

THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY

SHANTANU CHAKRAVARTY

Assistant Professor of English, Department of Applied Science and Humanities, Guru Nanak Institute of Technology,
Sodepur, West Bengal, India

ABSTRACT

The English Language Laboratory in the engineering colleges across India is a collage of content related to language and soft skills. With the incoming industry demand the students are expected to serve tailor made job functionalities. With the concept of outsourcing booming in India our students are marketed to join the legion of global corporate houses.

These days the process and methodology of acquiring language skill has changed completely. From the more reserved and often conservative approach the students have at their disposal a host of devices wired and wireless which serve as a diligent input to their learning. Teaching these days is like an outing which the teacher facilitates the students with. Modern technology allows the teacher to use various devices as tools of instruction. It also serves as a delivery system for imparting learner instruction and in itself technologies serve as an instructional content. In this paper I wish to unravel some of the key skills that students learn from our Language Laboratory and the daily experiment that we initiate in order to make it more interactive and often value added.

KEYWORDS: Language Laboratory, Soft Skills, Language Skill, Indian Corporate Houses, SWOT, Etiquettes and Language Acquisition

INTRODUCTION

The Language Laboratory Infrastructure

The modern language lab is a sophisticated state of the art facility where technology and creativity merge. The inception of the language laboratory was a couple of decades ago in the 80s and 90s. The language laboratory during this period used as an aid, heavy wooden box televisions and audio systems which played cassettes. With the aid of these devices language experts over the years used movies and TV shows. They created activities to go along with the video and used it as content and not as fillers. The laboratories these days have a multidimensional infrastructure. A host of traditional and new devices are available for installation these days. Multimedia activities shape up the language classroom which allow the facilitator to merge language and soft skills. The more recent addition of Computers, LCD / DLP Projectors, Internet, Stand-alone Software, MP3 Players (Podcasts, iTunes) and Handhelds and Cell Phones. With the inclusion of CALL (Computer assisted language Learning) the infrastructural geography of the language classroom has changed but technology is not a replacement of a live teacher. The teacher continues to be the constant gardener. The picture will be clearer if I introduce our language laboratory where I conduct the classes.

In our language laboratory we have a 26 inches television, a talk-back console, a two in one audio cassette player, a radio, a voice recorder, a video camera, Over head / DLP Projector, Digital language Lab Software, White Screen and of course computers. The ambience of the room is also different when compared to other subject laboratories. When I go to a

physics laboratory I find wooden tables on which instruments are mounted. The students have to stand throughout the session as they take instructions and perform the experiments. It becomes a little wearisome when students have to repeat the same procedure day after day. However in a language laboratory we have revolving chairs, covered with leather and well furnished desk. The floor is covered with well knit carpet and the room is air conditioned. This infrastructural facility is good enough to lure students into the laboratory for the first couple of days but with two and half hours of session (as per WBUT Syllabus) it becomes challenging for the teacher to retain their interest throughout the semester.

Here comes the scope of experimentation and challenge. The teacher in the back of his mind is satisfied if the class responds to his or her design. She/he is a successful person when the students enjoy his/her offering. In West Bengal like other states of our country I am sure the teachers are doing their everyday research to give the best. In fact I become very happy when my students say that Language Laboratory was the best part of their 4 years course. We are more like friends inside the Laboratory where we flourish on the basis of individual, pair and group work. The whole idea of the Laboratory is to make them industry sensitive and to acquire skills required in the organization. Normally in the first semester we get approximately 15 weeks and in the fourth semester another 12 to 15 installments.

Writing and Grammar

In the first semester we focus on basic listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The course focuses on the development of paragraph-writing skills with emphasis on topic sentences, order of arrangement and basic styles of paragraphs. It introduces the multi-paragraph structure, enabling students to work on the creation of short essays. I think it is vital for communicative language course learners to know the basics of grammar, if possible to the extent of having a comprehensive and accurate grasp of language structures, functions and multiple uses of language. Grammar provides the foundation for how language works, and practice teaches how it is used and adapted in different contexts. Correcting the different types of learner errors and teaching them strategies to overcome them turn out to be beneficial. Students in a communicative language laboratory typically practice listening and speaking with each other rather than the teacher. This is generally used in an interactive skills-based course and often my students call the language laboratory as “Liberty Center” as they happily participate and learn using their creative, emotional and linguistic capabilities. This allows my students to communicate with one another and this helps them get new friends. I have observed that in a class of 60, a student ends up knowing not more than 15 people as their friend after spending four years in a batch. Contrarily the language laboratory pair and re-pair, group and regroup them which help them to know more people. This will help them with people skill when they will be working in a large organization.

