# FUNCTIONS AND MAJOR PROBLEMS FACED IN LANGUAGE LABORATORIES

## C. VISWESWARA RAO[1] & RAMBABU.VELAGALA[2]

[1]Sr. Assistant Professor of English, Department of BS&H, AITAM, Tekkali, Srikakulam, AP, India

[2]Assistant Professor of English, Department of BS&H, AITAM, Tekkali, Srikakulam, AP, India

## ABSTRACT

In recent times the facet of teaching and learning process seems quite different from that of the days of 1970s and/or before that. Particularly in the process of learning a foreign language, the outworn and former methods have been thrown away and they are replaced with new and advantageous teaching methods and aids such as language laboratories, art of learning centers etc. Today the purpose of learning a second language is sifted from purpose of learning the literature of the target language or for any other purpose to the specific purpose that is to communicate in the target language. With the changes taking place in trade and commerce industries and with the advent and spread of information technology industries, the purpose of learning a second language- specially English language as it is internationally linking language- is to efficiently communicate both in oral and written forms. Fluency in English language- both speaking and writing skills- is highly essential and most seek after requirement to get into any industry irrespective of its work nature and functioning. Thus the latest language teaching methods and language laboratories change the face of teaching and learning a second language. This paper concentrates on studying the functions and problems of language laboratories. In this paper, we try to explain some important functions and major problems faced in language laboratories.

**KEYWORDS**: Language Labs, Major Functions, Major Problems

## INTRODUCTION

It has become necessary to teach English for all the people who enter into world trade be it IT or any other trade, have to communicate with the customers all over the world whose mother tongue is not that of the trader or the employee. Since oral communication plays a major role in today's business, the traders and their employees- the industrialists and the job doers- in their industries have to communicate with all sorts of customers from the four corners of the world. It is not an easy task for any one as in the most of the occasions the speaking languages of the customer and the service provider are not the same. Thus they must see for a common language to communicate with each other. There would be no shade of doubt in saying that English language can serve the purpose and English is the obvious choice for everyone as it is spoken in many parts of the world and it is the computer language. In that way English has become lingua franca for the people who involve in world trade. Indians too have no exception from this.

In India till 19880s English was treated as a window to know and understand the world but today it is treated as a global language which opens opportunities to eke out livelihood. English has become a promising language which provides a job.

Nowadays even middle class people and of course, lower income people who wish to secure jobs in MNCs and other industries which involve in international business start learning English with seriousness and commitment. Apart

from technical skills the job seekers need to have good communication skills in English language. English is a very helpful language for one to be groomed and make oneself ready to cater the needs of industries as well as society. Most of the training of various aspects of professional life is given in English language.

Though English has been learnt and spoken by Indians for more than one and half centuries, it is learnt with a specific purpose that is to learn and study English literature and various sciences which are available in English language. But now the scene is changed and English is learnt for communication purpose. English is spoken by upper class Indians till the recent times as speaking in English is treated as none of our business by middle and lower class people. It is one reason for teaching-learning English with a specific purpose. Even today, the situation of teaching and learning of English language is not up to mark in India and in major parts of India English is taught and learnt from high school stage.

At the graduation level job aspirants have to learn all necessary skills such as communication skills, soft skills, hard skills and employability skills. If one has to be thorough with all these skills, one has to be thorough in English language and should have sound knowledge of English language.

To have a good command over a language one has to go through the semantics (vocabulary), syntax (structures) phonology (speech sounds) of the target language. Learning, understanding and using vocabulary, grammar and phonetics is very essential. A general classroom cannot provide all facilities. So a well furnished language laboratory is must to master all these elements of a language. Keeping all the above considerations in mind, the organizations of graduate colleges start establish language laboratories on the campuses of the colleges.

In the process of teaching a language, the language teacher may consider the language lab as a main tool and source with a view of improving those areas in which the learners face difficulties and problems; structures, pronunciation, etc. They can also be used to acquire and enhance all the language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. The language lab is used to implement the well constructed activities based on the learners' requirements and needs. Now-a-days, because of the utilization computers and internet in the language lab, the functions and advantages of language labs cross the boundaries of traditional lab functions. Various activities and programs are conducted in the language lab in order to improve the life skills, soft skills and other skills which prepare the learners capable enough not only to secure a job in MNCs but also face and deal successfully with the problems both in professional and personal life. In the view of Antich de leon, R. et al:

> *…..the main objectives of the language laboratory are to make the individual practice of students more effective, and increase the productivity of language teachers who only need to focus on the student's production and the mistakes encountered.*[1]

To know and understand the total scenario of the work nature, activities, and results achieved the language lab; we need to go back to the time of the inception of the first language lab. If we start the study from the first language lab, we can get the complete picture of the language lab, its functions and advantages.

