

Internet: a resourceful teaching aid

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Abstract: *Language learning has taken a progressive shift from the days of, learning through translations, to using audio video aids, to today's technology integrated learning. Taking the teaching process to another level is the recent innovation in English Language Teaching - the Internet integrated language labs. Internet usage as technology has its roots in 1950's and by mid-1990 it became a revolutionary tool in communication. Electronic mail, instant messaging, Voice over Internet Protocol, two way interactive video calls, world wide web with its discussion forms, blogs, social networking and online shopping sites created a furor and increased the pace of communication globally. It took world wide websites to spread its web across the globe in comparatively less years and today its influence on the society is everywhere including our classrooms. Web based learning provides today's communication skills teacher ample material that stimulates language learning and sets the language acquisition at a faster pace. This paper focuses on the resourcefulness of internet as a teaching aid in an engineering English class and the feasibility of its application in the classroom. .*

Keywords: *Internet resources, language learning, activities, syllabus design, limitations.*

I. Introduction

Using Internet as a teaching aid has become one of the key research areas since the advent of 21st century. The outcome is that researchers have started to explore the potential of internet as an instructional tool in language learning and educationists began to consider the possibility of its inclusion in the curriculum. The increasing demand for engineering graduates who also excel in communication and interpersonal skills is reflected in the observation made by Dean of Duke University :

“One of the important criteria in today's competitive world for getting a job is to excel oneself in communication and interpersonal skills...” (Dean of Duke University)

This fact today echoes all over the world including India and it further necessitated the English teacher in an Engineering college to shift from conventional classrooms to technology integrated language labs. However, though CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) has been revolutionary in its implementation and positively rewarding, it couldn't completely fulfill the requirement. The main handicap being that professional students need something beyond audio- visual aids that mentally stimulates them. Realizing the potentiality of web based resources; CALL started incorporating web resources into the learning material.

II. Crucial Factors

The crucial factor of undergraduate students is their age factor. This factor, if molded correctly can be highly rewarding. However, the same factor can be disastrous to learning if the learning process doesn't challenge their critical thinking and the result is that they lose interest in the entire process itself. Hence, to motivate Professional students and to further captivate their attention today's teacher should transcend the educational methods. Language labs should be reviewed and updated to be able to meet the student's language needs. Students along with language inputs given by the instructor and practice provided by the labs further need a platform to apply the acquired language. Internet integrated language programs offers a more practical real life language experience, providing students with functional communicative experiences that serve the learners needs as well as motivate them to use English in their daily lives.

Technology and pedagogical skills should be combined to accomplish

Communicative language teaching goals (Brown 1993)

Fortunately, Engineering colleges are technology centered and language labs are no exception. A carefully designed and well- executed internet usage in the language labs can be made possible with little effort. Educationists and researchers have already been experimenting and the outcome is that today we have wonderful sources to depend on and take our English classrooms to a higher level by incorporating internet usage.

“A positive outcome of this balance is the increased reading and writing skills that are developed as a result of using the Internet effectively” (Peyton and Crandall 1995).

III. List Of Sources

Here are some sources that can be extremely useful to help students to improve their language proficiency and can be easily incorporated in the language programs. The best part is that without further burdening the students, these sources reap immediate results as they are intrinsically motivating.

2.1 Key Pals: One of the problematic areas concerned to language learning is lack of immediate feedback. Key pals or Electronic pen pals, is one such source that helps students use language really i.e. outside classroom context. It also provides an opportunity to the student to rectify errors. "If a sentence in a message they receive is not clear, they can shoot back a question. If they gather from a response that they have not made themselves clear in a message, they can shoot off a correction or an addition. Exchanging email can thus become a process of revision" (Brunner and Tally 1999, 149).

Added to the valuable practice it extends in reading and writing, the fun element in exchanging mails is highly motivating for the students to improve their language further.

