THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE LABORATORY AND ICT ON THE EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

English Language is not our mother tongue. It is a borrowed language; which accounts for different pronunciations we often hear. This is as a result of interference of different mother tongues with the English most people speak. There is a growing verbal incompetence noticeable, and very glaring among our students, teachers, and among other educated people in the society. So, this study focuses on the impact of the language laboratory and ICT for effective teaching and learning of the English language, since English language has remained a very important tool for socialization and bureaucratic activities in Nigeria. The evolution from language laboratory to ICT in language learning was equally highlighted. Among the major findings of the work is that language laboratory and ICT improve productivity and better performance in communication. At the end recommendations were made to the effect that language laboratories and ICT devices should be made available in all schools to facilitate language learning.

Introduction

Language, according to Caroll (1980), is an acquired learned arbitrary system of vocal/written symbols, through which human beings interact in terms of their cultural experience. In the same direction, language, according to Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, is the body of words and system of use common to a people who are of the same community or nation, the same geographical area or the same cultural tradition.

Language is human speech, either spoken or written. Wherever there is human society, there is language most forms of human activity depend on the co-operation of two or more persons. A common language enables human beings to work together in an infinite variety of ways.

English is one of the major languages out of about 6000 estimated languages spoken in the world. About two hundred or more years ago, English language was simply the language of less than sixteen million people. However, today, English is used by more than four hundred million people and second only to Chinese as regards the number of people using a particular language. English is one of the most influential, significant and growing languages spoken across the universe.
One – sixth of the earth’s land surface uses English either as native language or official language (Lingua franca). Of the entire world languages, English is the most widely studied especially in areas where it is not native. We cannot dispute the fact that today, English is used in several countries in the American continent, including the United States of America and Canada, New Zealand, Republic of South Africa, Australia Republic and by most countries in the West African region. English was actually the language of colonization in these countries.

In other countries including Japan and China, English is usually taught as the chief foreign language. Equally, about half of the world’s scientific and technical journals as well as newspapers, are printed in English. The spread of English is further enhanced through the establishment of British council and United States Information Service by the British and US governments respectively, with centres and libraries in various countries, including Nigeria. All these factors have, therefore, made it easy for anyone who understands and speaks English, and moves around major cities in the world to communicate effectively with other people.

The English language has remained a very important tool for socialization and bureaucratic activities in Nigeria, since the days of colonization. It was natural that emphasis was laid on spoken English only and either on written English or both of them. However, with the emergence of a new class of people, with time, the civil servants, and their new roles in the colonial administration, the teaching and learning of the language took another form. Today, English is the language for the international community. According to Ezugu (1998), the English language is the most widely spoken language in the world. It is used either as a primary or secondary language in many countries. It is the language of education, administration, law, world trade, international diplomacy as well as a means of enhancing their culture. It is, therefore, worthwhile acquiring mastery of this very important language, for whoever does not, has deprived himself of access to the world’s brightest ideas and modern technologies.

In Nigeria, English remains the language of pedagogy. Students can hardly make commendable progress in their studies without adequate mastery of English through which most of the courses, in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions are examined. This calls for a system that would be both rudimentary and functional in its approach. This is important, for, according to Umaru (2005), as a student learns a new language, very often he does not know how to express what he wants to say in writing. Since the student uses a foreign language as a medium of communication, he has to start from the scratch to learn the rudiment of the Language. It is natural then that this is the function where the various problems arising from the teaching and learning of the language meet the need to do so properly.

Writing on language teaching, Oluike (2005), stated that the basic criteria for assessing students’ proficiency in writing and speaking are generally controlled by the basic grammatical categories such as punctuation, tense, number, gender etc. Language teaching in Nigeria has brought out several deficiencies. The major reason for these deficiencies is our English teachers who are not well-trained. Even if they are somewhat trained, their training is
not rooted into the work. A situation where a teacher of the language has no mastery of its grammatical categories as we see today does not mean well for the education system.

Also, writing on these problems facing language teaching, Regner et al (2001), posited that many good teachers are adaptive rather than rigid in their approach to teaching children and only loosely base their instruction on a given method. Language is the official medium of communication of humans; it is one of the things that differentiate man from animals. Signs and symbols have no international understanding and they can be difficult to understand. Picture, painting and sculptures cannot be read by all. This makes language superior to all of them because it is easily understood and generally used.

According to Ozohili (2007), language literally means the “tongue”- a human organ used in speaking. Traditionally, language is defined as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which thoughts are communicated from one being to another. Human beings have the ability to learn and to understand and think about things. They have the capacity to gain and use knowledge. They can as well explore situations, collect information, plan and execute plans. Man’s high intelligence has also enabled him to evolve a level of linguistic communication by which life can be regulated.

