ENHANCING QUALITY TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ORAL ENGLISH IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS: THE ROLES OF DIGITAL LANGUAGE LABORATORIES

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Abstract

The teaching of oral English in schools in Nigeria has not received adequate attention it deserves. Oral skills in English are taught and examined in schools with the aim of developing accuracy and fluency in speech communication. However, majority of students do not attain intelligibility at the close of their study. It is common for second language learners of English to struggle to communicate due to incorrect use of speech sounds, mispronunciations and mother tongue interference. These often hinder communication as listeners struggle to understand what is being said. The use of technology to enhance teaching as digital learning resources has come to lessen difficulties faced by students. One of such is the use of digital language laboratories to enhance the teaching and learning of oral English. Going by the limitations imposed on learners of English as a second language, the use of digital language laboratories become imperative, if they would be globally competitive in job searches. This study was carried out to investigate the role of digital language laboratories in the teaching and learning of oral English. The study is qualitative, relying on secondary data such as journals, articles, books etc. The study revealed that digital language laboratories can contribute immensely to the acquisition and improvement of students' oral English since it can assist them to be learn pronunciation, practice, and assess their speech in the English Language competently.

Keywords: Digital Language Laboratories, Oral English, Phonetics, Enhancing and Quality

Introduction

Exposure of students to a second language is often accompanied sometimes by uneasy tasks of mastering the four language skills (listening. Speaking, reading and writing), particularly, speaking, to effectively communicate. It is common for learners of English as a second language to struggle to communicate due to incorrect use of speech sounds and mispronunciations. The mispronunciations often hinder communication as listeners struggle to understand what is being said. This is not unconnected to the interference of the mother tongue, which often plays inhibiting role in the phonology aspect of the acquisition of a second language.

Of the four generally known language skills; reading and listening are classified as receptive, while speaking and writing are known to be productive for teaching the English language in the context of a second language. Speaking and listening are very challenging to teach and learn due to the phonological and pedagogical challenges confronting teachers and learners. As it is generally agreed that language is primarily speech, as well as the fact that most individuals communicate orally, it therefore, become imperative for individuals to effectively use oral language to effectively communicate informally, but more importantly, in official and professional spaces and communities. Njoku (2017) notes that determining the outcomes of students in the English language must include tests of oral skills proficiency.

Teaching English as a second language has not been spared of some challenges, especially as oral English is concerned, due to the substructure of intonation from the first language of the learners. Mother tongue interference and attitude of students towards spoken English have been underpinned as likely factors responsible for the declining performance of students in spoken English. This poor communicative competence of learners as highlighted reveals a perilous trend as it leads to falling employment rates of Nigerian graduates both within the country and in international organisations. Maheshwari (2016) noted that good communication skills are indispensable for professionals in any field, particularly those who seek to advance their careers beyond local and national boundaries. Therefore, the ability to efficiently communicate orally in English language is essential particularly, to people who consider their careers not to end soon. Organisations in Nigeria have it tough recruiting applicants, who may have come with good academic results, and sometimes, a good knowledge of grammar, but who lack the phonetic provess needed to excel on the job. By pronouncing some words, anyone who has good knowledge of linguistic and intonation will easily identify the tribe or ethnic group a speaker is from. This is not a matter of accent, it is of phonetics. To ease this situation, some organisations now resort to

pre-job tests and trainings in a bid to screen out undesirable applicants, and upgrade the ones to be integrated into organisations.

To overcome the burning issue of poor communication skills among Nigerian students and graduates, academic institutions come to the rescue. There is a need to address the matter using a bottom-top approach. Circumventing this inhibition which is mostly created by environmental factors which has traditionally been the teacher pronouncing the words to learners, and they (learners), repeat the words after the teacher. The extent of the result generated by this method is however limited by several factors, one of which is the knowledge of the teacher, who learned English as second language too, and who may also have limitations which may be biological or health-related, leading to a personal phonetic deficiency. This means that learners pick whatever is taught to them in oral English classes by their teachers, thus, making self-learning and personal development difficult. While teachers may be working hard to pass the phonetic ability to students, poor performances observed among them many times do not bother on the teacher's incapability, but the use of inappropriate and non-interactive instructional materials. According to Richard (2016), teaching the complex aspect of English, especially phonetics, cannot be singularly based on near-passive classroom interactions.

