



Advancements in Higher Education

* Vasim Kaji

* Assistant Professor, Kalol Institute of Technology and Research Centre

ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to provide an overview of the CALL oriented changes that are taking place in the engineering colleges of Gujarat and its effects in teaching the subject Communication Skills to the first year students. Engineering education in India has witnessed a major change over the past few years. Substantial increase in the demand for

High - quality education has led to the adoption of Information and Communication Technologies for extending the outreach of education. This paper presents a review of some of these technology-enhanced initiatives already taken up by the government of India, as well as by some of the leading institutions in the country. Important developments include the CALL (Computer Aided Language Learning), National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL), the use of an educational satellite called the EDUSAT and various other approaches such as the use of 'virtual classrooms' and 'virtual laboratories'. The paper goes on to discuss some of the problem areas in the present mode of dissemination and deployment; some possible future trends and modalities are also outlined. These include blending collaborative learning with interactive technology-enhanced learning initiatives and finding ways of providing support for learners' queries.

Keywords : Higher Education, Students

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 With the advent of sophisticated technologies, it seems pretty outdated if the faculty and officers concerned do not provide students with new and interesting technologies of language learning and practice.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). Kalol Institute of Technology and Research Centre is one of the institutions for technical education in the Gujarat. The institute has 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 1st 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 Essential aspects of CALL in the GTU institutes:

This Paper explores the pros and cons of establishing a CALL based environment by the Gujarat Technological University in particular the faculty of Engineering and the Technology. The objective of this paper is to provide an overview of the CALL oriented changes that are taking place in the engineering colleges of Gujarat and its effects in teaching the subject Communication Skills to the first year students. The institutes in Gujarat have carried out

The direction given by the Gujarat Technological University and the AICTE of establishing a Language Lab, but the major idea behind this project which was to teach students with the help of CALL has been carried out by some teaching faculties of the subject very laxly. 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.

The Bachelor of Engineering course at The Gujarat Technological University which includes Communication Skills (C.S.) as one of its major subjects as an integral part of every technical institute. In most of these institutes, including the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology and National Institutes of Technology, the C.S. 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 (C.S.) component into the curriculum. English classes sometimes have a higher studentteacher ratio than engineering classes, varying between 50 and 70 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 many prominent companies like Reliance Ltd., Tata consult Services Group 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 (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 Gujarat Institutions:

1. Increase opportunities for individuation, diagnosis, and self-pacing
2. Give access to a wide variety of information resources
3. Bring resources to isolated or limited-mobility populations
4. Stretch instructors' capabilities to reach more students
5. Accommodate different learning styles
6. Provide better ways to measure skills than standardized testing

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 behavior 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.

Challenges 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. 5-7 Lakhs which is a big amount. 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., Globearena Language Learning Software Courses and 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.

The most popular softwares which are used to teach Communication Skills and English:

Globearena English lab learning software

Clarity English language lab (used in many government colleges)

Smart lab- Digital language lab

(<http://www.digitallanguagelab.com/index.html>)

E-tail network limited language lab

Ore'Il multimedia language lab

Lotus Lingua phone language lab implemented in (Pune university)

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 1821, 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.

ICT enhancements:

Edusat

Launched in September 2004 at a cost of USD 20 million, Edusat is India's first dedicated education satellite.

—India will require 10,000 new schools each year and meeting the teaching needs on such a scale [by conventional methods] will be impossible...ll Madhavan Nair, chairman of ISRO, quoted in New Scientist, (Tata, September 20, 2004)

With footprints covering the entire country, Edusat makes it possible for receive Direct to Home quality broadcasts of educational programs using any television set and a low-cost receiver. The result of a collaboration between the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and, the Union Ministry of Human Resource Development, state departments of education and the Indira Gandhi National Open University. This infrastructure is available to all sectors of education, but primarily to publicly funded and implementing agencies that will be responsible for transmission and programming for their defined audiences (Iype, July 28, 2005).

Conclusion:

The directives are given by the government to the Institutes but the implementation and the reaping of the benefits relies heavily on the following things:

1. The interests and proper implementation of the concerned faculty and the students.
2. The proper setting up of the CALL based Language Lab.
3. The core competencies aimed such as Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing.
4. The base of the subjects and the topics covered in the syllabi.
5. Putting more emphasis on the practical applications rather than being concerned with grades or marks or exams.
6. The impulse and the impetus provided by the Government.

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