Language labs, when they were in an experimental stage, had only phonographs as technological equipment. Phonographs as teaching aids were used in language labs in order to listen to the voice or speech of native speakers. After listening to the speech of a native speaker, the learners had to repeat it. The primary function of these labs was to teach the aural-oral skills and the sub skills of pronunciation. It was very difficult to the learners to listen to the speeches from the phonographs since the voice from them was not so clear.

In the second period of language labs which is known as formation or establishing period, headphones linked to a single output were introduced into language labs. Radio was used for the first time for educational purpose in language labs during this period. During the 1940s Speech Spectrographs were also used in the language labs to analyze the waveforms and frequency of the sounds that make up human speech.

In the third period (1953- 1969) telephones were used in the language labs. During the 1960s audio tapes and portable recorders played vital role in conducting language labs. The use of this kind of center grew rapidly in the late 1960s. Howatt and Widdowson explain it:

> *….it (language lab) allowed learners to hear themselves speak. This was a novel experience in the 1960s, and quite entertaining for a time…. It was an excellent resource for developing listening comprehension and it could offer a range of different voices that went far beyond the teacher's own resources….*[2]

For the nonnative learners of English language it is very difficult to speak and compare their own efforts with those of native speakers during this period. They needed much and more skills and a lot of drilling sessions with which felt tired and felt boredom. For practicing the alien language in the language lab successfully, the learners required a certain amount of cleverness. In addition to these problems, the language teachers were not in a position to help their students in the language lab since they were not accustomed completely to the new trends in the language lab design.

In the 1970s the language labs consisted of sets of learning materials which included a book, audiocassettes, and tape recorders etc. The popular 'audio active-comparative system' has been used in this period. The master programmed had been shifted to the student recorders. The learners in the language labs during this period were able to listen to the voice in the native speakers and record their voice using the microphones. But the language labs went rapidly out of fashion due to various reasons such as complex and cumbersome technology, other issues regarding lab design, methods of language teaching, material and maintenance. Television got its entrance into language lab and computer too in the later part of the 1970s. All these sudden and new changes in the language lab made majority of language teachers confused and were unable held the lab effectively and successfully. This made the learners felt bore in the labs. The inability of language teachers in handling laboratories, inadequate facilities, incoherence between the lab equipment and lab manuals and improper maintenance led to put the existence of language labs in the danger of extinct.

**Multimedia Language Lab**

Multimedia becomes a very important and useful means of teaching. The teacher can teach his learners using several ways of giving or getting information or several different materials in multimedia language lab. Nowadays multimedia refers to computer-based materials that can perform more varied tasks than the purely-audio mixed-media. The multimedia language labs provide new audio and video recordings apart from the old pre-recorded audio and video material. It also has the capability of integrating the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, as well as giving immediate feedback to the student. However, like its predecessors, multimedia centers run the risk of being underutilized due to poor utilization and maintenance.

Though multimedia language lab offers many opportunities for language learning with the availability of text, images, sound and video as well as interactive activities, the problem is that these opportunities have not been taken advantage of well. Most multimedia computer programs tend to be strong on presentation but weak as far as pedagogy and even interaction. One of the main promises of this lab is the ability to individualize learning, but like past language

laboratories, use of the facilities in many cases have devolved into rows of students all doing the same drills. The only advantage to the multimedia in these cases has been better sound and color images. Most modern language learning theories stress the importance of teacher guidance rather than control, giving students control over what they do, how fast they do it and even the ability to find and correct their own mistakes.

