

Class-Lab Hands-on Study-Clusters for ELL (English Language Learners)

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Abstract

The concept of laboratory in Foreign Language Learning dates back to 1908 (Jonassen, 2004). The current waves of changes and trends in English Language Teaching (ELT) have reshaped the concept of 'lab' as a space. In this context, the paper introduces a new paradigm for approaching language activities. It has been named as *Class-Lab Hands-on Study-Clusters*. It centres on the understanding of 'language laboratory' in terms of the blurring boundaries between 'classroom' and 'laboratory'. The potentiality of digital multimodality and the proliferation of semiotic resources have redefined the 'lab' as a fluid space for English Language Learners. This paper introduces two new coinages validating the need to seamlessly shift between individual and cluster levels of competencies in acquiring one's core language skills. In this process, the 'lab' gets adapted as a space matching the needs of the trainer and the learner in the most convenient manner possible.

Keywords: Language laboratory, Class-Lab Hands-on Study- Clusters (CLHSC), space, classroom, *jeu composé*, *lexème libre*, compound words, multimodality, games.

Introduction

The 'lab' is a concept that has been constantly evolving as a multimodal metaphor for foreign language learners in the context of technopedagogy, automated learning systems and the latest addition of Artificial Intelligence-powered teaching and learning tools. Language Laboratory as a teaching aid can be traced to its roots at the University

of Grenoble in France. From there and then subsequently spanning over a couple of years, the language laboratory has traversed a long trajectory from its magnanimous size, complex installations and the outdated teaching methodology of continuous drilling and practising the four core language skills. Interestingly, in today's age and time, it has transformed itself into a whole new idea of 'space' in its conception as a 'multimodal metaphor' rather than a room with some computers.

As Kronenberg (2014) observes, the 'language laboratory' has transitioned to what he calls a 'language centre' encapsulating the dynamic changes of shifting technologies and the subsequent positioning of lab within the dynamic 'spaces' of convenience. According to him, "While its predecessor, the language laboratory, had a clearly defined mission and purpose, current models of language centres are multipurpose spaces that manifest themselves in very distinct ways at different institutions and locations" (pp. 1-2). Thus, the early forms of language labs emphasised the role of separate cubicles for students to practise language skills teamed up with the monitoring presence of the teacher's console. It validated its presence as an inevitable component in the language learning ecosystem in the name of 'increased learner autonomy'. But the element of peer-collaboration in language learning had been compromised. In contrast to it, the current modes of development match the fluidity of space in terms of English Language Learning in a multimodal environment. Hence, we see that socio-materiality is never compromised in the name of learner-autonomy. This is pivotal in understanding language acquisition and learning in a collaborative and cooperative manner.

Class-Lab Hands-on Study-Clusters

This paper introduces a new model of language activities that has been named as "Class-Lab Hands-on Study-Clusters". This innovative model for English Language Learners aims at reconstructing the idea of 'lab' in terms of English Language Learning by balancing the individual learner needs with teamwork and shared learning. Thereby, the individual problems of the learners are addressed without compromising the learners' collective participation in language games and similar situations.

There is a conscious attempt in using the word-formation technique of 'compounding' while naming this model of technology-aided teaching-

learning paradigm. These are explicit in the compound words, 'class-lab', 'study-cluster' and the compound adjective, 'hands-on'. In the first place, 'class-lab' should be seen as interplay between 'classroom' and 'laboratory' in terms of English Language Learning. It incorporates the fluidity of spaces and thereby underlining the need for a symbiosis, a free interaction between the two.

Taking a cue from Derrida's coinage, *jeu libre*, as the endless, unpredictable movement of meaning and interpretation within a structure, liberated from a fixed "centre" or singular truth (Derrida, 1978), the present paper introduces two coinages for English Language Learners in comprehending the one-to-one relationship between the class and the lab namely, *jeu composé* and *lexème libre*. The former, translated as 'compound game' looks at the flexibility between the two words, say class or lab and study or cluster, where such compound words intentionally reduce the boundaries and enable a free play or game which is suggestive of the features of a multimodality that shapes the teaching-learning paradigms. The second coinage, *lexème libre*, translated as 'free lexeme', refers to the basic lexical units or words that constitute such compound words in a state of 'free play'.

