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Role of Modern Language Laboratories in Teaching Communication Skills

Reshma Rabbani
Research Scholar,
Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University,
Raipur, (C.G.)

Abstract:

Communication has always been a key factor in all walks of life. In the age of globalisation and modern technology, English language has emerged as the language of global communication. Thus proficiency in English language has become essential for a person's personal and professional growth. Communication skills in English language can be mastered by mastering the four skills of language i.e LRSW namely listening, speaking, reading and writing and with some basic knowledge of grammar, which form the base a language. Modern language laboratories fully equipped with modern technologies have played a vital role in mastering these language learning skills and preparing the students for placement/ campus interviews, and many other informal and formal situations like group discussions, personal interviews, meetings, presentations, etc. which form a part of their professional sphere. In this paper I have discussed the role of language lab in teaching communication skills.

Keywords: Language Laboratory, Communication Skills, Modern Technology, Globalisation

Communication has been an integral part of human civilization since time the idea of civilization came into being. From the hairy ape of the caves to the present highly sophisticated man of modern age, the journey of evolution of communication has been similar to the evolution of human being. The means and modes of communication have undergone a vigorous change from the non-verbal signs and symbols of early man to the sophisticated pattern   languages of modern day man. Communication has always been a key factor in all walks of life for exchanging information, for developing mutual understanding, for establishing relations, for successful personal and organisational growth and for the collective development of society and the nation.

With globalization reducing the whole world to a small place and modern technology bringing people just a click apart, English language has emerged as the language of global communication connecting people all over the world and increasing their zone of access. In addition to this in India it is an associate official language, a language of upward mobility and unfortunately of prestige in society, a language of smartness amongst youth and in corporate setups. Besides it has become a must recruiting criterion whether seeking admission in professional institutes or applying for jobs in all reputed organisations of the country or abroad.

Due to the current status of English as a global language of science, technology, and international relations, many countries around the world consider the teaching of English a

major educational priority (Crystal 1997; McKay 2000).Thus proficiency in English language has become essential for a person's personal and professional growth. The proficiency in English Language can be achieved by honing the communication skills in English. Communication skills of a person play vital role in deciding his career curve and personal growth. The communication skills of a person are call for evaluation during interviews, while group discussions , power point presentations , working in teams, writing official letters and reports, addressing public, in professional meetings etc. Moreover it is an important aspect of a person's personality and helps in projecting a confident image of the self before others. Moreover effective communication skills is a must for teachers too who act as a bridge between the texts and the students. Because of poor communication skills in English, most Indian students develop a low self-esteem which is reflected in their personalities during professional interviews. This is quite evident from Prof. Seema Mohanty statement when she says:

> "Many Indian students also suffer from low confidence in their use of English because it is not the language they are most comfortable in. This feedback is evident from the written responses consistently given by companies like Mahindra and Mahindra Ltd., Essar Group, Jindal Steel Ltd. and Tata Refractories Ltd. to the Training and Placement Centre of our institute during the recruiting process which takes place every year." (Mohanty 66)

Communication skills in English language can be mastered by mastering the four skills of language i.e LRSW namely listening, speaking, reading and writing and with some basic knowledge of grammar, which form the base a language. Out of these four skills listening and reading are input skills which help in acquiring the language and feeding in the memory while speaking and writing are output skills which help us to retrieve the language stored in memory as when required either in spoken or written form. Modern language laboratories fully equipped with modern technologies have played a vital role in mastering these language learning skills. As aptly pointed out by Antich de Leon, R. et al. ,the language laboratory is very helpful in teaching advanced students, especially people who are focusing on a certain field of the language. (Antich de Leon 176)

The concept of language laboratory was institutionalised to improve the communication skills of the students and to prepare them for placement interviews, and many other informal and formal situations like group discussions, personal interviews, meetings, presentations, etc. which are going to be a part of their professional sphere. The Language lab helps in creating real life situations in an artificial environment where students or learners can learn and practice their skills in an artificial environment before facing them in realities. The exposure of such artificial environment helps the learner to become familiar with the situations which he is going to face later in his life. Moreover facing such situations like informal conversations, formal interviews, power point presentations, group discussions, debates, extempore, JAM sessions, role plays etc. removes his nervous energy and instils confidence in him as he happens to face such situations several times in his mock drills of language laboratories before coming in terms with them in real life such that when he faces

them in his real life then they are no more new for him .Besides his experience of such sessions helps him to improvise his real life performance, bringing the best in him.