It becomes possible to blend or combining all the four language skills for the first time in the journey of the language labs with the existence of the multimedia language labs. Multimedia language labs lend themselves to self-study, and potentially self-directed learning, but such is often misunderstood. The simple existence of computers in a laboratory does not automatically lead to students learning independently. Significant investment of time is essential for materials development and creating an atmosphere conducive to such. Mark Warschauer gives an account of the importance of multimedia language laboratory:

> *Multimedia technology exemplified today by the CD-ROM allows a variety of media (text, graphics, sounds, animation and video) to be accessed on a sing le machine. What makes multimedia even more powerful is that it also entails hypermedia? That means that the multimedia resources are all linked together and that learners can navigate their own path simply by pointing and clicking a mouse.*[3]

Managing a multimedia language lab properly requires not only knowledge of foreign languages and language teaching methodology. It also requires a certain amount of technical know-how as well as the ability to combine all these into creative ways of taking advantage of what the technology can offer. Often the language teacher needs assistants for technical problems, for managing resources and even the tutoring of students.

The journey of Multimedia Language labs can be divided into three stages; the classification is done basing the features and functions of the labs.

**The Formation Stage of Multi-Media Language Lab**

In the formation or initial stage, the multi-media language lab mainly consists of projectors and slides: Slide projectors features of teachings to provide large, clear screen text, images, saving a lot of writing on the blackboard in class time. Recorder and tapes are characterized by making the teaching of English to provide clear content, can be repeatedly played, and heard. Projector is the use of light and lens device, the film's text and images projected on the white screen projection technology.

**The Primary Stage of Multi-Media Language Lab**

During the primary stage multimedia language labs work basing on the use of video recorders. Video recorders focus on film, slides, sound recordings and other audio-Visual media, the advantage of the process of reproduction of verbal communication, and create verbal communication environment in which teaching becomes more effective. Students are able to mimic the use of language, communication processes, and enhance their understanding and mastering of the language. Language laboratory is conducted with the help of dozens of tape recorders, headphones, microphone etc., through a master device to carry out operational use. Function play, listening, recording, monitoring, intercom, chipped, group training. Teachers can use these functions to create a good environment for teaching and practice of English language, especial communicative language.

**Advanced Stage of Multi-Media Language Lab**

During the Advanced stage multimedia language lab work basing on the use of computers and multimedia systems marked. The rapid development of computer technology, and rapid fall in the prices of computers helped the computer-aided, computer-assisted English language lab teaching. The advanced multimedia language teaching system is based on a computer as the core, coupled with video projectors, DVD players, VCRs, white screen, tape recorders.

**Digital Language Lab or Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)**

The digital language lab or Computer Assisted Language Learning (lab) is a revolutionary in the history of language laboratory. It is because in 1970s the language lab usage has been in dilemma since the expenditure of establishment and maintenance of language labs become a white elephant to the managements. The advantages of the language lab are not encouraging due to various reasons. With the usage of computer in language lab, the outputs of the language lab are noteworthy. The digital language lab includes a wide range of activities and initiatives in materials development, pedagogical practice and research. It facilitates the learners the highly interactive and communicative support for the four language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. It also provides both the teacher and students with the extensive use of the internet. The perfect blend of technology and English language teaching enhances the English language standards and there is a plenty of opportunities to the learners to improve their communication skills, life skills, soft skills and employability skills. By the time 990s, the CALL lab widens its features incorporating the latest technologies; blogs, wikis, social networking, podcasting, web 2.0 applications etc.

The digital language lab or the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) lab is a perfect blend of all the rich and fine principles of language pedagogy and methods which is designed basing on various learning theories. The CALL lab provides teachers with a powerful set of tools for interacting and sharing information with the students efficiently sitting in front of his/her system. It immensely helps the learners in improving the language skills. Michael Levy well describes the CALL:

> *…as the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning. The name is fairly recent one: the existence of CALL in the academic literature has been recognizable for the last thirty years. The subject is interdisciplinary in nature, and it has evolved out of early efforts to find ways of using the computer for teaching or instructional purposes across a wide variety of subject areas, with the weight of knowledge and breadth of application in language learning ultimately in a more specialized field of study.*[4]

There are many other and more facilities available in the digital language lab.

- The students can involve in tasks that taken place in the lab more comfortable.

- They can interact in the target language with an authentic audience.

- The students can have direct exposure to the native speakers and can produce varied and creative language.

- The digital language lab provides the students with a stress free atmosphere in which they can work and interact with the teacher and other learner with causing any sort of disturbance.

