

Digital language labs with CALL facilities in India: Problems and possibilities

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores key problems and possibilities in the use of Multimedia Digital Language Laboratories with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) facilities in engineering and technology institutes in India. In India, language teaching mainly depends upon the chalk and talk method of teaching. But in recent times the major stakeholders in these institutes have begun to realize that language learning should take place in a naturalistic manner—a process of learner discovery, trial and error and ultimately achieving language proficiency and fluency. The objective of this paper is to provide an overview of technology-related changes that are taking place in the engineering institutes of India vis-à-vis language learning and teaching and to examine how far these changes are actually able to make a difference at the ground level. The language lab sessions of the author's own institute is presented as an example to highlight the challenges and possibilities facing CALL as it is contextualized.

KEYWORDS: *CALL, digital language labs, India*

Introduction

In engineering and technical institutes in India today, establishing digital language laboratories has become the norm rather than the exception. With the advent of sophisticated technologies, it seems pretty outdated if the faculty and officers concerned do not provide students with new and interesting technologies of language learning and practice. Both the government and private institutes have realized that to become more 'marketable', students need to be proficient in both technical and soft skills. Most global organizations value workers with a good basic education and qualification and at the same time they place greater value on people who are technically strong while well grounded in the soft skills. Increasingly, strong academic credentials have become only a small factor in the long-term success of a person in his/her career in the global market.

Indeed, good communication skills help groom the whole personality of the individual. They help build a confident and congenial person who can communicate effectively with all kinds of people. This person integrates into a team more easily and effectively, resulting in an increasing level of efficiency and productivity. In India, 'good communication skills' usually refers to good communication skills in the English language. Regional languages, while

abundant, are deemed much less important which is why people prefer to use English while doing business with each other. It is an irony that in a linguistically rich and diverse country like India which has numerous indigenous languages of her own, English, a once borrowed language, has become the language of choice in many contexts, such as business and commerce.

Thus, all institutes of higher learning in India have English as one of their core subjects. And because of rapid advancements in technology in the world today, there is now a demand in most of these institutes to adapt technology-based learning methods for English language teaching (ELT). National Institute of Technology, Rourkela is one of the premier national level institutions for technical education in the country and is fully funded by the Government of India. The institute has recently set up a digital language laboratory (lab) course with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) facilities to help improve the English language proficiency of engineering students. This lab course is compulsory for all undergraduate engineering students at the 2nd year level.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to provide an overview of technology-related changes taking place in engineering institutes in India vis-à-vis English language learning and teaching and to examine how far these changes are actually able to make a difference at the ground level. Language lab sessions of my institute are described to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of language labs with CALL facilities for language learning. The key point to make is that CALL without an effective teacher may not work; the teacher continues to occupy an important, indispensable space in classrooms which deploy computer-assisted work.

The need for CALL in the Indian context

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS), which includes English as one of its major subjects, is an integral part of every technical institute in India. In most of these institutes, including the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology and National Institutes of Technology, the HSS component has been made compulsory for all Bachelor of Technology (B. Tech) students. There are, however, big problems that go with this inclusion of the HSS component into the curriculum. English classes sometimes have a higher student–teacher ratio than engineering classes, varying between 50 and 100 students per class. Moreover, English language teaching in India today still mainly depends upon the chalk and talk method. Therefore, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the teacher to give special attention to each student in such big classes. 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.

This is where CALL enters into the picture in engineering classrooms in India. It is believed that CALL has the potential to provide teachers with a powerful set

of tools for sharing information with the students—interactively and efficiently—which can help improve the language skills of students (Warschauer, 1996).

Students with limited English language proficiency can benefit from technology in multiple ways. Burns (1996) notes that multimedia software and production tools provide students with a richer linguistic environment that accommodate their needs both through animations, videos and graphics to demonstrate difficult concepts, as well as through clear audio to model correct pronunciation and to repeat sounds and words. She notes that integrating technology into language teaching also helps students feel comfortable with and enjoy using 21st century technology. Knox & Anderson–Inman (2001) describe how English language students successfully use wireless laptops to communicate with note-taking and mentoring partners. The following eight conditions for optimal language learning through the use of CALL are outlined in Egbert & Hanson-Smith's (1999) classic book, *CALL environments: Research, practice, and critical issues*:

- Learners have opportunities to interact with each other and negotiate meaning.
- Learners interact in the target language with an authentic audience.
- Learners are involved in authentic tasks.
- Learners are exposed to and encouraged to produce varied and creative language.
- Learners have enough time and feedback.
- Learners are guided to attend mindfully to the learning process.
- Learners work in an atmosphere with an ideal stress/anxiety level.
- Learner autonomy is supported.