Global trends necessitate pedagogical metamorphosis from traditional methodologies used in spoken English, where teachers are at the centre of the teaching-learning process to one which spurs enthusiasm in learners through active involvement of learners. According to Filoye (2022), in an attempt to shift from a passive pedagogy to a more participatory one, it becomes necessary to integrate technological tools in the teaching of English generally, and oral skills in particular. In the same vein, Ghavifekr and Rosdy (2015) support the importance of the global notion of integrating digital technology in classrooms and other teaching and learning settings, as a way of enhancing collaborative learning skills in multi-sociocultural contexts. To alleviate the situation and improve the acquisition of oral skills in the English Language, the use of Digital Language laboratories (DLL) became necessary, to take the learning of the oral English to an unprecedented level.

The realisation of a need for a departure from the traditional teaching of oral English may have prompted the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE, 2012) to recommend that students who are studying courses with a practical orientation such as spoken English should be exposed to proper oral drills in language laboratories. The importance of a functional language laboratory was expressed in the College of Education, Ikere-Ekiti, by the denial of full accreditation to the Department of English Language in 2004, due to the unavailability of a functional language laboratory (Filoye, 2022).

A language laboratory is a dedicated space for foreign language learning where students access audio and/or audio-visual materials for foreign language learning. It plays a significant role in foreign language learning as learners gain exposure to the target language while practising the phonetics of the language. It is a facility in any academic institution equipped with resources to help students learn foreign languages by listening to pre-recorded tapes or disks, videos, and recording themselves to assess themselves. In the words of Mambo (2004), "language laboratories are environments designed to enhance foreign language learners' skills. Generally equipped with analogue and digital hardware, and software (tape recorders, video cassette recorders, or computers), they provide practices in listening comprehension and speaking (listen and repeat), to reinforce the grammar, vocabulary and functions (grammatical structures) presented in class.

Language laboratories may be broadly grouped as analogue and digital. Analogue language laboratories are often referred to as the conventional and the modernised version, the lingua phone laboratory. Conventional language laboratories are such that language learning equipment available are audio cassettes and audio CD ROM which are listened to as learners learn through repetition of patterns of pronouncing words. Tape recorders are also used to record and compare the learners' improvement over time. In this system, the teacher's console is located in front of several booths, giving the teacher control of what each learner in the laboratory hears per time. Aiding the conventional language laboratories is the lingua phone laboratory which consists of workstations, each of which is equipped with a headset with a microphone and a cassette player, where the learners learn the target language wordings by themselves as well as communicate with their teacher (Asri, Syaifuddin, and Rozi, 2016). The improvement of the lingua phone laboratory over the conventional is the reduction of distractions and noises from the external environment. The laboratory enhances the use of audio-

lingual learning and teaching method which spurs the language habits of learners through consistent exercises, accurate sentence patterning, and practising dialogues and conversations which are common among native speakers of the English Language.

The second is the Digital Language Laboratory (DLL) which came through developments in the field of Information and Communication Technology. Digital language laboratory (DLL) is software which works on digital platforms. It offers language learning skills based on listening, speaking, reading and writing (LSRW) methodology. It is a vital methodology for learning any language. DLL helps in understanding a language in a productive way. There are two major brands of digital language laboratories, and they are; Computer Assisted Language Laboratory (CALL) and Web Assisted Language Laboratory (WALL). In the computer-assisted language laboratory, the courses meant to be learnt have already been downloaded on the computer, and are employed to aid students learning. In the web-assisted language laboratory, however, the resources are not downloaded or pre-installed before the class, but the teacher and learners browse the internet to source for the resources during the teaching-learning interaction. These digital laboratories enhance the development of language skills in learners.

While many researchers such as Aleman (2014), Njoku (2017), and Balamayuranathan (2019) have found that the presence of language laboratories in Nigerian schools to teach Oral English to has been contributory to the acquisition of oral language skills, the extent of the use of digital language laboratories have not been satisfactory explored, hence, this study.

