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Innovative Techniques in Language Teaching: An Analysis of the Computer Assisted English Language Learning Software used in most of the Engineering Colleges in India

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Abstract

This is the Age of Globalization and Internet. Excellent English language and Communication Skills are absolutely important these days to get a decent job. One of the main reasons for the unemployability of a majority of Indian engineers and other degree holders is their inability in being highly communicatively competent. Therefore a lot of innovative techniques are required to develop effective communication and soft skills. An internet mediated classroom is a practical reality these days and therefore digital language learning labs are crucial for developing communication and soft skills. In this paper I would specifically focus on the software developed by various companies for improving English language, communication and soft skills recommended for teaching in most of the engineering colleges in India. Finally it is strongly recommended that the teachers should be given special training with the active help of managements and governments to effectively use such technology and software.

Key Words: Globalization, software, language lab, activity based teaching, communication and soft skills.

In this fast changing globalized world, new and innovative techniques are being developed using the latest computer technology for English language learning. In this paper I would specifically focus on the software developed by various companies for improving communication and soft skills. The software developed by these companies are almost similar both in their content as well as recommended methodology for using them.

Most of the engineering colleges in India adopt any one of the software technologies for first year engineering students. The English language course is known by several names in different colleges. Some of them are a. Professional Communication, b. English Language Communication Skills Lab, c. Communication and Soft Skills. Whatever may be the titles the content is almost similar in many of the colleges and universities. It is approximately a hundred hour course spread over nine months. The classes are held once a week for three hours a session. The course is again divided into two sections with two different classrooms. In one classroom cum lab there are sixty computer systems with a Master Console. This room is also called as **Multi Media English Language Lab**. The other room comprises around 30 – 40 cushiony revolving chairs and around 10 small round tables along with a television and a full length mirror. This room is also called as **Communication Skills Lab or Activity Lab**. For this language lab course, two faculty members are allocated. The class (usually consisting of 60 students) is divided into 30 students each.

One batch of 30 students sits in front of the computer systems and practice listening, reading and writing the course material provided by various software companies. The other batch of 30 students in the communication skills classroom practices the art of speaking and implementing whatever they learnt in the Multimedia Language Lab. After one and a half hour the students exchange the places. Speaking is the main and only important activity in the Communication Skills Lab. Both the classes are closely monitored by one faculty member each with close coordination among them. Most of the engineering colleges in India have more or less the same syllabus for their first year engineering students. Since the present researcher has been working in Hyderabad for the past 15 years his analysis primarily focuses on some of the software which is more popular in engineering other management colleges in and around Hyderabad.

An analysis of the English lab software material:

This lab – **English Language& Communication Skills** – at first year engineering level consists of around 10 sections. They are as follows:

1. Introduction to English Sounds: Vowels and Consonants
2. Introduction to Intonation, Accent and Rhythm
3. Role plays / Situational Dialogues
4. Oral Presentations – Prepared and Extempore
5. Just A Minute (JAM Sessions)
6. Describing objects, Situations and People.
7. Information Transfer

8. Debates
9. Telephone Skills
10. Giving Directions

Detailed Analysis:

Introduction to English Sounds: Vowels and Consonants:

English alphabet contains only 26 letters but has 44 sounds. All these sounds are displayed on the computer screen along with their phonetic symbols. On the top right corner of the screen the mode of articulation of that particular sound is also displayed. The main phonetic symbol is shown on the centre of the screen. The learner listens to the sound with the help of head phones by clicking on the symbol. A student is expected to practice listening to a sound several times imitating the pronunciation. At the bottom of the screen there are three rows consisting of five words each. After listening to the sounds to his/her satisfaction (as well as the teacher's satisfaction) he/she should write down the symbol in its transcription form in his/her observation notebook. Here the teacher should explain the phonetic transcription and its importance. They should be told that it will be easier to learn the correct pronunciation of words with the help of an advanced dictionary like Oxford Advanced Leaner's Dictionary or Cambridge Advanced Leaner's Dictionary and this requires familiarity with the symbols. The teacher should motivate the students by telling them that if they know the English phonetic symbols and their transcription thoroughly they don't really need any English teacher's help for better English pronunciation. Here all the students are instructed to buy an Oxford/Cambridge Advanced Leaner's

Dictionary. All the students should maintain a separate observation notebook for Multimedia English Language Lab.

