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The Role of Language Lab in English Language Learning

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Abstract

Mere passing out in the examinations just by studying the theoretical aspects of a language does not adequately guarantee a successful language learning experience. So the learners are almost found to be lack of proper communicative skills in English. As English is a world language, the demand for communicate skills in English has been increasing rapidly due to globalization. Hence, language laboratory (lab) is considered as an effective tool to meet the demand as well as to enrich the English language learning process. The present writer has attempted to focus on the various aspects of a language lab, such as its general features, basic aims, procedures of use and educational significance to teaching English. Moreover, this paper shows the advantages and disadvantages of using a language lab and skills there by discusses the techniques to improve language skills of the learners through language labs. This article also deals with the feasibility of the use of language labs in a country like India and put forward some suggestions for efficient functioning of a language lab. The paper concludes that the language lab is the urgent need of the hour to learn English.

Key Words: Communicative Skills, Language Lab, Globalization.

Introduction: Advanced information techniques have enriched teaching-learning process by providing customized instruction and individualized assessments. Language laboratory (Lab) serves as a platform for learning where the learners can practice and develop their language skills through interactive lessons and communicative mode of teaching based on language learning software. Language labs have become highly valued in educational institutions as they enable learners a e-learning environment, facilitate classroom engagement and interaction through computer-based network, provide more exercises to practice and give more advanced functionalities in learning languages. As, we live in multilingual world and digital age, language lab is essential for students helps learners to learn language at their own pace, record their performance and assess their learning experience and thereby develop strong communication skills needed for professional careers. Thus, the language lab has become a significant part of teaching English.

Objectives of the Paper:

The objectives of the paper are stated precisely as follows:

1. To know the common components In a modern language lab and its stages of development over the year.
2. To focus on the usability of different kinds of a language labs and its general features..
3. To deal with the procedures the use of language lab.
4. To point out the advantages and disadvantages of using language lab.
5. To focus on some techniques to be adopted for improving various language skills effectively.
6. To highlight some suggestions for effective organization for language labs.

Structures of the Paper:

The present study in the form of article is structured in the following manner:

In Section-I, an attempt is made to understand the concept of language lab and its development with the change of media operation and thereby focus on the usability of different kinds of language laboratories.

In Section-II, it has been focused on the general features and procedures of the use of language labs.

In Section-III, the advantages and disadvantages of the language laboratories have been identified.

In Section-IV, an attempt is made to focus on the techniques to be adopted for improving the language skills through language lab.

In Section-V, some suggestions for effective organization and functioning of language lab have been highlighted and in concluding remarks the author's own evaluation is reflected.

Section: I

Language Laboratory: Language laboratory is an audio- visual installation of technical tools in order to assist the modern language teaching- learning process. The American Heritage Dictionary states that language laboratory "is a room for learning foreign languages and equipped with tape recorders, video-cassette recorders or computer connected to monitoring devices enabling the instructor to listen and speak to the students individually or as a group.

Purposes of Language Lab: The language learning experience will remain imperfect unless we provide with a well-equipped language lab to our learners. The purposes of setting up of a language lab are stated here:

- To improve and demonstrate four major language skills in a wide range of communication strategies.
- To acquire good linguistic competence through accuracy in grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary.

- To develop pragmatic competence and to comprehend the grammatical form, function and formality.
- To build up discourse competence, to write contextualize text and develop to produce speech.
- To develop the ability to communicate language effectively in a variety of situations—real and simulated.
- To attract more students to study languages in a functional way with a joy full experience.

Development of Language Laboratory: The language lab has been develops through different stages over the years with the change of media operation. Perhaps the language laboratory was initially started at the University of Grenoble in 1908. It was only tape-based system using reel to reel or later cassette during the period from 1950 to 1990. In the year 1990, the language lab has been transformed to new digital hybrid PC based system with software and hardware drives in place of analogue type. It also creates a supplementary network over and above the existing PC network for audio connections and communications in fixed locations. Software systems can be installed on an existing PC based network which make them multi-locational in their access., provide with content much richer and self-authored-now not just audio, but video, flash based games, internet etc., increase the speed and variety of the delivery of media and enable teachers to assess learners performance remotely.