These are some of the key concerns addressed in language labs with CALL facilities in India.

Possibilities of CALL in the Indian context

In India, CALL is a relatively new and rapidly evolving academic field that explores the role of information and communication technologies in language learning and teaching. It includes a wide range of activities and initiatives in materials development, pedagogical practice and research. Today, CALL provides highly interactive and communicative support for listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, including extensive use of the internet. In the last decade, there has been a growing corpus of research studies on the ways in which computers can best facilitate language learning. By integrating technology into English language pedagogy, a large number of CALL applications have been designed and developed for the specific purpose of enhancing the English language skills of students. However, while countries like USA, Japan, Hong Kong, Australia and the European countries are at the forefront of research in and use of CALL, India still lags behind both as a CALL developer and as a CALL practitioner. Teachers usually do not have adequate knowledge or training in effective integration of technology into language learning. Additionally, lack of proper infrastructure and appropriate equipment, along with sometimes apathetic behaviour of institute

authorities, act as deterring factors in the practice and development of CALL in India.

Nevertheless, materials development, pedagogy and research in CALL have developed in such intellectual sophistication (Hubbard 2009) that its status as an academic field of study with the potential to provide optimal learning conditions has convinced Indian academicians that it has indeed great potential to change the course of ELT in the country. Local research in CALL is currently being actively pursued by academicians from institutes like the English and Foreign Languages University (EFL University), Hyderabad; Regional Institute of English, South India; and Anna University, Chennai.

Disadvantages of CALL in the Indian context

There are, however, huge challenges in the use of CALL in India. One problem is financial in nature. Not many institutes in India can afford the huge amount of money required to set up a Multimedia Digital Language Laboratory. Along with site preparation expenses, a lab requires much financing for the purchase of computer hardware and software. In Indian currency, the minimum expenditure required to set up a good lab would be a minimum of around Rs. 20 Lakhs (roughly around \$41,666) which is a big amount even for a centrally funded institute like NIT, Rourkela. This price, for example, was the actual expenditure incurred by the institute to set up a 30-user digital language lab. To make matters more complicated, superior language learning resources (e.g., *Clarity Language Learning Software Courses and Dyned English Courses*) which are currently available in India are mostly software courses which are proprietary in nature, thus requiring another huge expenditure. Moreover, maintenance and sustenance of costly technical equipment and resources also require some more money. Every other day something goes wrong with the hardware or the related software and one would have to spend good money for the remedy. Even then, in institutes which can afford such an amount, the use of CALL also needs a supportive Head of the institution as well as sympathetic colleagues who believe in its vision.

Another challenge for CALL is the very nature of learning that goes with it. CALL is basically a self-study mode of language learning. But the age group of students in Indian institutes varies from 18–21, a challenging (perhaps difficult) group to implement CALL with. Even students with very poor English knowledge do not seem to be interested enough to access these resources for a long period of time. Since they are mostly technologically sophisticated, working with multimedia elements hardly impresses them and they get easily bored and lose interest in improving their English skills through a self-study mode of learning.

CALL at NIT, Rourkela: Personal reflections

At NIT, Rourkela, *Digital Language Lab* with CALL facilities is a one-semester compulsory two-credit lab course for 2nd year B. Tech students. The course was introduced for the first time in the curriculum in the July 2008 session. My

experience in the first few language lab classes at NIT, Rourkela involving 2nd year B.Tech students provided real insight into the way engineering students perceived CALL. In one of these first few three-hour classes comprising 30 students, majority of the students lost interest in the resources within half an hour and looked like they wanted to leave the session. Even with interactive and interesting exercises, something more was needed to sustain the interest of these bright engineering students.

