Impact of ICT Resources on Addressing Listening Comprehension Needs of ESL Learners

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Abstract

The benefit of digital technology is all around us and has significantly contributed to English language learning (ELL) practices. The English language proficiency of the second language learners has always been a matter of great concern. Of the four language skills, listening the fundamental skill, remains as one of the most neglected skills in classroom activities. The existing language teaching system in Kerala pays little attention to develop it. When listening comprehension (LC) of the learner is not given the right opportunity to develop it that will lead to poor language proficiency. The focus of this paper is to analyse the listening comprehension needs of English as a second language (ESL) learners in Kerala and to suggest how ICT resources can be used to address them. The paper concludes with the finding that if integrated judiciously and used appropriately, ICT resources can play a great role in developing the language proficiency and Listening comprehension of second language learners.

Keywords: information and communication technology (ICT), English language learning (ELL), English as second language (ESL) and listening comprehension (LC)

Introduction

In the present world of rapid technological advancements, there is hardly any realm of life that remains untouched by the benefits of technology. Countless researchers have discussed the role of technology in learning and how it supplements the process of learning. ICT is an umbrella term that covers information and communication tools that are used for effective presentation of information and for better communication. It offers many powerful tools to revolutionize the educational set up. The ever-increasing importance of ICT in education is indicated by the high profile given to ICT by concerned authorities and the relatively large amount of money spent into procuring ICT tools and gadgets.

ICT and English language learning (ELL)

Language learning is considered as a skill. Acquisition of a language, especially a second language, is a complex as well as a unique process. Though given great importance in schools, acquisition of English language skills remains a great challenge to many second language learners and the system often struggles to help the learner acquire at least the basic skills. English language teachers throughout the world depend on many strategies to enhance language learning and to break the shackles of the much-wearied process of traditional language learning.

The advancements in ICT have contributed much to language learning. In addition to the overall benefits to learning, it offers some exclusive benefits to English language learning. ICT tools can play a great role in developing language skills. Inclusion of texts, voices, images, music, animation, sound effects and video can make language learning an interesting and collaborative affair. If integrated judiciously and used appropriately, ICT tools can provide a powerful platform to improve the language skills of second language learners.

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ICT and listening comprehension

Of the four language skills, listening is treated as 'receptive skill' (Masduqui 2009) and the existing educational system in Kerala pays little attention to develop them. Of all the four language skills, listening is the most neglected skill and 'listening rarely is taught in schools' (Richards 1983). Listening is the fundamental skill. 'When the fundamentals are taken for granted or ignored, all other skills are affected' (Ur 1998). Students remain as passive listeners and get limited exposure to real language. The current examination system gives more importance to writing and reading skills. Listening and speaking thus remain as neglected skills in classroom activities.

There is a close affinity between listening comprehension and language proficiency. Listening comprehension plays a critical role in both communication and language acquisition. 'In teaching and learning foreign languages, it is the listening skill that is considered as one of the most difficult skill to teach and to acquire. That is why the proficiency levels of learners tend to be very low' (Gómez 2008). In the areas of second language acquisition research and second language teaching, listening has always been the most forgotten and least researched of the four macro–skills (speaking, reading, writing, and listening). Moreover, until not so long ago, listening was not considered as a separate and independent skill in itself, with its own characteristics, purposes and micro–skills, but as an activity of means by which the other macro–skills could be taught and acquired. But listening is now considered as a skill on its own with its own characteristics, as an active, rather than passive, and 'very complex skill which deserves special treatment and a special teaching methodology'. (Field 2008; Flowerdew 2005; Gómez 2008).

ICT is a valuable tool to enhance English language learning. For ESL learners' ICT provides opportunities to communicate more effectively and to develop language skills. 'English teachers can maximize the impact of ICT in their classrooms by ensuring that they and their students use ICT as an integral part of lessons, present ideas dynamically, and use a range of media' (Becta, 2006). Many research

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findings have proved that the use of well-designed ICT environment would enable ESL learners to develop their language proficiency and Listening comprehension skills. The outcome of the study 'Using Digital stories to improve the Listening comprehension' by Verdugo and Belmonte (2007) revealed that learners of the experimental group had better listening comprehension and outperformed the control group. The study proved that internet-based technologies played a great role in improving the listening comprehension of learners in English. O'Bryan and Hegelheimer (2007) reported that the use of Podcasts for giving listening instruction had resulted in creating positive attitudes in teachers and students towards computer-based multimedia. Martinez's (2010) research found that new technologies provided a valuable support for both teachers and students with the teaching and practice of listening comprehension in a foreign language.