Usality of Different Kinds of Language Laboratories: Different kinds of language labs have different modes of their applications. The conventional laboratory which is used in a normal classroom set up is no longer in use. The Lingua phone Laboratory in its modernized form is sometimes available as it uses electronic device to record students' voice and replay it for comparison. The Computer Assisted Language Laboratory (CALL) uses computer to teach language. The entire course materials are already stored in the computer and are displayed to the students according to the features available in the system. The acceptance of CALL has been seen slowly and unevenly. In Web Assisted Language Laboratory (WALL) system, the computers are connected to internet. The Multimedia Hi-Tech Language Laboratory is very helpful to meet the students' academic needs and help them to develop English Language skills. Mobile Lab is also built up to fix a console on the wheel with storage spaces for headsets. Any classroom may be turned into a Mobile lab, but it is not possible to move one classroom to another. In a wireless laboratory the wires can connect the sources to students' headsets replaced by radio transmission, but the functions of monitoring and intercom are eliminated. The Remote Controlled Lab enables learners to regulate specific tape decks located elsewhere at remote locations. It is helpful for students as they can start, stop, backtrack and rewind at their will.

Section- II

The General Features of Language Laboratory: There are some common features of the modern language laboratories. Thus the layout of language labs comprise with a teacher's console and students' booths. The teachers' console is a desk or central control panel in the language labs which has a broadcasting system in relation to control the process of communication between the teacher and students by blowing a button in addition to a headphone and a microphone. Sometimes teachers' console is provided with a computer which is used for supervising students' activities. The students' booths are small semi-private enclosed spaces where students take seat and equipped with technical facilities, such as earphone, microphone, tape recorder to receive the recorded lessons and listen to them. Regarding general functioning of the language laboratories, it is found that the teacher and students wear headsets that block outside sound. Learners are provided with a media player or recorder for listening to audio and recording their voice. The Local Area Network (LAN) or separate audio cabling can connect the position of the teachers and students. The learning materials are generally stored in a server computer or by using separate storage device in a digital format. Here language texts, images can alter materials to cope with demands and control the learner's computer through their consoles. The learners can practice language learning exercises through interactive activities for reinforcing materials learned in the class. Teachers can monitor and evaluate the learning progress of each student.

The language laboratory can provide effective communicative language training programmes for the general public as well as teaching programs for the students. Language experts take initiatives for creating and editing technical resources for teaching. The language lab can provide all forms of technical documentation, carry out online lessons and oral examinations, generate teaching materials, create web content and enable corporate publicity. It helps learners to be familiar with the various aspects of the Phonetics of a language and to acquire language skills for effective communication.

Procedures of The Use of Language Laboratories: The language lab is utilized for teaching or learning English with the help of teacher's console and student's booths. The purposes and functions of a teacher's console are stated as follows:

A. Purposes of Teacher's console:

1. **Staying in control:** Staying in control refers to monitor the learners from the teacher's PC when they engage in self-learning. It indicates various activities, such as controlling web browsing, monitoring students' on-screen work and activities, locking cursors and keyboards to focus attention on a given task shutting down, logging off or restarting student computer set etc.
2. **Reinforcing learning:** Learners can reinforce their language learning in various activities, such as text messaging or chatting, facilitating broadcast and sharing files from teacher's PC to the student's booths through the software. They can revise pronunciation, vocabulary, sentence structure and conversations through the computer for reinforcement of learning.

3. **Teaching with familiar software:** Teachers will use software which is easy to use and activity-driven. The unknown specialized instructional technology skills which may create should not be provided for this interface.
4. **Ensuring the best learning result:** Language learning software can be used for reinforcing the best learning result which is achieved through carrying online tests in a individualized manner. The language learning software also enables students access to resources for independent and supplemental learning.