The benefits are multifarious

- It allows learners to communicate with one another, lowers tensions and the apprehension to present.
- It also enables supportive language learning, whereby they can puddle their knowledge of language items and communication.
- It also enables replication of real-world activities, thereby providing much-needed practice in serviceable situations.
- It also encourages the learners to cope up with the element of drama inherent in role play and works as an added incentive.

- It also boosts the self-reliance of the learners.

However there are loop holes like

- The disadvantages are in a class of underprivileged communicators and low aptitude learners where progress generally is very sluggish and the learners dither too much.
- They will also be exchanging incorrect language so they need to be alerted about that.
- Sometimes the pressure of having to carry out before the others can be so nerve-racking that learners can hesitate or even give up while delivering.

The Teacher / Facilitator in the Language Laboratory

Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) rightly said that, *“You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him find it within himself”*. These days the language teacher is performing the same role. The learner is given the liberty to choose a suitable learning style. The content execution has become customizable and tailor fit. A language tailor as one can call him is more infested with adaptability to fit into the multicultural environment. I have students from Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal, Assam and Tripura who come to me with variations in terms of English language speaking and writing. Soft Skills is a term with which they are not acquainted. At the same point of time my job is to ensure that they understand what clients in U.K. and U.S. are saying, frame an appropriate reply, comply with organizational structure, prevent revenue downtime and be able to become a part of the leadership factory after their stay with me. I have approximately 30 weeks time to ensure that they are ready to survive. So a good teacher is the (i) one who is amicable, sociable and handle students with consideration ii) One who is broadminded to deal with learner errors while, simultaneously helping to overcome the errors, iii) one who has a very good/in-depth knowledge of the subject and can put that knowledge to practical use in the classroom, iv) one who can explain very well and make even mundane matters interesting, v) who allows students to voice their opinions and does not always seek to impose himself/herself on the learners, vi) with whom learning is always a positive and fruitful experience.

In the Language laboratory the teacher / facilitator has an uphill task to make sure that everyone has a take home. Keeping in mind the LSRW model, other modules are integrated. Special focus is levied on Learner Autonomy in Language Learning, Multilingualism in the Workplace with emphasis on Translating and Interpreting. Invested with European, American and Indian culture (when they will be working in a multinational company) it will be difficult for our students to strike a balance and interpretation of information forwarded becomes integral as a whole. So the focus in the language laboratory shifts on varieties of activities during lessons, intelligibility of presentation and opportunity to learn standard material.

Listening Skill

In the first semester apart from the writing skill we focus on honing **Listening Skill**. We use upgraded material every semester for presenting the theory. We integrate business situations and comments from the industry to learn the essence of Listening via quotations. For example, *“A good listener tries to understand what the other person is saying. In the end he may disagree sharply, but before he disagrees, he wants to know exactly what it is he is disagreeing with”* – Kenneth A. Wells, Guide to Good Leadership. Once we are through with Signal Processing, Literal Processing and Reflective Processing we give the students a worksheet carrying several statements. The students are to identify whether

the statements are *true* or *false* after we read out a short extract on which the statements are based. We move on to identify the myths, needs, barriers and steps of listening. Then another worksheet is distributed, which is normally a Gap-Fill exercise, but before we play the track, we ask the students to guess the words. To conduct this activity I use songs, i.e.: The Lover after Me (*Affirmation*, Savage Garden), Words (Backstreet Boys), Winter Song (Ronan Keating) etc. This helps in understanding construction of sentences, enhancement of lexical resources, working in a pair and competing among pairs to come up with the best creative construction thereby catering to the pre-listening process. While listening (when the track is played) they take down notes and during post-listening they evaluate and do the critical analysis. Our focus on pronunciation during the verification stage also serves to the overall learning process. Apart from the Gap-Fill exercise the worksheet have questions on Vocabulary building, sentence matching, sequential questions and descriptive type questions.

