# Technology Innovations for Language Learning

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The Austrian-British philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "The limits of my language are the limits of my world" (1961). As human beings, language is something that we constantly use to symbolize; we symbolize our feelings, our needs and our thoughts. In other words, the language we use is deeply enmeshed within the social context of its use. But how often do we turn our language classrooms into spaces of vivacious talk and self-expression?

**Talk in the Classroom**

In a comparative education study across Russia, India, England, France and America, Robin Alexander (2001) found that on an average, "teachers everywhere spoke not only much more frequently than their pupils but also for longer …." He also found that Indian students "were more monosyllabic in their utterances than those elsewhere." Alexander observed that in India, in most cases the teacher spoke to the entire class and the nature of this talk was largely instructional, explanatory or interrogative. There were few instances of informal talk in the classroom. Subsequent NCERT studies corroborate these findings, and highlight the lacunae in the current pedagogy of English in schools. Children do not get opportunities to speak or listen to English (Dutta and Bala 2012). Classroom pedagogy leaves a lot to be desired, with the main focus often being on questions and answers (Noronha et al 2015, and Dutta and Bala 2012). According to Dutta and Bala (2012), "mostly the teacher asked the questions, students were not motivated to ask question [*sic*], this deprives the students of practice for communication, command and confidence. Across all the states, just 5 to 10% of students asked questions."

Ironically, the breakdown in communication seems most severe in the second language classroom. Students learning English as a second language have few or no opportunities to use it in informal situations. This is what Cummins calls Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). This is the language we use in social situations and is a stepping stone to Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) which is essential for students to succeed academically in school. Large class sizes aside, the "textbook trap" that most teachers fall into, impedes teachers from enabling any kind of meaningful language use by children in the classroom, especially spoken English.

**Technology and Language Learning**

The last few decades of education technology in India have largely restricted

innovations to glamourizing ways of "transmitting" information to students. In fact, EduSat technology became an added appendage to the teacher who was already transferring knowledge to students in the classroom. The focus since then has been on digitizing content for easy dissemination and consumption in classroom. A recent report on teaching and technology by British Council and Central Square Foundation (Motteram 2017) corroborates this view. They found that teaching with visuals and videos was the most popular mode of using technology in the classroom. One purported reason teachers gave for this was their impression that children were able to understand and retain information better. However, there is little evidence to suggest that it effectively changes the nature of learning among children.

## The Computer Lab: An Alternative Space of Language Learning

As language teachers, many of us feel that the computer lab is beyond the purview of our classrooms. We look at the computer lab as "another" space—a space to teach digital literacy skills, computer programs and even computer languages, but never the languages we speak. In fact, computer labs hold the promise of rich language learning experiences for students when teachers identify and use technology resources that allow students to be active agents of learning.

The audio output and recording functionality is a simple feature of computer technology that can be exploited to give students an immersive language experience. Currently

geared to provide English learning experiences to students, the Connected Learning Initiative (CLIx) is one such instance of using thoughtful education technology to deliver a meaning-focused English course material to high school students. Every lab session provides learners with opportunities to listen to conversational English, followed by activities that make use of interactive digital tools to improve their listening and speaking skills. The production tasks typically use audio or pictorial triggers to encourage meaningful usage of English in authentic contexts. Being mindful of collaborative learning principles, the course is designed to enable students to work in pairs at a computer terminal rather than individually. Teacher guidance and feedback on tasks are however essential to keep them motivated.

Most students are excited to be able to access spoken English material as very little English is otherwise available in their environment. In our observations, we have often seen students listen to audio clips more than once while simultaneously following the subtitles or reading the transcripts. Students appreciate the same language subtitling feature as it allows them to better understand what is being spoken.

What is most interesting to observe is the kind of talk that opens up around the listening and speaking tasks. Students talk to each other to try and understand the audio stories or conversations better. They discuss strategies to create conversations, recollect words, phrase sentences and then

record themselves. In most cases, the talk around the task is usually in the local language. However, it is interesting to note that in 100 per cent of the cases the final product, whether a story or a conversation, is in the target language. By not curtailing the number of attempts for a task, the design of the course fosters a safe space for learners to play with the language. For instance, students use the recording feature not only to speak but also to playback and listen to their audio recordings. Students describe this as a strategy to correct themselves and re-record conversations to their satisfaction.

The course scaffolds language learning by giving simple feedback to learners on tasks they attempt. Speaking tasks give learners opportunity to first listen to model conversations, pick words from a word cloud and then record their own conversations. As they progress through the sessions, students slowly begin to take charge of their own learning, and embark on a path of autonomous learning. In his book, *Mindstorms*, Papert (1980) notes,

> The presence of computers begins to go beyond first impact when it alters the nature of the learning process; for example, if it shifts the balance between transfer of knowledge to students (whether via book, teacher, or tutorial is irrelevant) and the production of knowledge by students.

In other words what we are beginning to see in CLIx classrooms is how simple technological innovations combined with a thoughtful learning design and appropriate content is putting students on a path of learning how to learn.

Let's move away from using technology to disseminate information and let us use it instead to create safe learning spaces buzzing with talk.

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