B. Functions of Teacher's Console:

The functions of teacher's console are as follows:

1. **Live Audio and Video broadcasting:** Teacher's console can be utilized for broadcasting live Audio and Video from educational channels of TV or from internet and from teacher's screen to learner's computers or from any analogue source i.e. DVB, CD etc.
2. **Monitoring the student's workstations:** Teacher's console is used for monitoring screens of the students' computers from the teacher's workstation. It can regulate or terminate the use of any student's computer.
3. **Speech Drill Exercises:** Teacher's console can provide speech drill exercises through model imitation, voice recording, voice graph and variable speed playback for acquiring fluency and accuracy in speech.
4. **Group discussions:** The live recording of group discussion content for each group are displayed on screens of the computers so that the teacher can give feedback to the students on their performance.
5. **Conducting Online Examination:** Besides designing customized course materials, the teacher's console can conduct tests, quizzes and examinations by using text, graphs, audio and video.

Section-III

Advantages and Benefits of Language Laboratory: The language lab has much relevance in the domain of teaching-learning and every aspect of human life. Some advantages and benefits of the language lab are stated here:

1. **A platform of Practical:** Language labs provide adequate practice on an interactive way for developing language skills and allow learners to reinforce materials learned in class.
2. **Learning makes faster and accurate:** The interactive course of a language laboratory helps students to learn much faster and accurately than in a conventional classroom system. The progressive model of language network of a language lab can promote natural learning where students learn the different components of language in an intuitive way.
3. **Teacher's role makes more effective:** The language lab can provide supplementary materials that facilitate to perform the duty of the teacher, such as to prepare lessons in

less time, to provide a greater volume of interactive resources and also guide the direction of the class on the basis of the instantaneous reports on the learner's day to day progress.

4. **More resources and varied activities:** Language labs can provide learners to practice the language with a variety of activities and exercises based on the computer. It makes learning structurally comprehensible, contextually real and visually attractive. The learners can learn grammatical structures by watching the videos and acquire correct pronunciation through a speech recognizer.
5. **Foster communication in the classroom:** Language labs can promote a deep communication between student-teacher as well as student-student through language activities and provide exercises essential to oral communication. Language labs can provide various tools for communication, such as headphones, conversation through chatting, messages on the screen of the computer etc.
6. **Effective learning English:** Language lab enables learners to hear the model pronunciation of English language distinctly without a time constraint and the learners can record their performance in the use of phonetics, such as pronunciation, accents, stress etc. the use of language lab would increase students motivational to learn rectify speech problems, save time and enable more learning in a less time.
7. **Auditory oriented:** As the language lab is based on the direct sound transmission through audios, it provides the opportunity to all students to hear equally irrespective of location where they stay and allows them to use of time efficiently.
8. **Improve methods of teaching/learning:** The use of language lab would help to supplement and enrich the methods of teaching English. It can provide more informal conversation or interactive session between students and teachers. The language lab motivates students to talk freely, provides privacy that encourages the shy students to speak freely and allows teachers to monitor the student's progress individually so that they can give necessary feedback to them. The learning process in language lab is innovative, interesting, easy and learner-centred.
9. **Provide individualized learning:** In a language lab, the learning activities are organized activities are organized on technology-based rather than manually-controlled. The language lab provides freedom to the teachers to learn language at their own pace and ability with less involvement of teachers. The access to resources beyond the school timetable encourages them to engage in independent learning. The student can make self-correction when he listens to the correct responses on the tape recorder.
10. **Provide self-evaluation:** In a language lab, the students can do a periodical self-evaluation of their progress in learning and store the results in the computer. They can assess their own performance in comparison with a particular sample or model. The periodic self-assessment would gradually increase their language skills.

Disadvantages of Language Laboratory: n spite of various advantages or benefits of a language lab, it has also a few disadvantages or difficulties in relation to its organization and functioning. The disadvantages of the language lab are noted here precisely:

- The organization of a language lab requires a high cost. Moreover it is difficult to organise language lab country like India as there is no laboratory work in the language syllabus.
- The language lab needs suitable infrastructure and modern technical equipment which are too difficult to provide. Moreover, the lack of well-qualified teachers and technical assistants cause great trouble in functioning of a language lab.
- It is difficult to solve the technical fault of the language lab in time and even it becomes useless when the electricity is off.
- Now-a-days the students do not pay enough attention and patience to listen to sample pronunciation and practice them. As the teacher has to listen to students' response randomly, it would become unorganized and ineffective.
- It is hardship to keep the equipment in the language lab in high-quality conditions for want of technicians. The technicians should guide the students so that they do not misuse the equipment.
- The language labs are facing troubles for want of space and funding. Due to over-enrolment of students, it has become difficult to accommodate all students in the language lab at the same time and also teacher will not be able to give time to each student.
- The students face a great difficulty to have a time to engage in the language lab everyday as they have scheduled hours in the course of study. The language teachers also find it hardship to be present in the language lab throughout the day.