Speaking Skill

We then move to Speaking Skill encompassing various activities. We mainly focus on interpersonal and work place communication. Students will have to speak with team members / colleagues, clients and customers. We shape up situation based activities where students role play, give individual and pair or group performance. We start by introducing **Personal Narrative**, where students speak in front of the class and introduce themselves. We give hands-on training on the quality and structure of a personal narrative. We rely on case studies and activities. We co relate by unfolding a historical reflection of an individual state of affairs or profile after due reflection. We accommodate career briefing, presentation and situational briefing. Our focus remains on structure, purpose orientation, linear or non-linear narrative (flashbacks/flash forwards if required) and usage of comprehensible and straight forward language. We focus on speech rhythm/cadence, eradication of fillers, effective use of pauses, tonal variation, stress, intonation and Accent. We show them sample personal narratives which we have downloaded from YouTube. We do a video recording when students perform. We share the video with them, so that they can make a comparative analysis between the sample video and their performance. We also generate feedback based on their performance. This helps us to achieve our purpose effectively. We introduce to our students **Telephone Etiquette**, which serves to the process of learning and practicing speaking. We give them hands-on training on call opening, rapport building, transfer protocol, hold protocol, call ending, small talk and empathizing. We make groups of three and give them different situations to role play. We discuss with them while preparing the call flow and script which helps them to frame situational dialogue writing and business conversation. Situations like irate customer calling up, home movers calling up to request change of address, customer calling up requesting specific information, Making an appointment, taking a message, ordering a Pizza etcetera. We give them real life scenarios to deal with. Then we initiate the role play and the facilitators and other participants generate feedback. We put the role play on tape so that proper performance evaluation can be conducted. Once all the participants complete the process we connect the participants' phone with our amplifier. We make a live call to leading service providers like Vodafone, Airtel and Idea and record the interaction. This gives our students a real time experience. As part of speaking skill we line up activities based on picture speaking where the participant gets an image randomly selected from our database. The student gets 30 seconds to think and then speaks for 5 minutes. We cover group discussion next. We start by cascading an industry compatible evaluation sheet to the students. We focus on the group speaking activity unlike JAM, extempore and debate. Candidates judge on performance in real time. Through a PowerPoint presentation we focus on how to acquire topic knowledge, logical thinking, clear speech, framing arguments, cohesion among group members, procedures, assessment criteria and negative traits. The students work as evaluators. The facilitator takes down group

feedback as well. The entire performance is videotaped. Post performance the students give their feedback and the facilitator builds on it. The video footage is played so that the performers can correlate the feedback and their performance.

Writing Skill

In order to strike a balance we come back to writing skill after spending adequate time on speaking. This time we take up **Job Application Letter, CV and Resume writing**. In the first semester we introduce the basic patterns. We have prepared worksheets to tap the information of the candidates individually. We focus on identifying competencies and skills, step by step preparation of the CV following standard format which we discuss with them via power point presentation, correspondence for the application process and comparative analysis through peer work. We have work sheets where the students match job advertisements with sample CVs. This gives them a better understanding of the writing process. We repeat this in the fourth semester but the degree of importance and approach change. We make the students visit prospective company websites. We ask them to collect information of various job openings. Once they are acquainted with prospective job opportunities, we ask them to go through the profile requirement. To have a hands-on idea of the core competency areas we get them registered with consultancy service providers like Mafoi, Naukri.com and Monster.com. The process turns out to be a real learning session. We also introduce the concept of Video resume. By the end of the fourth semester my students are ready with print/electronic version of their CV/Resume and much like a personal narrative we assist them to prepare a script based on their CV and ask them to prepare a video where they are enunciating their profile. In order to make the video resume visually interactive we tell them to get in touch with the teachers of the computer science department and take feed on graphic interface building. We use **Facebook** and **Twitter** to practice and understand writing. This is an interesting paradigm as students move outside the classroom, they get an opportunity to build communities and more importantly they get the cultural information in the form of postings and comments. By following newsfeeds and tweets of individuals and organizations students get into the social sphere of learning which dramatically enhances their vocabulary and also construction of apt reply.