Theodore (2001), stated that language learning requires time, patience and practice. It cannot be done solely in school with the large class but requires few minutes of daily practice. Therefore, pupils, students and teachers should be encouraged to practice this language in their leisure time in order to master the language as required.

**Language Learning Evolution: From the Language Laboratory to the ICT modes.**

Modern Language laboratory was one of the media that made a lot of impact in our educational scene. The language laboratory is an audio or audio-visual installation used as an aid in language learning. Here each student is able to replay one track of play and at the same time record his response on another track. He is then able to rewind the tape to listen to both the master track and the recording to his own response comparing the two recordings.

A language laboratory is a room equipped with audio and visual equipment, such as tape and video recorders for learning a foreign language such as English. Perhaps the first laboratory was at the University of Grenoble in 1908. In the 1950s up till the 1990s, they were tape-based systems using reel-to-reel and later cassette. Current installations are generally media based.

The original language laboratory is now outdated. It allowed a teacher to listen to and manage student audio via a hard-wired analogue tape dock based systems with ‘sound booths’ in fixed location.

All but the most simple or first generation laboratories allowed the teacher to remotely control the tape transport control of the student booths (record, stop, rewind, etc) from the master desk. This allows for easy distribution of the master programme which is often copied at high speed on to the student’s positions for later use by the students at their own pace.
Better tape laboratories housed the tape machine behind a protective plate (leaving only a control panel accessible to the students) or locked the cassette doors. This kept the expensive decks from students’ misuse and dust, etc.

**Operation**

Once the master program had been transferred on to the students’ recorder, the teacher would then hand over control of the decks to the students by pressing the record key in the booth; the student would simultaneously hear the playback of the programme while being able to record his or her voice in the pauses, using the microphone. This is known as an audio active-comparative system.

The significance of the language laboratory has been much felt in the domain of communication. We live in a multilingual and multicultural world, which is being shrunk to the size of a village by the advancement of science and technology. The language laboratory exists to help one to use technology effectively to communicate. It is not merely used for learning a single language, but it can also be used to teach a number of languages efficiently.

To acquire a sensibility for sounds and rhythm of a language, one has to hear the best sample of a spoken language, says Richards (2010). This is precisely the function of the language laboratory. Some highlights of the language laboratory are given below:

- It is a tool designed for teaching any language.
- It helps one to learn pronunciation, accent, stress and all other aspects of the phonetics of a language.
- Effective communicative training programmes for the general public, private and corporate sectors, junior and senior level officers can be given through the language laboratory.
- With content creation, the setting-up of in-house news magazine, corporate publicity and identity, and teaching materials can be generated through the language laboratory.
- General documentation, software documentation and all forms of technical documentation can also be done.
- Experts can utilize the laboratory for creating and editing scientific and technical materials for teaching language.
- The language laboratory enables one to conduct courses for various groups of people like students, faculties, business people, etc.
- Short term and long term coaching classes for international examinations like IELTS, TOEFL and other. Competitive examinations can be organized through the language laboratory.
- Online courses and paperless examinations can be conducted through the language laboratory.

**Problems Associated With Language Laboratory**

Language laboratories in the 1970s and 1980s received a bad reputation due to breakdowns. Common problems stem from the imitations and relative complexity of the reel-to-reel tape system in use at that time. Design played a part, too, as the simplest language laboratories had no electronic systems in place for the teacher to remotely control the tape.
decks, relying on the students to operate the decks correctly. Many had no device to stop the tape running off the reel.

The tape recorders in use after the early 1970s in the language laboratory were more complex than those in the home, being capable of multitasking and electronic remote control. As a result, they often had several motors, relays, complex transistorized circuitry and needed a variety of voltages to run. They had lots of rubber parts such as idlers which wear out. Bulks in the control panels were also in continual need of replacement.

Since the student booth tapes were not normally changed from one class to the next but were recorded over each time, these would eventually wear and shed their oxide on the tape heads leading to poor sounding tangling.

The installations were usually maintained under contract service engineering but these either served a country or similar wide area, and would call at five (5) monthly intervals. This meant that if several booths malfunctioned, then for much of that time, the laboratory was out of action.

In the evolution of language learning, it is observed that the use of the language laboratory has gradually given way to ICT (Information Communication Technology) modes of language teaching/learning.

Eaton (2010) posits that the focus in language education in the 21st century is no longer on grammar, memorization and learning from rote, but rather using language and cultural knowledge as a means to communicate and connect to others around the globe. ICT has broken all the barriers.

According to Human Resources and Skills Development (Canada, n.d) in the 21st century, a comprehensive essential skill set is needed for employment. Some today’s tertiary students have a word of resources and information at their finger tips. So they need competences in areas beyond language such as numeracy, thinking skills, computer use and the ability to work well with others. They understand that life-long learning is going to be the norm for them.

The use of technology allows for demonstration of work through portfolios, students-made videos, student blogs, Wikis and podcasts just to mention a few. All these are about using technology to demonstrate students learning in order to show how they themselves reflect upon the impact language learning has had on the them. These they can share with others through ICT.