Techniques for Improving Language Skills through Language Lab: The language lab will have to adopt a few techniques for developing language skills in the learners. These techniques are discussed here:

1. Techniques to improve Listening: The teaching of listening skill involves training in accurate perception of the sounds of a language as well as its practice in various forms of listening comprehension. Hence, pronunciation exercises should be practice with the help of software or by using CDs in language lab. Earphones and headphones in a language lab can deliver undistorted sound distinctly to the ears for intense listening.

The procedures for listening comprehensive activities in a language lab should follow the stages as follows:

First, the students will have to understand the setting of the recording which enable them to guess about the contents of what the speakers will say.

Secondly, the teacher should explain the sort of language that might be heard in that setting.

Thirdly, the teacher will have to give listening tasks before the students listen for focussing their attention on listening. The listening task should be limited from 10 to 15 minutes as it needs intense comprehension.

Fourthly, after listening, the teacher should give students a number of questions to group of students and students would share their answers for comprehension.

Fifthly, after students have understood the general idea, they can analyse it in more details and examine the speed and style of speech of the speaker.

Sixthly, the teachers will have to grade the listening tasks from easy to more difficult based on the output by the learners in the form of their answering to question.

2. Techniques to improve Speaking: Language lab is very helpful for developing speaking skill of the learners. The students will have to participate in group discussions and role plays under teachers monitoring which can be recorded modules in language learning software may be used for the evaluation of student's speech. The pronunciation module of the software can compare a waveform representation of the native speaker's pronunciation with a waveform of the student's pronunciation through accuracy scale of voice-matching on the screen.

3. Techniques to improve Reading and Writing: The development of listening skill leads to improve speaking and writing skill. The average persons should be exposed to the use of vocabulary before integrating it into reading and writing. Writing practice should be made through typing on gap-filling exercises, writing summary, notes taking and preparing model formats for E-mail, letter, reports, message and resume which can be edited by instructor. The different methods of reading such as skimming and scanning etc. are to be practiced with the computer. Language learning software can provide different methods for evaluating student's performance in language skills and tracking their progress.

Section-IV

Suggestions for Effective Organization of Language Lab: There is always scope for the better organization of language lab by taking some necessary measures. These are as follows:

- ❖ The deep rooted habit of traditional methods of teaching English should be discarded.
- ❖ The government and educational institutions should take initiatives for providing suitable space, funding and infrastructure for setting up language labs.
- ❖ The syllabus of language lab activities should be included in the language curriculum. The practical work in the language lab and its regular assessment will be made mandatory. The practical classes on language teaching must be placed in the daily class time table.
- ❖ The government and educational institutions should take steps for the appointment of well-qualified language teachers and technicians for functioning language lab efficiently. The language teacher must have the basic knowledge of computer application.
- ❖ Efforts to be made for organizing seminars, workshops and training programmes on the organization of language lab successfully. The mass-media can be used for their purpose.

- ❖ The UGC, NCTE, NCERT, British Institute and other higher institutes of language teaching will come forward to focus new concepts on framing syllabus and mode of practical work in a language lab.

Concluding Remarks: Lastly it may be remembered that computer is just an aid and not a solution. Hence, the teacher's and student's inputs are very important in language lab activity. The judicious use of computer and other technical tools is extremely needed for this purpose, unless the new technical tools are used in English language teaching, the communicative method of teaching will go in vain. Both classroom teaching and language lab work would make the comprehensive language learning successful. Hence, we need digital computerised language lab in all educational institutions where the trained experts are engaged in conducting the language laboratory works efficiently.

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