At the bottom of the screen 15 words are given in 3 horizontal rows. Each row consists of 5 words. In the first row, words are given in such a way as the sound occurs in the initial part of the word. For example for the sound /I/, the words in the first row are it, ink, India, English and is.

The student clicks on each word and listen to the pronunciation of the word with a special focus on the sound / I / as it occurs in the beginning of the word. They then write down these words and underline the letter or letters where the said sound occurs. For example it, ink, India, English and is.

Similarly in the second row the words would be bit, pit, sit, fit, think and in the 3rd row ability, sunny, costly, almighty, chubby.

For the sound / iː / the fifteen words could be:

Each, eager, easy, eat, equal,

seen, been, sheen, feel, steep,

knee, me, free, spree, bee.

The students should practice and then write them down symbols and examples in their observation notebook for all the 44 sounds. Diphthongs should be given special attention since they are sensitive sounds especially for Indian learners. The most common errors that Indian learners and other non-native speakers of English commit are in the pronunciation of certain diphthongs.

These are / eɪ /, / ɪə /, / aʊ /, / əʊ / etc. The most important diphthong to be mastered is / eɪ / as in 'make'. Most Indians pronounce it in its literal form. But the educated native speakers of English pronounce it as / m eɪ k / similarly take / t eɪ k /, cake / k eɪ k / etc. Ironically even many non-educated native speakers of English commit the same errors in such diphthongs. This stunning fact of mispronouncing the / eɪ / and other diphthongs is beautifully exemplified in the movie 'My Fair Lady'. This movie is an adopted form of a drama 'Pygmalion' written by George Bernard Shaw. In fact Shaw is perhaps the first and only English writer to concentrate on and highlight the problems in English spelling and pronunciation. This movie can serve as a good motivation for students as the pronunciation techniques are taught in a humorous and entertaining manner. The demonstration coupled with the explanation of the movie can be a superb example for getting the correct pronunciation. The primitive English lab shown in the movie produced around 40 years back is an excellent example of the vision and imagination of some language experts when the concept of a language lab was not even heard of in those times. There are some difficult consonant sounds in English especially for Indians and other non-native speakers of English. The most important of them are / h /, / ŋ /, / j /. Most Indians pronounce the sound / h / as / h e tʃ /, whereas it should be pronounced as / e tʃ /. Similarly the nasal sound / ŋ / can be better explained that it mostly occurs in the words of continuous forms especially the morpheme –ing. For example running, speaking, doing etc. It

also occurs in the transcription of the word English itself. The students can be better motivated to learn and master transcription by asking them to transcribe their own names. Almost everybody loves to see the written version of the pronunciation of his/her own name.

Most Indians are also confused in identifying the pronunciation of the symbol / j / it should be pronounced as /ya/. Most of them confuse it with the letter j and the sound / $dʒ$ / in English spelling and alphabet. The student should be made to realize that, in English, there is a lot of difference between spelling and pronunciation.   GB Shaw famously describes it by saying that the word 'fish' can also be spelt as 'ghoti'. /f/ can be written as 'gh' as in the pronunciation of the word 'enough' - /in f/.   similarly 'o' can be written as 'i' as in the word women pronounced as /wimin/. Similarly the letters 'sh' can be written as 'ti' as the pronunciation of the word 'examination - /igzamination/. He highlights these kinds of examples to show the complicated relationship between spelling and pronunciation in many English words. Today's students are genuinely interested in improving their communication skills, but their age group (18 – 21) is such that unless the assignments challenge their critical thinking skills (or are entertaining) they immediately lose interest in the language learning process. As *H.D. Brown* in his book *Teaching by Principles: An interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy (1994)* suggested the utilization of technology such as films, videos, and computers as pedagogical techniques that will help accomplish the goal of

Communicative Language Teaching in a much better and quick manner.