The processes of teaching and learning the oral aspect of English cannot be divorced from personal and environmental factors of the teachers and the learners, which impact, positively or negatively, the acquisition and development of oral English skills. This study is based on Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition as it explains second language acquisition. The theory is discussed in relation to the study. Stephen Krashen's theory of language acquisition which was first presented in the 1970s, and based on six hypotheses gives a perspective to second language learning. These hypotheses are; The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis, the Affective Filter Hypothesis, and the Reading Hypothesis.

The Acquisition/Learning Hypothesis puts forward that an individual gets to acquire a second language through two means: acquisition and learning. According to Krashen (1981, 1982, 1985) in Řepová (2004), the acquisition is described as an unintentional, subconscious process virtually identical to the one used in first language acquisition. It is a natural process of language proficiency development through understanding language for proper communication, while the acquirer is usually unaware of the acquisition taking place or the results of it. The acquisition/learning hypothesis is the cornerstone of the theory. The Natural Order Hypothesis states that grammatical structures are acquired in a predictable and natural order. Bailey, Madden and Krashen (1974) found out that adults showed a natural order of grammatical morphemes.

In the Monitor Hypothesis of the theory, Krashen explains that the production of sentences in a second language by an individual is initiated by the subconsciously acquired system, and the role of the conscious system is only to monitor or edit what is uttered. This perhaps explains how people correct themselves having made an error in phonetics or grammar. The Input Hypothesis puts forward that language is acquired through comprehension. This happens when an individual is exposed to language just a little beyond the current level of competence. This expresses that "comprehensible input" is the only way language is acquired (Krashen,2003a). The affective filter hypothesis puts forward that there exist, certain personal variables, which influence language acquisition. Such factors as motivation, good self-image, and self-confidence, encourage language acquisition. Krashen (1982) explains that the Affective Filter Hypothesis may actually explain why a student of a second language, English, for example, receives a great deal of comprehensible input, but still does not reach a native-like competence. The problem could be traced to the high Affective Filter that prevents the input from reaching the language acquisition device. Student teachers who are high in these variables then may acquire proficiency in English phonetics than those who are anxious or low in self-confidence. The last hypothesis is the reading hypothesis. This hypothesis is much more responsible for competence in vocabulary, among other language competence (Krashen 1994), and it does not distinguish between aural and written input (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). This hypothesis claims that comprehensible input in the form of reading also stimulates language acquisition. The first five hypotheses contribute massively to the understanding of how student-teachers may acquire proficiency in English phonetics through aided instructions.

Olaide (2021) found that multiple interactivities among students using the Digital language laboratory resulted in significant improvement in the oral English communication skills of the students in the study. Filoye (2022) who studied the effects of analogue and digital teaching strategies on learning outcomes of students in colleges of education in South-West Nigeria, found that while the use of both teaching strategies is effective for enhancing classroom instruction and students' performance in spoken English, the use of digital language laboratories in digital teaching strategies was much more potent in improving students' performance in oral language than the analogue strategy and tools. Digital language laboratories were also found to be more prominent and rich in teaching spoken English in schools.

Essence of Digital Language Laboratories

The traditional learning environment is limited and can as well limit classroom interactions between learners and the content being learned. Digital language laboratories on the other hand create a more interactive and efficient learning environment which allows an improved measure of learners' immersion in the course content and attention to instruction. As advancement in technology seeks to improve all areas of human interactions and endeavours, the acquisition of digital language laboratories in schools and colleges are generally aimed at improving the teaching-learning of oral English, specifically improving the phonetic ability of the students. Sihite (2017) highlights four aims of procuring language laboratories: improving the listening skills of learners, and stimulating learners to learn more and learn better. Since digital language laboratories are equipped with web and computer-based devices which produce high-quality sounds for student learning, students are better able to acquire and learn phonetics competencies when taught in digital language laboratories. The learners, upon graduation from various institutions of learning, would seek employment, within and outside the shores of the country. Their oral language skill, in a global world, becomes a competitive skill, and poor performance could be a disadvantage (Maheshwari, 2016).