2.2 Discussion Lists: Similar to discussion lists popular in 1990's and 2000, teacher can initiate a topic oriented list where members exchange and share information on the topic through mails. This kind of activity will be extremely helpful during group discussions because many a time lack of participation from the students is due to lack of information. Exchanging information enables students to expand their already existing knowledge. This can further be used to involve students who have stage fear by giving them a chance to participate in the discussion that happens through mails first and later after gaining G.D in the classroom if an online Group discussion forum – a private group space, that is where only students of the same class become members, is created then the students will be more confident to participate. Once the initial inhibitions are expelled the teacher can further work on making the student participate spontaneously on the given topic.

Further, access to internet can help students find relevant discussions list sources, such as <http://www.liszt.com> a directory of discussion lists. <http://www.latrobe.edu.au> the most successful student list at Latrobe University which offers list with different topics.

2.3 Creating a webpage: Today's tech savvy engineering students have an advantage of being well versed with designing websites and this can be exploited to improve communication skills. Creating a website for the class or as a group who share common interest is highly motivating. Added features like story space, reviews, recent innovations, photography column, quote for the day, campus news can make the page more creative and generates communication among the students. Points to the contributions will further motivate the students and yields better results.

2.4 Mock Interviews: Effective communication skills are one of the key factors that spell success in job search. Training students to draft effective resume, cover letter and face interviews confidently is the vital part of advanced communication skills programs in engineering colleges. Using internet, teachers can make students participate in virtual document builders – a free online tool powered by optimal resume developing application materials and refining them. Another useful tool powered by interview stream is virtual mock interview where students where they prepare for various scenarios, including initial screenings, behavior-based questioning, and panel interviews. Such tools help students review their answers and refine them if necessary with the teacher's assistance. The opportunity to practically apply the language learnt boosts their confidence. <http://www.careers.unsw.edu.au> is one of the websites where students can register for mock interview sessions online. www.toastmasterinternational.com is another useful website that helps students prepare for interviews, leadership skills and public speaking.

2.5 Writing skills: Writing is often considered by students as monotonous and tedious. Using online resources creative assignments can be initiated in the classrooms. For instance, asking the students to open any city's home page and take a virtual tour to submit a brief travelogue on the city makes the writing part very interesting. Similarly, students can identify their topic of interest and research for information and submit reports for assessment.

Business English is one of the key areas that is to be taught to professional students. The reason being that once the students cross the threshold of the college, business English becomes part of their career development. Online assignments definitely create a virtual environment where students can use and assess the standard of their language. Drafting proposals, preparing abstracts, drafting business letters, telephonic conversations, conveying information are the areas that can be practiced by the students online. In fact, Final year students can be assigned an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) project to further boost their confidence.

IV. Websites

In addition to the above activities, internet access in the classrooms can expand the resources of the teacher. Classrooms become more flexible and tailor made depending on the needs and priorities of the students. Web based activities enables the students to take home the learning process. When further assistance needed, the students can depend on wonderful sites that provide information.

3.1 <http://www.study.com>: This site offers free English Language Classes in Grammar, Reading and Writing, Listening and Speaking, as well as specialized classes in TOEFL English for Special Purposes. Some of the courses use Internet Telephony and Voicemail to improve listening comprehension and pronunciation.

3.2 <http://www.esl.about.com>: This site features numerous tutorials at various entry levels. The courses are not monitored but chat rooms and forums for questions are available. The tutorials feature audio files for the improvement of listening comprehension and pronunciation. Interactive assessment tests are also available.

3.3 <http://www.english-course.com>: This English as a Second Language course is based on a virtual learning environment that features online exercises, assessment and a hyperactive (hyperlink-based) glossary. The entire course is also available on CD-Rom for offline studies.

3.4 <http://www.englishtown.com>: This commercial online learning environment offers a range of courses, including "Classic and Business English" as well as speaking lessons and preparation for TOEFL and TOEIC. Native English teachers tutor the classes and, in addition to the course work, free email lessons and a placement test are available. Online resources, a chat room, a magazine and a pen pal search engine are provided free. A university-certificate is available. The website itself is available in 14 different languages.