Introduction to Intonation, Accent and Rhythm:

Accent can be defined as the way a particular group of people speak differently the same language.   For example the way Hindi is spoken in the Lucknow region (Avadh Region) is different from the way Hindi is spoken in different parts of UP, Delhi and Bihar. Similarly in English we have two main distinctive accents – British and American. There are other cultural differences between British and American English. For example what British call as ground floor Americans refers to it as first floor. More such examples are gasoline in America and Petroleum in Britain, Cashier in Britain and Teller in America. Phonetics in general and intonation, accent & rhythm in particular are highly technical subjects. If a teacher goes too much into the depth of such technicalities the learners (being youngsters) might get bored. So as Peter Strevens says *"phonetics requires prior professional training and also demands something rather different, almost intellectual, of the learner. Given some ingenuity and imagination and an understanding of the phonetic and phonological facts of English, a good teacher can give the class a good deal of enjoyment while deliberately teaching special points of pronunciation."*

Role plays / Situational Dialogues:

This section is especially important for developing the fluency of the learners. In the software this is divided into two parts. The first section deals with Indian accent consisting of around thirty situational

dialogues. The conversations revolve around several typical everyday topics like discussion between strangers on a train, meeting the doctor, talking with the bank manager, ordering food in a restaurant, introducing oneself to others etc. The conversations covered are so exhaustive that if a learner masters them he/she will have no difficulty at basic conversational competency with anybody in different situations. The methodology followed by the teacher will be as follows: a group of thirty students (half the class strength) will first listen to and read the first six conversations. They will then write down the summary of each of them in their observation book. After one and half hour of such practice they will move into the communication skills classroom. The other half of the thirty students will come to the computer lab and practice the first six conversations. In the communication skills lab the students will be divided into pairs and they enact and recite the same conversations in front of their classmates under the close supervision of the teacher. Later on they will exchange the partners (depending upon their comfort level initially to overcome shyness and other social and communication barriers) and complete other conversations. In the subsequent classes, they will not be given a partner of their choice but a partner will be selected at random based on roll numbers or any other technique devised by the teacher. The rationale behind this approach is to develop the confidence of the student when interacting with strangers.

Here I got an interesting feedback from the students. The students are around 18 years of age and attending seven classes per day between 9 am and 4 pm. The English Lab is a three hour session. The students told me that they look forward to the English class not only to develop their communication skills but also as a relief from core technical subjects. It should also be highlighted here that they have a separate English theory class covering two hours per week. So in order to infuse motivation, interest, creativity, recreation and entertainment topics which interest the teenage students belonging to areas like movies, sports (especially cricket), fashions and gadgets like mobile phones will be covered. For example in the role play section one student can enact the role of Sachin Tendulkar and another student can be a journalist interviewing him. Similarly other two students can enact the role of two different movie starts etc. This section is organized and produced in a comprehensive manner involving both Indian accent and British accent covering various topics (more than 40) such an approach is recommended for all the sections of the software. Presently the system is quite haphazard with regard to other topics. As Diane Larsen Freeman (2000) in her analysis of Communicative Language Teaching stresses – in role plays the learners will try to passionately put forward their views and ideas. So their natural inhibition will diminish and unconsciously promotes their fluency. Here the interesting nature of the topic or game becomes more important in communication than their shyness or other social factors. I implemented such a technique in my classroom with a lot of satisfaction and success.