Need and significance

The teaching and learning of English language has never been more demanding. The impact of globalization has re-doubled its prominence and relevance in all parts of the world. Acquiring proficiency in English language is given great importance as knowing the language itself is a 'passport' for better prospects in life and career. English is taught as a second language in India. 'It is taught as a second language at every stage of education in all states of India' (Vijayalakshmi & Babu 2014). Like many other developing countries, India too pays great attention to enhance the English language proficiency of learners. But the state of affairs in English language learning is quite disappointing. The situation is not much different in Kerala, a state that has a reputation of highest literacy in India.

Kerala 'Model Education' has gained wide acceptance all across the world. English medium schools have great popularity in the state and most parents prefer English as the medium of instruction for their wards. But even after many years of learning English, a large number of students after completing their secondary education find it difficult to express themselves in good English. The deteriorating standard of English and limited English skills of high school leavers has been

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highlighted in many studies. (Nair 2004, Nayar 2008 and Manjooran 1997). Thus, developing language proficiency and enabling students to become effective users of language remain as distant goals. The principal cause for the inadequate command of English among high school leavers is the limited use of the language and existing discrepancies in teaching. The wide disparity between expected competence and actual competence in the use of English language has resulted in infusing the benefits of ICT to second language learning. Purposeful and appropriate application of ICT in language learning can provide pupils with opportunities to use and practice language in a relaxed environment. In this context, the endeavours to explore the possibilities of ICT to enhance English language learning gain immense significance.

IT @ School

IT@ school is a pioneering initiative by the Directorate of Public Instruction of the Government of Kerala to explore the immense possibilities thrown up by ICTs and thereby ushering in a sea change in the educational scenario of Kerala. This project introduces 'Information Technology' in High School Education for qualitative improvement of the conventional teaching / learning system. Kerala is the first state to introduce IT as a compulsory subject in school curriculum. The project aims to integrate information technology into the mainstream curriculum of the high schools and higher secondary schools with a view to enhance the intellectual productivity of teachers, to improve students' learning capabilities and to increase the management efficiency of school administrators. The government of Kerala had equipped all the secondary schools with ICT facilities including high speed internet connection. All the teachers had been given training in IT and entire system had been geared up for ICT integration. Hence, the investigator is interested to examine the impact of ICT integration in English language learning. Moreover, the long experience of the investigator as an English teacher at higher secondary level has helped her to validate the issues raised in this study like the limited language proficiency of second language learners, neglect of listening skills in

language classrooms and the great role played by ICT in addressing these issues.

The effect of ICT integration on listening comprehension will be given special attention by the investigator as listening is the primary language skill to be developed in learners. The influence of ICT in developing the listening comprehension of second language learners had been studied by researchers and the findings had confirmed the influence of ICT in developing listening skills of learners. The secondary school curriculum for English followed in Kerala gives little importance to the listening comprehension of learners. When all other skills are given due importance in the English course book, listening is totally neglected. Hardly any activities are included for developing or assessing the listening skills of learners. This may be due to the rationale that listening is a natural process, tantamount to breathing. Development of listening is left to chance under the assumption that it will automatically get developed when the other language skills are acquired by the learners.

Listening needs of ESL learners

Lack of availability of authentic listening materials for developing the listening skills of second language learners is a great cause of concern. Many teachers of English also remain clueless about the various types of listening tasks and of the possible ways of developing and assessing the listening skills of learners. Though there are many websites in internet that deal with English language skills, sites that exclusively deal with listening skills are very limited and are highly native in their approach. Learners often find it difficult to follow the style of presentation, content, accent, intonation and speed of such sites. In general, they fail to cater to the needs of the second language learners of Kerala.

Research question

The present study has stemmed out of the research question:

What is the impact of ICT integration on the language proficiency of second language learners?' and Will ICT integration help to develop the listening comprehension of second language learners?

Objective

The main objective of the study is to construct and validate a website for developing the English language proficiency and listening comprehension of high school students and to analyse the effectiveness of the interactive listening module (ILM) in developing English language proficiency and Listening comprehension of the high school students.

Methodology

The investigator had adopted a mixed method approach – Descriptive-cum-Experimental method for the study. The various issues related to ICT integration in English language learning were studied using descriptive method. The effectiveness of the website and (ILM) in developing the English language proficiency and listening comprehension of high school students was assessed using experimental method. The design used was non-equivalent pre-test – post-test **control group design.**

Population and sample

The high school students of Kerala study English as second language and hence they represent second language learners. The investigator selected 180 Standard IX students as samples- 90 students in control group and 90 in experimental group.