Roles of Digital Language Laboratories

It can be expressed from literature and expectations that the central role of digital language laboratories is to enhance students' language abilities through the production of word sounds to convey the intended meaning and thereby improve communication. For example, a mispronunciation of 'Sheep' / $\int I:p/$ as 'Sip' /sIp/ or as 'Ship' / $\int Ip/$, inhibits communication and slows down communication. Teaching oral English to students using digital language laboratories is motivated by the desire to have them better communicate in the English Language, even though, they are not native speakers of the language. Beyond Oral English,

Balamayuranathan (2019) asserts that language laboratories help students to improve their reading, listening, and writing skills too. As learners listen to words pronounced correctly, they develop their listening abilities. Having got a good grasp of each word pronounced, they can write them down well, and read them correctly, thus, improving their language acquisition access to the four language skills. Another role, which may also be considered to be an offshoot of the first, is professional enhancement. Learning in school is a preparation for life afterwards, part of which is a career. In Nigeria, a country with very many languages and dialects, English is used in offices, banks, government parastatals, many private practices, and even in some malls and shops. One of the readiness strategies to get professional opportunities is the ability to communicate well. According to Rao and Murali (2016), nowadays, English communication skills plays crucial roles in securing and sustaining jobs in this global era, as fluent English speakers are far more advanced in securing jobs. An employee who looks to climb the career ladder fast, especially in international organisations must therefore be such who communicates well in oral English.

The provision of a comfortable environment is another role digital language laboratories perform in the acquisition of a second language. While computers and other equipment in the language laboratories are not teachers themselves, Rao and Murali (2016), they aid digital language laboratories, unlike traditional

classrooms, DLL enable teachers and learners to better interact, and allows for learners to acquire the second language in perhaps the most comfortable of all environments without prejudices, since learning can also be done personally. Intimation of English Language teachers with development in the teaching profession is another worthy role of digital language laboratories in teaching English. The inclusion of technology as an aid in teaching has pervaded every sub-field of teaching. Language teachering isn't left out. However, Mohammed (2017) found that language teachers are habituated to traditional teaching methods. This is a sad reality that needs to be challenged. Digital Language Laboratories offer a veritable solution to jolting such teachers out of their fading teaching stance to produce graduates who will be competitive in the world of jobs.

Digital Language Laboratories in Teaching Oral English

English language teachers, who themselves are not native speakers of the language need enhancements to teach oral English beyond the restrictions of students' and teachers' native languages placed on their phonetic abilities. Digital language laboratories are technological empowerment for teachers to impart oral English skills, owing to the rich teaching resources that can be easily accessed through them. Krishna (2022) asserts that language laboratories have become an essential part of the paraphernalia for the teaching of the English Language as they particularly provide support for teachers in teaching, and assessing non-native speakers of the English Language for standardised language tests like IELTS, TOEFL, etc.

During classroom instructions, the teacher needs to some extent be in control of the class to regulate what is learnt as well as encourage learning. According to Syaifudin, Rozi, and Asri (2016), the teacher monitors learners during self-learning; facilitates broadcast, which may be done over the speakers; facilitates the transfer of audio, video, and other teaching resources via the internet or intranet; pairing learners to encourage and enhance collaborative learning; and finally, to assess the performance of the learners. Studies have found that the use of digital language laboratories to teach students who are learning English as a second language is heralded by a myriad of benefits to both the students as well as the teachers.

Digital language laboratories have been identified by Omotoyinbo (2020) as a phenomenon to overcome shyness among learners as it enhances their speaking abilities. The fact that it provides a non-judgemental learning environment, especially during personal practices could offer a positive effect and helps the learner to better acquire a second language. Even during classes or group assignments, digital language laboratories encourage participation as exercises are usually interesting. The learners acquire proficiency in relaxed and enthusing environments, thus fetching English students closer to native-level speech and heightening all their language skills by providing valuable exposure to the language in action (Krishna. 2021).