Oral Presentations – Prepared and Extempore:

Excellent oral presentation skills is minimum prerequisite for getting a good job. Here the material provided by the company is in five stages. The videos section needs a lot of improvement. Structurally this section is well organized one with examples of a bad presentation followed by a good one. The accent is an American one and should be converted into General Indian Accent. Indian examples should be given in the video section. Production values in terms of sound system (only for this particular section) needs a lot of improvement. Adding multi – media and PPTs to an already over – burdened teacher as well as students might not seem to be a good idea. But one can incorporate these into the syllabus (as assignments) by dividing the students into small groups of four or five (the students can choose their partners) and ask to select their favorite topic and prepare power point slides for presentation. As R.J. Beichner(1994)in his article "multimedia editing to promote science learning "published in the journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia (55 – 70), presents relevant facts which prove that *"when learners use multimedia and IT presentations in an atmosphere of cooperative learning and constructivist suggestions – students learn more and retain their knowledge better".* The presentation must be followed by a question – answer session. Such interactive nature of learning makes the students engaged with language and meaning as well as "intensive cognitive process which induces inter – lingua modification and development" (Skehan, 1998)

Just A Minute (JAM Sessions):

This topic is a crucial element in developing the fluency and confidence of the students. In the initial stage the students will be given different topics and they are allowed to choose any topic of their choice with 5 minutes given as preparation time.After that one by one they should come on to the stage and talk about their topic for a minimum of one minute time. There are certain rules to be followed viz. no hesitation, no repetition or no deviation. Different teachers follow several methods to teach this topic. My favourite approach is as follows: On small pieces of folded papers different topics like vegetables, exercise, aeroplane, teacher, mother, time, house, mother tongue, water etc., are written. Each student will take a slip of folded paper and thinks for a while and writes two or three paragraphs about it depending on his/her ability. Why only a paragraph why not in terms of sentences? A paragraph denotes a small idea regarding a topic. Writing two or three paragraphs makes the learner aware of the logic behind the paragraph division as well as the fact that three paragraphs denote three small ideas regarding the same topic. It must be noted here that a paragraph can be three sentences or ten sentences. The reason is one small idea should accommodate a paragraph and another small idea should be written in another paragraph. The length of the paragraph (in terms of sentences) depends upon several factors background knowledge, interest etc.

After writing, the students are divided into small groups of six each and they exchange the ideas. Here, the learners can improve or add upon their existing material in terms of sentences or

paragraphs based upon their interaction with the groups. Now the students are called one by one on to the stage to talk about the topic for a minimum of one minute without looking at the written material. This is a very important aspect of the session. It will encourage the speaker not only to memorize some important points but also to create a scope to improvise then and there in a spontaneous manner.

The objective of this JAM Session is to develop the learner in three areas viz.

1. Fluency 2. Public Speaking for Confidence 3. Body language on the Stage. Body language or non-verbal communication is also an important aspect in developing communication skills.

Describing Objects, Situations and People:

The objective of including this topic in the syllabus is to develop the competency of the learner in the areas of everyday vocabulary. Most of the learners generally do not use English at all outside the classroom. So, many words the meanings of which he/she knows but does not use them in everyday language. The words are in his/her passive vocabulary list. Through this topic the words are transferred to active vocabulary list. Describing requires a close observation and analytical skills. When a learner describes something it also reveals his/her personality traits and also exposes his classmates to alternative views and ideas. As an engineer one has to deal with many instruments and machines as well as write several reports. So the areas in which he/she needs to sharpen and develop are: 1) Specific 2) Concrete 3) Accurate etc. For example if one has to

describe the bird "Eagle". The dictionary description is as follows: a large bird of prey (= a bird that kills other creatures for food) with a sharp curved beak and very good sight; Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th edition) to this one can also add certain other features like the family to which it belongs, its graceful figure, powers of flight, keenness of vision and other cultural usages of using it on the flags of invading armies. Here the focus is to show the difference between a technician and an artiste. An artiste is perhaps more interested in the imaginative aspects of the bird like *"graceful figure and powers of flight, keenness of vision"* a technician would focus on the family to which it belongs and other physical features.