A language lab in general is equipped with all modern technologies like internet, interactive white boards, network aided personal computers, head phones, collar mike, recorders, handicam , digital podium, language lab software, projectors, sound systems, etc. Even smart phones can be used as an audio – video recorder in absence of expensive handicams and recorders. A language lab is basically a student centred mode of teaching where the students are trained to enhance their LSRW skills through network aided computers centrally controlled through a teacher's master computer. Beder (2008) in defining language laboratory stated: "A Language Laboratory is a room in a school, college, training institute, university or academy that contains special equipment to help students learn foreign languages by listening to tapes or CDs, watching videos, recording themselves, etc.". Mambo (2004) affirmed that: language laboratories are environments designed to enhance foreign language learners' skills. Generally equipped with analog and digital hardware, and software (tape recorders, videocassette recorders, or computers), they provide practices in listening comprehension, speaking (listen and repeat), with the goal to reinforce the grammar, vocabulary and functions (grammatical structures) presented in class.(p.2) In such labs the teacher as per the requirement of the course and the level of student can use some pre-recorded tapes, audio- video CDs, audio- videos recordings from you tube etc. to teach LSRW skills to students through the Master computer . The teacher can use the material for all students or select   groups through the master PC. The teacher can also listen to and discuss with a selected student and participate in a student's activity. The language lab software enables the teacher to conduct a wide range of activities like both listening comprehension and voice practice. The versatile language lab software solution supports student voice recording for drilling in pronunciation and intonation, and offers teachers innovative content authoring capabilities, which allow for the creation of new learning material.

An extensive set of language learning activities can be conducted in language laboratories through the language lab software. Some of the activities are as follows:

- **Listening Comprehension:** In listening comprehension, the teacher can transfer an audio track to students through the master PC. During the playback of the source material or afterwards, the teacher may select one or several students to answer questions. The teacher may also allow students to access their digital recorders, so that they can work with the source material individually and at their own pace.

- **Discussion Activities:** In discussion activities, the teacher can form groups through the master PC and allot them same or different topics for discussion. The teacher can unobtrusively listen to student conversations, allowing them to feel free to express themselves using their own words, rather than rehearsed textbook responses.

- **Round Table Discussion:** In the round table discussion**,** the teacher can set up small student groups with a designated chairman, who leads the discussion. The

teacher can set up a meeting environment to help advanced language learners strengthen their oral presentation skills.

- **Reading Practice**: Reading aloud is a useful way of practicing intonation, rhythm and pronunciation, and is ideal for students' individual practice. Students can read a text which is recorded on the student track, and then practice to improve their proficiency.

- **Model Imitation**: Students can listen to and repeat a model track that the teacher has transferred to them to practice the stress, rhythm and intonation of a foreign language, while their voices are recorded. The model audio track for the session may be recorded by a teacher or a student. Later on the teacher or the student can replay the recorded track and evaluate their performance by comparing it with the source track with a voice graph.

- **Recap Functionality**: The students can quickly repeat the previous sentence or part of the file using the recap function, designed to permit the students to review examples of authentic or native speakers in the target language.

- **Voice Insert:** The students can quickly also insert, gaps automatically into source material, with the help of voice insert function for recording their voices after each sentence in the source material which they can use for comparison and self -evaluation later. This unique feature allows for the creation of exercises during playback. Thus each student can listen to pre-recorded material spoken by native voices, repeats what he hears in pauses, and then is ready to play back the recording of his own repetition in alternation with the native model(Milton& Helen,1961.p 294).As further stated by Milton and Helen (1961): "Unlike any other type of language learning activity, this permits every student to recite simultaneously and receive correction in the laboratory period"(p 294)

- **Screen Transfer with Audio and Marker Tool**: The teacher can share the contents of the teacher screen and talk to the students at the same time through the language lab software. The screen image and audio can be transferred to a single student or the entire class. The teacher can also highlight the screen items using the marker tool in order to make sure that students are concentrating on essentials .

- **Whiteboard**: Teacher and students can collaborate using an interactive whiteboard. Pictures, text and graphical annotations can be drawn to the whiteboard by anyone who is participating in whiteboard session. Whiteboard content can be saved as a project which can then be edited afterwards.

- **Written Assistance**: The teacher can send messages to assist students with their work and the students can reply. The teacher can also initiate a text chat session with single or multiple students. The chat feature provides an additional layer to audio-based classroom collaboration.