SWOT Analysis

In the fourth semester we cover SWOT Analysis. It provides a framework for visioning by helping the students to identify and prioritise their goals and to further identify the strategies of achieving them. We have personal SWOT analysis worksheet, where the students come up with their personal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. We split the paper in four quadrants and the students focus on their personal information. The activity takes approximately 30 minutes. After they fill up the worksheet we analyse them. We introduce the concept of Organisational SWOT and by using power point presentation we discuss the theory. From the personal strengths and weaknesses we move forward to assess an organization's strengths and weaknesses and the opportunities and threats posed by the external environment. We take a model company (i.e.: XYZ college) and perform SWOT. We focus on the internal environment of the organization which either facilitate or encumber organizational growth and daily operations. The internal parameters of scan include:

1. People 2. Properties 3. Processes 4. Products

The external parameters of scan include:

- Scanning the Social (Demographic), Technological, Economical (Data that Impacts Business), Environmental and Political (Policies / Trade Barriers) areas.

- Identifying the needs of customers and potential clients.
- Identification of competitors and collaborators.

Then we move on to prepare a SWOT on this XYZ College. The worksheet carries several questions which the students answer and based on the findings they propose recommendations. We show the students a Hyundai i10 review video and we have a worksheet with questions like:

- To which category/segment does the car belong to? Can you cite cars belonging to the same category/segment?
- What is the USP (Unique Selling Proposition) of the car?
- Figure out the target group of this car.
- How has the company positioned the car as a brand?
- Figure out the areas of strength.
- What are the major weaknesses of this car?
- What opportunities can the company optimize to enhance the i10's market share?
- What major threats (immediate/future) are working as impediments to the car's market share/expansion strategy?
- Onboard Hyundai as an Analyst what recommendations will you propose?

We also distribute a handout carrying a comparative study of four cars in the same segment, which help the students to know the technical features. We also guide them with the areas of concern like Strong Advertisement, Increasing Fuel Prices, Intense competition and Brand Ambassador Association etc.

Pronunciation and Reading Skill

Our focus then shifts to pronunciation. We have observed that the students many great challenges in improving their English pronunciation and fluency. Common pronunciation errors include nonnative substitutions of individual consonants and vowels, consonant cluster reduction, and epenthetic vowel insertion. So we train our students with demo pronunciation lessons from YouTube and English Movies. We focus on pronouncing individual sounds and use activities based on tongue twisters and minimal pair distinction. We use a lot of online resources to make the learning more interesting. For example the songs (Winter Song, Lover after Me etc.) that we used for listening exercised are recycled and we try to analyze the sounds. We also use Local Train Announcements, Flight Announcements, Shopping Mall (City Center/ Bigbazar) announcements and inputs from other subject classes (all pre recorded) and compare and contrast them with the actual sound system. We use *Dictogloss* to help students randomly identify the sounds and incorporate them when they are giving the summary.

Presentation Skill

Now that we are ready to speak and express we move onto Presentation Skill and Interview Skill. In presentation we again focus on group work by asking the students to choose a company and prepare a presentation. We accommodate three in a group. They work on the presentation and we tape them. Show them instantly their presentation. Next we learn the presentation etiquette and compare and contrast them with their amateur presentation. We have divided the presentation

into two sets – (1). How to prepare the presentation and (2). How to deliver the presentation. The students prepare the presentation by using their laptop under constant supervision of the teachers in the laboratory. They present it several times and we tape and deliver the final product to them for showcasing. At every step the students are given constant feedback which include – speaking, language usage, making the presentation interactive, audience analysis, body language, ability to handle questions and off course maintaining a balance between taking control of the room as a presenter and handling logistic support.