Coherence and cohesion play an important part in the description of anything. Coherence refers to the logical sequence of facts, issues and events. Whereas cohesion is a use of proper linkers for sentences. The learner should practice all these skills to master over the topic.

The software provided by most Indian companies don't go into all the above mentioned details. They simply have some routine topics and issues. Detailed introductory notes with examples covering all the topics are recommended.

Information Transfer:

Information transfer is mainly concerned with converting information from one form to another e.g. from verbal information to a graphic such as pictogram, a graph, a bar diagram or a pie chart. It can also involve interpretation of graphic and writing a paragraph. This skill is very much required for professional

student or a practicing professional in order to present large chunks of information in the form reports or presentations. Lot of practice is provided to students in this software both in describing the use of various graphics like as pictogram, a graph, a bar diagram, a pie chart etc. and using them. Several exercises are also provided to make them conversant in using these graphics.

Debates: This is an exciting topic in the syllabus. The objective of this topic is to inculcate the competence of arguing with others for presenting one's own point of view. The material in the software provided by some companies is culturally alienating. Many debates are shown regarding America's problems. Most of the teachers may not understand the background of these debates let alone the students. They could have given topics based on Indian situations.

Telephone Skills:

Needless to say, telephone communication has gained a lot of importance of late. Innovations made in the telecommunication technology have transformed the way we communicate with people. But, one needs to be doubly careful while communicating over phone since we do not have the advantages of face-to-face communication here like facial expressions and the use of gestures. In this era of call centres, BPOs, telephonic interviews one needs to take a lot of care not only about what one speaks but also how one speaks. Hence, telephone etiquette, knowing how and what to say is of very significance along with other basic components like clarity of speech, choice of words and rate of speech. In this

software, we can find many of the features mentioned above along with scores of model telephone conversations covering commonly used expressions suitable for various day-to-day formal and informal situations.

Giving Directions:

This covers not just asking for and giving directions so as to reach a destination but also giving instructions to people to perform an experiment, to follow a procedure or to implement necessary safety precautions. Giving or receiving directions requires a lot of care and alertness both on the part of the one asking for the directions and the one receiving them. Even a slight misunderstanding can lead to confusion which in turn may result in undesirable developments. In the software the focus is mainly on different situations where one is required to ask for or give directions to strangers to lead them a specific destination. Several conversations are provided throwing light on various commonly used phrases and expressions used in such situations. But the examples given are too simplistic even for the first year engineering students. Therefore, one can say that the content is lopsided. In certain topics the examples are quite tough (even for the teachers) and that too in either American or British Accent. In spite of this a good teacher should be able to use it according to the situation.

Conclusion: As several reports of NASSCOM (The National Association of Software and Services Companies) suggest, most of the engineers produced by our Indian universities are unemployable. In this highly competitive world employers view effective communication skills as

critical not only to get the all important opening break into the corporate sector but also for the individual's success. One of the main reasons for the unemployability of a majority of Indian engineers is their inability in being highly communicatively competent. Unfortunately most of our English teachers are not highly competent in effectively using such technology and software. The software provided by these companies might have their own limitations but a good teacher should make effective use of them and maximize the communication skills of a student. The teachers require special training in using such technologies. But most teacher training courses ignore the quantity and complexity of such kind of training. As *T.Anderson* in his book *Theory and Practice of On – line Learning (2004)* asserts, this kind of software has "the ability to support content encapsulated in many formats, including multi – media, video, and text, which give access to learning content that exploits all media attributes" (273).Therefore it is strongly recommended that teachers should be given special training (with the active help by managements and governments) to effectively use such technology and software. Individuals who want to develop their English and communication skills at a higher level on their own (highly motivated students and teachers) can browse through the material provided by some of the following companies:

a. Gobarrena
b. Gols
c. i – Lingua Language Teaching Software
d. i - Lotus
e. K- Van solutions
f. Learn to Speak
g. Linguaphone
h. Orell Multimedia Language Lab
i. Rosetta stone,
j. Smart Lab language Lab

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