Olaide (2021) studied the effect of utilising digital language laboratories in English instruction on oral communication skills and found that digital language laboratory positively influences the oral communication skills of students. In a similar vein, Motteram, (2013), in a report of two Japanese researchers in English and Social Studies found notable improvement in the oral skills of students after being exposed to video conferencing sessions and listening practice with native English speakers. Students taught without access to language laboratories have been found to fall short of expectations in phonetics. Peace and Mabel (2016) found that urban students' communication among themselves in English is often not without influences and interferences from their mother tongue even though they are taught phonetics as a part of their curriculum. The challenge however has been that they are taught using the traditional means is teacher pronunciation, which often leaves little or no provision for personal practice and assessment. This is a pointer that language laboratories, particularly the digital type, are needed in schools and colleges to promote innovative teaching-learning techniques to enhance students' proper acquisition of English phonology (Krishna. 2021).

An advantage of digital language laboratories over analogues is the portability and flexibility it offers within and outside the school premises, such that students can interact concurrently without disturbing each other regardless of the group of students and their size. In Nwosu (2019), language laboratories, especially digital laboratories, give chance to work on individual needs, which are not dealt with in a traditional classroom setting. Aleman (2014) highlights how digital language laboratories enhance classroom interactions. First is versatility; as digital laboratories are set up using a network of computers equipped with multimedia applications and functionalities, it becomes possible to integrate texts, audio, and videos in the classroom, using application software such as

Audacity and Adobe Premier. Images and videos allowed in the language laboratory will enhance language acquisition. Secondly, ease of movement among different applications on the computer. As modern computers allow simultaneous operations on different applications, thus, removing restrictions to learning, learners have less restriction to what can be learnt per time, especially for students who are fast learners. The third is interactivity. In digital laboratories, computers are networked and equipped with multimedia tools such as the internet, headsets, microphones, and webcams. These tools make interaction with teachers and learners, as well as native speakers possible.

Nunan (2004) in Olaide (2021) found listening comprehension activities and recording of language usage to notably enhance the oral English Communication skills of students. Students also gave verbal testimony that, unlike in classroom situations, there was no negative attitude from other group members. According to Sihite (2017) student interaction time in a traditional language classroom is about 2.5%, while in a language laboratory classroom, the time spent reaches nearly 24%. It is also necessary to note that these figures might be higher depending on the exercises taking place in the class at the time. The fourth is the potential for teacher intervention in the form of oral comments. It means teachers can easily give remarks on the students' performance and work easily and even control the students' activities in the laboratory through their own console. Next is the potential for independent learning. If students have access to digital learning resources beyond class time, or a regulated timetable, they are able to seek to learn more at the time they consider best since materials can be accessed and copied by the use of USB drives through the internet. Learners are able to practice and self-assess themselves whenever they feel especially night crawlers and early birds who may enjoy the graveyard silence of the night and early mornings to enhance their listening skills and learn pronunciations, stress, accents, and other aspects of the phonetics of a language effectively through repetition and self-assessment.

Conclusion

As there is a global departure from analogue systems, digital language laboratories are needed to engage students and spur them to overcome the influences of their mother tongues on their phonetics in the English Language and improve in the art of English communication. They provide a different environment from the traditional classroom set-up and allow for interactions beyond what is obtainable in the traditional classroom as the teaching-learning processes become more interesting, participatory, and enhancing to learning. Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that oral English communication can be enhanced by the use of digital language laboratories to teach and learn phonetics. The traditional method by which teachers teach oral English where they pronounce a word, and such is repeated after the teacher has been found to be grossly inadequate, and has been responsible for poor performances of students in phonology. Digital language laboratory therefore comes to the rescue to enhance the teaching-learning process. Acquisition of oral English skills and reactions of students can be better improved through the use of digital language laboratories are more potent in improving students' performance, owing to the fact that digital laboratories allow for better interactivity, versatility, and self-learning and assessment.

Recommendations

On the basis of the outcome of this study and conclusion, the following recommendations are hereby made:

- i. Digital language laboratories should be made available in schools and colleges to improve proficiency in Oral English communication skills of learners
- ii. Teachers of English Language should be trained on the use of digital language laboratories before use in order to get the best out of the facility.
- iii. Access should be granted to students work in digital language laboratories outside of class time, especially those in teacher training colleges for personal practice and self-assessment.
- iv. The government and management of schools and colleges should work to ensure that analogue language laboratories are replaced by, or upgraded to digital status.
- v. Teachers should give room to learners to explore during classes, to encourage discovery learning and class interaction.

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