- **Remote Access:** The teacher can collaborate with selected students by accessing their computers to help with a task on the student screen and at the same time communicate with the student.

- **Control of Student PCs**: The teacher can control over the student PCs through language lab software, which allows for guidance and support of the students. The teacher can black out the student screens and/or lock the cursors and keyboards to draw their attention to a given task. The student PCs can also be shut down, restarted, logged off or switched on (Wake-On-LAN) individually or all at the same time. The teacher can block the use of Internet or other applications through the blocking feature to help students focus on a given task.

- **Voting and Live feedback**: The teacher can run on-the-spot queries using the voting feature to determine student engagement or understanding of a subject. Students can use the feedback tool to let teachers know if they are following the lesson or if they are having difficulty.

- **Adjustable thumbnails in separate windows**: The teacher can work with separate windows, making it easier to more effectively monitor student activity in the Study environment. Using a dual display system makes it easy to monitor, guide and support students while working with other applications on a separate display.

- **Pronounce Software**: The students can listen to any written text material in spoken form using the pronounce software which transforms the text material into spoken audio with the help of text-to-speech technology. The teacher or students can load material from existing file or copy from an internet source which is automatically divided into sentences and is pronounced at a very high quality voice. The user can then play and listen to the model pronunciation. The students can also record themselves reading the current sentence and compare their recording with the source material.

In addition to the above mentioned computer mediated activities carried out through language lab software, some activities like JAM sessions, extempore, group discussions, power point presentations, debates, role plays, mock interviews, informal conversations, situational dialogues etc. can be conducted off computers live and the performance of the students can be recorded with a handy cam or smart phones. The recorded audio- video tapes can then be used to analyse one's performance and learn from the mistakes. Such videos are very helpful in correcting the non-verbal aspects like facial expressions, body postures, body movement, eye contact, as well as the paralinguistic features of the language like pitch, tone, intonation etc. which form a very important part of one's personality.

Apart from all the above facilities provided by a modern language lab, there are certain barriers or obstacles faced in imparting language teaching through it.

1. It's a very expensive system of language learning and requires huge cost for the setting up of a language lab and not all institutions are able to afford that.

2. Secondly it has been often seen that mere set up of the language lab is not sufficient, the teachers handling it must also be equally motivated. As a teacher lacking interest in language lab shall never be able to generate interest among the students. As stressed by

Croft, "the value of language laboratory lies not so much in the kind of equipment you have, but in the way you make use of it" (Croft 1972: 396). Thus besides being motivated, the language lab trainer or teacher should be properly trained so as to make full utilization of all the facilities of a language lab.

3.   As Nunan (2005) indicates that the notion of "Information Technology (IT) is becoming ubiquitous these days, with numerous education departments requiring teachers to demonstrate a degree of technological literacy. Many teachers, however, are unsure of what technology is and what it is not" (p. 167).Therefore teachers are expected to have some knowledge of complex hardware and learning software. Moreover teachers should also be trained to teach the soft skills using innovative methods so as to generate interest among students during the learning sessions.

4. Moreover the selection of material to be taught in language lab should be as per the students level as a material of too high or too low level will fail to sustain the interest of the learners in it.

5. Unfortunately, most language teachers did not consider that the lab should also be used to reinforce other areas in which learners are facing problems.

Language labs should never be seen as a substitute for the instructor; on the contrary, language labs require better-prepared teachers who can put the new equipment and techniques to good use as well as conduct the class. When used properly, labs can greatly increase the effectiveness of good teachers, whether or not they are native speakers of the target language. (Lado, p. 174)

Thus we see in this high tech world where technology has made our life so much easier, smoother and better, modern language laboratories are just another example of technology serving man and helping him conquer the world through his communication skills. The language laboratories tend to be extremely helpful tool for language learning, improving language skills, and particularly practicing and evaluating students' speech in any language.   They besides providing the authentic model of native English to the students for listening also enable them to compare their performance with it and do self- assessment. Moreover the laboratories also provide privacy to the students during their performances so that the shy students can freely perform their tasks .Thus we see that language laboratories are proving to be very helpful in country like India where most people fail to achieve their career goals in life not because of lack of technical qualification or knowledge of their subject but because of low confidence level, improper body language and poor communication skills in English. It's high time that we realised this and made full utilisation of modern language laboratories in mastering our communication skills.

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