'Hands-on' alludes to the direct experiences that the learners draw from their language learning ecosystems, quite similar to a 'workshop'. Thus, any language activities that bring in the learners for a direct experience can be hands-on. As a skill gets polished repeatedly through direct involvement in a workshop, here, the language as a skill gets polished through interactive learning spaces and active involvement of the learners. Such an experience serves the function of a 'language lab' re-read in the current context where the primary difference with the past seems to be the absence of machines. The absence of machines can be compensated for by the use of technology in an adept manner to meet all the requirements of what Joseph Candler Hutchinson in his seminal work, *Modern Foreign Languages in High School: The Language Laboratory*, enumerates as the ten necessary things that a language laboratory needs (Hutchinson, 1961).

'Study-Clusters' reflects again the aforementioned interplay between the learning process and cluster formation where learners having similar problems in English language are brought together and given activities and games. Say for instance, some learners would find it

difficult to handle their productive skills in English while some would be facing problems with receptive skills. Hence, cluster grouping and hands-on activities can be appropriately divided and, at the same time, intersectional games that call for different cluster collaborations can also be encouraged. Such overlapping demonstrates the fluidity of spaces and the reinvention of 'language labs' forming the core component of these activities.

Some model games and methods under such activities which may be abbreviated as CLHSC are as follows:

- Making students literary characters from renowned works of fiction and asking them to interact with Artificial Intelligence powered platforms like ChatGPT in the presence of the trainer.
- Asking students to 'perform' their feedback on regular language lab activities.
- Performing self-scripted plays and poetry of maximum one page with the aid of mobile-assisted language learning.
- Evolving gamification as a tool to enhance language learning.
- The students may form LSRW clusters and interchange their roles each time between laboratory space and classroom space.
- Assessing and grading the language competencies of students in different phases like easy, moderate and advanced stages of cluster programmes that aim to build a strong community of proficient learners in academic institutions.
- Introducing the already trained students under such workshop-like cluster groups as pioneers for executing similar activities for other students where the trainer can assume or take up his or her role as a representative.

Sample Activity 1

Name of the Activity: Performing Feedback Exercise Through Focus Group Discussions and Presentations

The students are divided into groups of five or six members. Each group is given one language skill in English as the domain to handle with respect to the activities provided by the language lab software. The members of each group should be chosen on the basis of their performance in activities that are provided under the software in such

a way that the students who need improvisation in listening skills are grouped together just like writing, reading and speaking. If students need improvement in more than one skill, they are given the opportunity to prioritise one skill that they are inclined towards. As the next step, each group is given a chance to discuss as well as engage in brainstorming sessions based on their target language skill. They act as focus group discussions targeting one language skill. The diverse activities and their subsequent assessments provided in the language lab are supposed to be critically assessed and analysed by the students in a way that they can creatively give their feedback as well as make critical comments on the activities, their individual performance in the different assessments, and how they may improve. This activity takes elements from critical pedagogy as well. At the next stage, the four groups can collaborate further and expand the domain skills based on the students' needs.

Sample Activity 2

Name of the Activity: Gamification and Productive Language Making

This activity chiefly aims at improving the productive language skills such as speaking and writing by applying the gaming features to non-gaming scenarios like language learning. Thus, it can make use of teams, badges, rewards and leaderboards while requiring the students to participate in interesting speaking activities as well as writing exercises with each group giving a demo of their enlisted activities. Groups with most interesting demonstrations would be promoted to higher levels of performance. An example would be a group developing an activity on immersive language learning and performing the same or a role play where two students would enact a situation with one student being asked to narrate the details of the technical report that they have prepared beforehand. These activities blur boundaries of traditional learning contexts with respect to English language Teaching and Learning.

Discussion and Conclusion

The intersectional junctures of different forms of digital literacies uphold the need for the learner autonomy in English Language Learning. But it should not be entirely dependent on machines, deep learning or Large Language Models. We must understand that the role of emotional quotient does matter in language as a form of skill acquisition when it takes into consideration, the tone, the response from the peers and

several other factors especially in academic spaces where learners of different faculties, attitudes and dispositions come together. Thus, a flexible form of techno-pedagogic space can offer an entertaining ecosystem of language acquisition and learning that will enhance the students' confidence level in ESL or EFL. Hence, CLHSC can ideally serve the purpose of complementary toolkits and hybrid spaces that can adapt to any environment rather than the substitutionary roles of automated learning systems alone which often lead to digital fatigue. In this context, we can re-interpret the 'language laboratory' as 'spaces' adjusted to the needs of English language learners in different fields like Engineering, Medicine, Humanities, Law, Business, and many others.

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