In latter classes, however, on top of learning resources which the students were asked to access for 30–40 minutes, various other challenging games and activities were conducted. These involved real-life problems and situations, business dilemmas and business plans. Initially, activities were assigned to randomly formed groups to force them to get out of their comfort zones and help them achieve good teamwork among themselves. These randomly assigned activities and groups also led to many helpful discussions and debates among the members. Gradually, the students became comfortable with teamwork such that it now hardly mattered to them who they were working with. While there was reluctance in the initial classes to form teams with randomly chosen classmates, this time the students started focusing more on their tasks than on each other. I also made sure that each student of each group had the chance to speak and express his or her opinion. Each student was asked to speak for five minutes (or more if he/she desired) on a given topic without worrying too much about content. This allowed students with poor English skills to gain support from their better equipped friends and at the same time to progress at their own pace, without the self-defeating belief that their lack of knowledge of English would be an object of ridicule of their more ‘privileged’ classmates. Since these were group presentations and not individual ones, students lacking good English speaking abilities understood that they would not be subject to ridicule by members of their team. In fact, these better equipped students listened patiently and quietly encouraging and prompting their friends to try and finish the talk properly so that the overall performance of the group was not hampered. In the long run, these group assignments have had a very positive effect on the students as they gradually refrained from laughing at any of their classmates even during individual presentations.

Subsequently, written and oral individual assignments and presentations were given to the students which were completed with enthusiasm and interest. In most of the oral-based assignments, technology-in-use was only limited to PowerPoint presentations for business case-studies. Students were also assigned individual PowerPoint presentations on topics of their own choice to help them improve their presentation skills which are essential to an engineer’s professional career. Feedback from students (obtained through feedback forms which are an essential component of our course appraisal system at the end of the semester) was extremely positive. Many of them commented that the lab sessions helped them boost their self-confidence in writing and speaking in English. Some of the students even proposed that language lab should be included in more than one semester’s work.

Ironically, however, it was not CALL which actually helped the students the

most but the conventional yet innovative and challenging group and individual tasks and activities assigned to them during the lab sessions. These assignments had nothing to do with CALL and could have been done in any moderately equipped classroom with the singular pre-condition that the class-size remains small. The help that the students took from computers was limited to getting information from the internet and preparing their PowerPoint slides for presentation in class. The question that arises here is whether a simple act of accessing the internet for information should be categorised under CALL. If not, then CALL in our language labs would have a very minor role to play in English language learning because multimedia resources do not by themselves sufficiently sustain the interest of bright and technologically sophisticated young students. They require language classrooms where there is active interaction among the students in the form of group discussions, oral presentations, PowerPoint presentations, talks and debates, etc. that would help them to overcome their lack of confidence in their English speaking abilities.

Nevertheless, this challenge does not automatically invalidate the usefulness of CALL, only that it cannot by itself become a panacea to English language learning problems. This means that for CALL to be successfully implemented, the role of the teacher becomes even more important. The teacher, for example, must work towards effective classroom management that combines accessing multimedia resources along with regular assignments in the form of innovative oral and written tasks. This way the students work on authentic tasks through multimedia resources and then engage in real-time discussion and debate which interest them and which they find useful in students' daily life. CALL needs the teacher in the classroom, but the teacher needs CALL to enhance his or her own teaching through ways which students easily relate to.

Conclusion

For professionals in India, the ability to communicate well in English has become more stark in the midst of even increasing globalization today. Academicians assume that exposing students to authentic CALL materials designed by so-called native speakers of English would meet this need to become proficient in the language. But actual classroom experience suggests that for engineering students CALL is not necessarily a precondition to improving their English language proficiency. It is true that students' lives are becoming more and more entwined with computer-based technologies and the importance of integrating computers into language learning is growing. But we need to think carefully how best we can integrate CALL into our English language classes in order to exploit its potential to transform students' experience in English language learning. Use of technology in learning is not necessarily sound pedagogy; it is only a way towards achieving good teaching and learning. There is also the problem of teachers keeping up with the speed by which technology advances. Learners may not have the same problems as they are more exposed to such kind of resources and materials. Implementing CALL in the classroom requires the teacher to be always 'relevant' to the students. We cannot use it as an excuse for complacency.

Certainly, its future must be nurtured but the teacher, instead of receding into the background, must even be more active in making sure that learning takes place in the classroom.

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