Technology does not only demonstrate student learning, but also facilitate their learning. Using MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning) is quickly gaining ground today as much as CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning (Chinnery 2006). It is not impossible that at some time in the future, “Apps” or some variation of mobile applications may replace textbooks.

Since the vogue today is that students are harnessing their creativity to express themselves in the computer world, the challenge for the 21st century teacher will be to find ways to allow them do it. Eaton (2010) asserts that students are the creators, not simply consumers, of technology and technology produced art and projects.

**Prospects of Language Laboratory**
In the current digital age, we are all connected regardless of the distance. Advancement in technology has literally brought the world into our living room in the form of TV or internet which allows us to watch events happening in other countries or talk to friends and family living in other continents via internet. As a result, we are exposed to different languages, cultures and traditions of people all over the world.

As we live in multilingual and multi-cultural world, language laboratory can greatly help students to learn language of their choice, as it will allow students to learn at their own pace. They can record and assess their performance to make sure that they are paying attention to all aspects of phonetics such as pronunciation, accents and stress, etc.

The language laboratory provides access to native speakers via audio-video aids so that they can learn correctly.

Given large number of students pursue higher studies outside their home country; language laboratory would help them in studying the language of the country where they are planning to pursue their higher education, for example, non-native English speaking students are required to give TOEFL/IELTS if they plan to study in North America. While there are several benefits to language resource centre, there should be proper safeguard in place to regulate and monitor the use of technologies employed in the teaching and learning process so that students do not misuse them.

Among others, language laboratory helps as it leads to:

- Pedagogy of learning through technology
- Putting the rules of language learning into practice
- Mastering the language
- Exposition of the strategies of teaching and learning
- Guided modes offer a step by step study course
- The free to roam modes give a student the option of learning by topic or by linguistic skill.
- The dynamic mode takes a student under its wing; and
- Methodology of instruction is followed in the communicative and integrated approach

Perhaps of paramount importance to the prospect of the language laboratory is the inclusion of ICT as an aid to Language Learning. Information Communication Technology in this paper should be seen as a diverse set of technological tools and resources used to communicate, and to create, disseminate, store, and manage information. These devices says Basak and Masoud (2011) include computers, the internet, broadcasting technologies (radio and television) and telephony. Among some of the capabilities of ICT researches have shown are as follows:

- Increase in the quality of learning
- Ease of access to a very high volume of information and knowledge available globally
- Rapid and timely access to information in very little time.
- Indirect creation of learning experiences.
- Create an interest in learning
• Increase learning opportunities etc.

Conclusion

The use of ICT helps learners to have real – life contact with, and exposure to the culture of the peoples, and countries where the language is spoken thus enabling the learner to access and research information worldwide.

Using ICT, particularly email, blogs and video conferencing, facilitates students interaction with native speakers and other communities. Interactive white boards, DVDs, and the use of digital projectors can provide stimulating visual aids as a valuable strategy to support understanding and recall in the new language.

From this study one can conclude that students/teachers find English language a difficult subject to learn and that they lack proficiency in the language.

The highest instructional material available to the learner is the teacher who is equally the model when it comes to pronunciation. And he might not even be a professional in this aspect. Naidoo (2003), suggests that ICT can be used to support teachers who lack adequate skills and content knowledge, thus contributing to improving the quality of learning.

From the forgoing, it is obvious that ICT is beneficial to both the learner and the teacher and if well applied can be a veritable tool in assisting students to acquire language skills whether used independently or in a language laboratory.

Recommendation

With regard to this research, the following recommendations are made:

1. That the government and education planners should provide facilities for training more English language teachers in schools using the language laboratory. Besides, English language teachers should not only have the intellectual knowledge of the subject matter, they must also possess language usage skill to solve the problem of articulation in learning the second language. They should know the methodology for imparting the language.

2. The government and Ministry of Education should make provision for refresher courses for teachers during seminars/workshop periods to bring the language teachers together in order for them to be in tune with modern methodology.

3. There is need for a reconceptualized field that is more learner – centred, more collaborative and more technologically driven.

4. Students should be encouraged and empowered to communicate with others across the globe in real time to enhance their language skills.

5. Again, adequate efforts should be made to ensure a blend of experimentation with the direct method in the teaching of English language. No single method is recommended in cfcisolation.
6. Ministries of Education should provide English language laboratory and other audio visual materials in schools. This will enhance the effectiveness of the teachers, arouse the interest of the students and their performance in oral English examinations and in other aspect of life.

7. National policy on education should lay more emphasis on the use of ICT to commence from the first year a child enters the four walls of a classroom. This will enable the child or pupils to have a good grasp of the language at an early age. The younger the learner, the easier the understanding. So, it is better to catch them young.

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