Tools

The tools used for collecting necessary data for the study were a questionnaire for high school English language teachers, English language proficiency test (ELPT), interactive listening module (ILM), audio and text transcripts for ILM, website - www. le4esll.com, website validation scale (experts) and website evaluation scale (students).

Experimental try-out (execution of the training programme)

The investigator obtained permission from the school authorities to conduct the experimental study. The study was conducted in the IT labs of the respective schools. For the smooth conduct of study, all the necessary arrangements were made by the investigator including measures to ensure uninterrupted power supply and internet connection. The students of the experimental and control group were first subjected to English Language Proficiency Test-ELPT. This test served as the pre-test. Then the students of the experimental group were exposed to the treatment.

The website and ILM were introduced to students and they were familiarized with the features of the website. The experimental group was subjected to the exposure of ILM and the control group was not given any treatment. Unit 3 'Tales of Toil' from the Standard IX English course book was selected for the experimental try out. For ease of administration, the students were divided and put in to small groups. 7 to 10 students were placed in each group based on the facilities available at ICT labs. At a given time, only one group was allowed to do the listening tasks from the website. This helped in the effective execution of the try out. The whole procedure took two –three days to complete, in a single school. Then the same pre-test – ELPT – was administered as the post -test to the students. Moreover, the pre- test and post test scores of the experimental group for the Interactive Listening Module test were also recorded manually by the investigator. These scores acted as an additional measure to ensure the effectiveness of the ILM. The same topic, Unit -3 'Tales of Toil', from the English course book was taught to the control group by the concerned English teacher. The ELPT was given as post–test to both the experimental and control groups. The collected data was scored and subjected to suitable statistical analysis.

Statistical Techniques

Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques (t test, ANOVA and ANCOVA) were used to analyse the collected data. The effectiveness of the ILM in developing the English language

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proficiency and listening comprehension of high school students was tested using statistical techniques like Test of significance of difference between means, ANOVA and ANCOVA.

Findings of the study

The developed website www.le4esll.com and its content (ILM) are highly effective in developing the English language proficiency and listening comprehension of the English language learners. This finding is supported by the following results. There was significant difference between the experimental and control groups in their post-test ELPT and listening test scores (Vide Table 29 and 36,;t =10.10, p <0.01) and (t =11.03, p <0.01). The post-test mean score of the experimental group was greater than the control group. So, it can be concluded that the language proficiency and listening comprehension of experimental group was better than that of the control group. Hence, the developed ILM is effective in improving the English language proficiency and listening comprehension of the high school students. When the experimental group was exposed to the developed ILM, there was significant difference in the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) between the experimental and control group with regard to post-test ELPT and listening test scores. The obtained value Fy for the ELPT score (54.92; p<0.01) and Fy listening score (46.82; p<0.01) was higher than the table value at 0.01 level. So, it can be concluded that there was significant difference between the post-test ELPT and listening test scores of the two groups.

Conclusion

This study has made an attempt to analyse the effectiveness of ICT in developing the language proficiency and listening comprehension of ESL learners at the high school level. For this purpose, an interactive website that deals with course book oriented listening tasks is developed. Though there are many websites and blogs for developing the language skills of second language learners are available, they are more general in nature. So, a website that deals with course book oriented listening tasks to cater to the needs of the second

language learners has great relevance. The website www.le4esll.com developed by the investigator is the first of its kind in the Kerala context. Many of the websites that offer listening materials are foreign sites and they fail to satisfy the needs of second language learners in Kerala. Here lies the scope of the present study. The website is a repository of listening tasks aimed at improving the listening comprehension of learners. It is customised to suit the needs of ESL learners and teachers. It would help both the teachers and learners to familiarise themselves with different types of listening tasks and games. Instant feedback is also given to the learners at the completion of every task. Each section ends with post listening activities.

The investigator intensely expects that the website and the interactive listening module (ILM) would help the learners to develop their listening comprehension along with improving their English language proficiency. Assessing listening comprehension would become an easy class room affair for both the teacher and the learner. Learners can self -check their listening skill and adopt suitable remedial measures to rectify the mistakes. It is also hoped that the findings of the study would help to throw light on the various issues in ICT integrated ELL and concerned authorities would take immediate measures to address them. The present study also undoubtedly establishes the positive impact of ICT resources in developing the language proficiency and listening comprehension of ESL learners.

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