3.5 <http://www.gofluent.com>: This web-based interactive English language school concentrates on conversational English. The classes are held as video conferences or net meetings with ICQ or MSN. The classes consist of ten students and are held in 30 minute-cycles. A free trial lesson and a placement test are also offered.

3.6 <http://www.learnenglish.org.uk>: The free site is provided by the British Council, the United Kingdom's international organization for educational and cultural relations. This site has activities and advice for Kids (8-12 year olds), Teens (13-19 year olds) and adults. The learning environment features online courses as well as interactive learning components, such as grammar exercises, games, etc. This website is available in thirteen languages.

V. Limitations

Implementing a language learning process that incorporates web based activities however, has certain limitations. Syllabus designing, teaching process and assessment are the three areas where pre planning can minimize the issues and help in successful implementation.

VI. Syllabus Design

Careful planning and organization is crucial in syllabus design. Teachers often complain that including web based activities might over burden the learning process. However, a well planned syllabus with clear goals based on students needs will make the learning process easy. A thorough needs analysis should be made and Syllabus should be designed in such a way that web based activities are integrated in the syllabus instead of implementing them randomly during the teaching process.

"When the e-mail classroom connection processes are truly integrated into the ongoing structure of homework and classroom interaction, then the results can be educationally transforming" (Warschauer, 1995a, p. 95)

Another concern is that it is time consuming, if the net is slow or unhelpful. This happens due to lack of proper technical support and can be minimized if care is taken; however, in such situations teachers should be ready to engage the students with add-on materials.

VII. Teaching Process

Lack of the basic knowledge of technology on the part of teacher will often lead to disorder and chaos in the classrooms. Teachers, along with pedagogic skills should know basic computer skills to effectively incorporate technology into teaching methods. Workshops on how to implement internet integrated syllabus should be organized by the universities to develop the faculty understanding of the technology and the teaching process involved. Qualified and knowledgeable faculty facilitates the teaching process and help students reach the goals.

Teachers often complain that including web based activities might over burden the learning process. This happens when teachers randomly select online resources, a planned syllabus leaves enough time for the teacher to incorporate online resources and implement them in the class. Another concern is the wastage of time, if the net is slow or unhelpful. Teacher should be ready with add-on material for efficient time management. Lack of training on part of the teacher is another problematic area- as teachers are often clueless

about what is available on net and how to incorporate it. FDP'S to train teacher regarding basic computer literacy, the resources available and how best to use them can to some extent solve the problem.

VIII. Managerial Support

Support from the college management is one of the key limitations as it hampers the entire process. College's should come forward and provide the necessary technical support and tools for implementing internet integrated syllabus. Faculty's effort to infuse technology into the curriculum requires support in developing strategies and in resolving technical difficulties. This means more than the technical help desk. Along with technical support what is needed is thorough understanding of the impact of internet on the learning outcome and assisting the faculty realizes the objective in every step. The lack of technical experience to be had by the students can be a limitation but fortunately, most of the engineering students have the basic pre-requisites to participate in these activities which are an encouraging factor.

Despite these limitations and ground realities, the positive impact of integrating web based activities on effective communication skills cannot be denied. Colleges committed to provide quality oriented education, teachers trained to utilize the best of the resources, students who are self motivated are the three major factors that can influence the outcome of the program.

IX. Conclusion

Today's Communication skills methodology transited through many phases molding to the socio cultural, academic influences and adapting to the growing needs of the learners. The present scenario in corporate, industry and government sectors alike demand a combination of technical and soft skills in a job applicant. Computer assisted language learning dominated 20th century and paved way to technology enhanced classrooms. Incorporating web based activities in the curriculum is the next step to these classrooms to realize the main objective in a communication skills program that is nurturing effective communication skills in a student.

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