use some form of technology. Technology assists and helps to enhance language learning experiences. Incorporation of technology in various forms is found at different levels. This use of technology supports teaching, involves students in the learning process and provides authentic examples of target culture, wherever necessary. Some technological tools help teacher to design suitable classroom activities and home assignments. Technology enabled distance learning makes spread of language-learning possible regardless geographical distance, different linguistic background. It also makes language-learning opportunities available to a great number of students. In other words, technology is gaining importance as a tool to facilitate language learning.

Success of any technological tool for language learning depends largely upon the skills and expertise of the teacher. It is the teacher who has to manage and facilitate the language-learning environment. Unsubstantiated claims of language technology companies about usefulness of their product to help students learn language confuse the authorities and make them think that it may be an effective cost-cutting measure. No research, however so far has been able to prove that technology can replace able language teachers and their interaction with the students will no longer be required. Following is a running survey of various technological tools available to language teachers.

Computers :

Video conferencing, telecommunications and computers have great potential to play a vital role in English and language teaching. There is a wide range of possible roles technology can play. More extensive research is still required in this area.

Computer is seen today as a device with well defined function like drills on basic skills, but it has more to contribute to language teaching. Computer is rather more flexible tool. It may be employed in many diverse ways. Computers may be used effectively for



teaching composition, reading comprehension, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, usage, outlining, reference use, rhetoric, drama etc. and many more. Programmes, specially designed for primary, upper elementary, high school and college students are already available. Naturally, the question arises, "What roles should computers be allowed to play in language teaching and learning process?" An answer to this question gives us the following roles which may be performed by computers:

- I. They can be Tutors. They give instructions at individual level, present learning material in controlled manner and pace, and can keep record of student progress.
- II. They may prove to be a useful Tool. They help in reading. Texts can be produced and formatted using computers. Revision of texts and checking spellings is also easy on computers. They can store varied and vast information in a little space in an easily accessible manner.
- III. Computers offer ways to explore language. With the help of computers, students can easily understand, examine and interact with the regularities, the beauties and the difficulties of language.
- IV. They assume role of media. New modes of communication, 'hypertexts', or 'hypermedia' become possible because of computers. Intermixing of tables, charts, graphs, pictures, sounds video and texts becomes possible.
- V. Computers provide an altogether new mode and environment for communication. This helps in formation of new forms of communication and ways of relationship among students and teachers.

Computers are useful to increase verbal exchange, because students are constantly involved in language activities. This enables learning through communication. The traditional curriculum of ELL may be successfully supplemented with the use of computers. Tools like interactive computer books are found useful in promoting verbal communication and the acquisition of English among the students.

Vocabulary development forms an important part in any language learning situation. Kang and Dennis (1995) write, "Any attempt to treat vocabulary learning as learning of isolated facts certainly will not promote real vocabulary knowledge". Computers can provide contextual environment and visual clues for vocabulary learning. Since computers provide a one-on-one environment, students tend to become active learners. A study was conducted by Kang and Dennis (1995) in Seoul, South Korea on fifth grade English language learners divided into three groups studying definitions, pictures and context. This study reveals, "the Context group subjects needed a period of time to get used to their instructional treatment before they could take advantage of this more engaging type of instructional approach". This contextual process of learning was facilitated by the use of computers, which proves usefulness of computers in contextual language learning.

Reading ability may be significantly improved with the help of computers. Computers can retain interest of students in reading by keeping the text simple and easy to read. They also provide immediate feedback and can suggest additional practice when it is necessary. Case and Truscott (1999) opine that computers help to improve sight word vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Computer assisted reading programme results in "increased interaction with texts, attention to individual needs, and increased independence through an ability to read texts they would not otherwise be able to read" (Case & Truscott, 1999).

Learning to write with the help of computers becomes an enjoyable activity. Graphics, clip art help students to express their thoughts more clearly. According to Lewis (1997), in case of beginners composition should be a guided activity, otherwise writing compositions in an unfamiliar language may frustrate learners. Adequate instructions should be provided to the students before computers are used as a supplement to curriculum.