This lab aims to formulize the students to the intricacies of the speech sounds of English language such as word accent, sentence accent, rhythm, tone, intonation, to neutralize the influence of the regional accent and to bring about a

consistent accent and intelligibility in their spoken English.

There is no dispute in saying that the digital lab or the CALL has changed the role of a language laboratory from being mere supporting tool to the centre of the teaching process. Even after seizing such an important place in pedagogical arena, there are some barriers in establishing and / or conducting digital language lab.

- The digital language lab or the CALL establishing and maintenance charges are heavy.

- Specialized supporting staff is needed to answer the learners' doubts.

- It is highly required that both the instructors and learners have to be trained in order to use the lab effectively.

- The ever changing technology in the laboratory machinery may perplex the users and the teachers. They are not always able to understand and use the changing technology.

- For the language it is very difficult to find, assess, revise, and make necessary adjustments in learning materials, activities etc.

**Virtual Language Laboratory (VLL)**

Virtual language laboratory is the latest version of multimedia language lab. It provides some latest features and facilities in the language lab which make the lab more comfortable. Apart from the features available in the CALL or digital language lab, the VLL has some latest facilities like screen broadcast, student control, sharing information among learners without interference of the instructor, internet, video conferences, multimedia resources, DVD players etc.

This virtual language lab enables the instructor/ teacher in the lab to control, monitor broadcast, and help the learners from his system without making any disturbance to other learners in the lab. It also provides the learners with facilities which have not been provided by the previous versions of language labs. The language teacher can clarify the learners' doubts through the system whereas once the same thing has been done by meeting the teacher personally. Other new facilities like Listening, repeating, recording and comparing, sharing information among the students etc. are available to the learners in the virtual language lab.

Salient features of a virtual language lab which are not available in the previous versions of language laboratory are listed below:

- One of the most helpful facets of virtual language lab is 'screen broadcast' which makes the teacher's job easy in the lab in passing information to one or more students in the lab. The instructor can also broadcast his/ her voice and system sound at a time.

- An advantageous aspect of the virtual language lab to the learners is that a student or students can communicate either with the teacher and clarify their doubts, or they can communicate with other student or students at a time in the lab. They can transfer their screen to other students in the lab.

- The teacher is able to send media files to students and make them record. Learners can improve their pronunciation by comparing their voice with these media files.

- Another useful facility that the virtual language lab provides to the instructor is that the teacher can conduct

various types of examination.

- The latest feature of the virtual language lab is that the teacher can conduct group discussions on systems.

## CONCLUSIONS

There is always scope for improvement and advancement in any field and there is no exception for English language teaching and English language laboratories. Due commitment and enthusiasm are needed to improve as well as to achieve the targets in a field. Change and novelty in any field can be brought by the people's commitment and enthusiasm. It is time for the methods of teaching a language to be reinforced and made suitable to the present day situation as the recruiting scenario is drastically changed and the work nature and work process is completely different from that of the traditional ones. The language teachers, except a few, are habituated to the traditional teaching methods. It is high time for the language teachers to change their attitude towards taking regular English classes and conducting lab sessions. They need to modify teaching methods in tune with the present day requirements and demands. They must study and understand the new methods in teaching and follow them effectively.

Visionary teachers, having vast and rich teaching experience, can foresee the future needs and requirements in the sphere of education. They can imagine the problems that would be faced by the future learners both in the class room and language laboratory and thus, they can prepare themselves mentally and train themselves as to face and solve such problems in the coming years. It is very clear that every language teacher and learner must prepare and train themselves and get acquaintance with the changing technology for better usage of a language lab.

## REFERENCES

1. Antich de leon, R. et al: '**Metodologia de la ensenanza de las lenguas extranjeras**.' La Habana: Editorial Pueblo y Educacion. 1988. P. 175.

2. Howatt, A. and Widdowson, H.: **'A History of English Language Teaching**.' Oxford: Oxford University Press. (2004). P.319.

3. Mark Warschauer: '**Computer Assisted Language Learning: An Introduction**.' In Fotos. S. (ed) Multimedia Language Teaching. Tokyo: Logos International pp. 3-20.

4. Michael Levy: **'Computer Assisted Language Learning, Context and Conceptualization'**. New York: Oxfor University Press. 1997. P.1