Interview Skill

In the interview skill we run a complete diagnosis of the prospective employers' stream wise. We ask students to choose five companies with whom the students have a prospect in the future. We then ask them to know everything about the company i.e.: Overview, Working Spirit, Mission and Vision, Group Companies, Alliances, Industries, Services, Products, Clients and Insights of the company. We have prepared a standard set of 150 questions and their best answer. We use them in installments. We give the first 25 questions and ask our students to prepare the answers keeping in mind the employer. We conduct a one-to one session with the students. When we train our students we keep in our mind the Campus and Off-Campus interview modes. So our students can walk in to any prospective opportunity and deliver the best, even if it takes 11 rounds of testing. We also conduct an online psychometric test and have a complete profile analysis and checkup. The steps of interviewing become apparently clear to our students. We merge Group Discussion with Interview Skill. In group discussion we first learn the purpose, stages, group skill and varieties of covered subject areas. We play demo group discussion videos and identify the dos and don'ts. Then we make them practice and tape their performance. We share the group video with the respective groups and ask them to evaluate on the basis of **Personality** – Exuberance, Zest and Involvement, **Knowledge** – Profundity, Variety, Diagnostic Capability, and Synchronization of Opinion, **Communication Skill** – Fluency, Precision, Rationality and Effectiveness, **Leadership** – Initiative, Open-Mindedness and Team Spirit. In the next class all the students give feedback on individual groups' performance.

We have also incorporated **Business Etiquette and Work Ethics**. We cover concept mapping, forms of etiquette (with clients' team, corporate parties, dealing with team members etc.), meetings etiquette, phone etiquette, Netiquette (specially dealing with e-mails and Intranet postings etc.) and work place ethics (unraveling OMBUDS, Corporate fraud, Confidential Data Handling etc.). The students are also taught how to deal with **Conflict Resolution**. As new hires' would be exposed to an open work environment, we expose the concepts of Competing, Collaborating, Compromising, Avoiding and Accommodating. The students also learn **Decision Making Skills**, where we stress on the types of decision makers, different styles of decision making, the approaches to decision making, the eight steps module of decision making, the advantages and disadvantages of group aided decision making and the errors that people commit while taking a decision. We back up the theory with case studies in the form of groups discussing in a meeting. We have integrated **Negotiation Skill** as part of the courseware as well. Here we deal with the concept of negotiation, the formal process, the strategies that are to be set up and issues which people encounter while undergoing the process of negotiation.

CONCLUSIONS

There are several activity based sessions which will take more pages. I believe that these days the language laboratory is a wonderful facility for Language teachers to excel, explore and experiment. By devoting some time we can come up with authentic materials. The online resource is vast but most of them aren't suitable for our students. So I believe

if we can adapt and contextualize it, we can come up with interactive materials catering to the need of the Indian students. With the convergence of creativity and technology we can deliver tailor made courses for our students. I deal with MCA, BCA, B. Tech, B. Pharm, BHM students and with this I can easily cater to specific purposes or to say need based materials can be generated. More than learning our focus should be on acquisition. We can learn the parts of modern avionics but that will not make me a pilot. My students will be motivated, will enjoy the classes and I will be able to retain their interest if they know what to learn, why to learn and when to learn. So instead of learning the language it would be better if they get used to it. They will acquire the language and work specific skills willingly. When I share information about Microsoft Students' Partner programme, Vendor Certification, TOEFL, IELTS and Six Sigma my students show colossal curiosity. We are test running the language software and so far the responses are outstanding. We are customizing materials, broadcasting, chatting, speaking, pinging and much more. I would like to thank my students for executing and internalizing the content that we deal with in our Language Laboratory which is better known as the "Liberty Center" for them.

REFERENCES

1. Steve, Kaufman. The Linguist on Language - How to Learn Languages in the Age of Internet 2009, <http://www.thelinguist.blogs.com>
2. Alan Davies, An Introduction to Applied Linguistics From Practice to Theory, Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
3. Graham Hall, Exploring English Language Teaching Language in Action, Routledge, 2011.
4. John Fotheringham, Language Learning Why Most Fail & How You Can Succeed, <http://www.LanguageMastery.com>, 2013.
5. Steve Kaufman, The Linguist on Language - How to Learn Languages in the Age of Internet, <http://www.thelinguist.blogs.com>, 2009.
6. Emily Wartinbee, The Value of Technology in the EFL and ESL Classroom: Using the Smartpen to Enhance the Productivity and Effectiveness of ESL Instruction, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University, Capstone Essay, March 1, 2009