Lewis opines that computers help to demonstrate and reinforce grammar skills. The students may be directed to highlight a specific part of speech throughout their writing. Many choices are available to students for highlighting such as underlining, italicizing, changing the font size, colour or type. Various modules involving multiple choice questions may be easily designed. A simple application like power point may be very useful for teaching of grammar. Slides involving exercises wherein answers appear after students have solved the exercises may be easily prepared by teachers. Immediate feedback in the form of keys to the questions motivates students and if necessary helps them to find on themselves where they went wrong. Thus computer for learning grammar is far more motivating than writing with pencil.

Language lab:

Language laboratory is actually a computer lab with little changes. Installation of some soft wares can easily turn a mere computer lab into a language lab. It is a facility where technology is used for learning a new language. Today's language labs have evolved from its 1960s 'listen and repeat' formats into truly interactive form. Various language learning apps, innovative game formats are all available at a click. Audio, vividly clear videos featuring native speakers with interactive transcripts are available. These soft wares allow closer look of every word in the videos and audios for translation, pronunciation, usage and more. With this combination of computer lab and language lab, the language learning opportunities are infinite.

Advantages of language lab:

It is clear that language lab today cannot be separated from the computer lab. Therefore, all the advantages of computers in language learning are available in language lab. In addition to that following advantages may be listed.

- A. **Acoustics:** Equal opportunity is offered to all the students to hear the instructor and to be heard by the instructor. Students can follow the learning material at a level convenient and comfortable to themselves.
- B. A sort of psychological **privacy** is provided to the students promoting and encouraging them to speak, setting aside any inhibitions. It helps students to overcome shyness and talk freely.
- C. Since, each student listens to the programmes individually, he/she is able to focus completely on the programme, resulting in increased attention span of the student.
- D. Listening is the fundamental of language skills, because process of learning language begins with it. Language lab helps students to develop good listening skills by providing with correct language patterns. Instructor or the teacher is not usually a native speaker of the target language. A variety of model voices of native speakers are provided in language lab which is the most authentic source of linguistic material.
- E. It may be safely said that language sessions are more efficient in use of time than the conventional classroom. In traditional classroom, teacher's communication with



individual student disturbs the rest of the class. In lab sessions students can continue their work even when the teacher is engaged in an individual conversation with a particular student.

- F. Variety of language material is available to the learners, which may be presented in controlled manner by the teacher. Variety of material avoids boredom, and makes students more active.
- G. Voice outputs of the students may be compared to the model material or other learners. The immediate feedback helps the learners to take corrective steps.

Apart from these, many other advantages may be enumerated, but the question arises how far these technological advances are relevant to Indian context. English teaching in India is still fraught with the continuance of old methods of teaching. Though the teachers are aware about these technological advances, there seems to be a psychological barrier on the part of the teachers and students as well. The students are used to passive listening rather than interactive learning. Despite strenuous efforts, it is difficult to ensure student participation in the higher classes. The problem of crowded classes is at the root of these difficulties. A teacher can manage a group of about thirty students. Most of the times there are more than eighty students in a classroom in our schools. How is a teacher expected to manage such crowded classes using interactive methods of teaching? Most of our schools and colleges depend on government funding. The infrastructural facilities necessary for using these technological tools are not affordable to most of the educational institutions. Providing computers to such a large number of students is not practicable.

Students from primary to higher education are still assessed on the basis of their performance in the specified period of examination. Concept of continuous assessment has not been accepted in our educational system yet. Use of technology is more compatible with the concept of continuous assessment, because all language skills cannot be evaluated in a two or three hours' writing test. We need to revamp our evaluation system from primary to higher education level.

Conclusion :

Computers can assist teaching of writing in many ways. They can help to overcome the problem of teacher time and individual attention. Feedback is immediate and convenient at any time, unlike teachers. If used properly, they also help in lessen the teaching load. Establishment of student-writers communities is possible through computer networking. Students can have real audience, which will stimulate further progress in written communication. More research is still needed regarding use and potential of computers in language teaching. Though these computer based programmes are useful, their designers should work on reducing clumsiness of these programmes and make them more user friendly and easy to handle. Cost is still a main hurdle in the widespread of technology in language teaching. We need cost effective programmes and hardware which may be easily accessible to multitude of learners. We also need to work on probability of providing smartphone based language learning programmes which will emancipate institutions from the compulsion of maintaining expensive computer systems for every learner. The concept of language laboratory may be revived using smartphone based language learning programmes and giving

it a personal and individual touch. Despite all these difficulties, the use of computers for English language learning and instruction is an indelible fact and inevitable future.

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