Perspectives of integrating the Digital Dedicated Language Laboratory in Foreign Language Pedagogy, Reality or Chimera: The Case of Souk-Ahras University, Algeria

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Abstract

Technology never stops evolving and transforming our world. All people are talking about a revolution in technology that is constantly changing the way they live, they work, they communicate and the way they learn. Information and Communications Technologies have been permeating all aspects of people's lives; a fact that prompts, day after day, governments, decision makers, politicians, academicians, philosophers, researchers, and teachers to discuss their profile, hold them in high esteem and sometimes even weigh up the benefits as well as the harms. A school or a university should reflect the way students live in their real world.
Traditionally, research has subscribed to the belief that a language laboratory is useful when the teacher knows how to use it skillfully. Such competence and craftsmanship must not be swamped and disrupted by fear, reluctance, or ignorance. It is true that some teachers and school authorities are disinclined to give it a try because, rightly or wrongly, they think that it will not work. Yet, two teachers who stand in awe of the new teaching experience can have totally different considerations when using and exploiting the same materials. The question concerns the way these aids are used.
Full implementation of digital laboratories in teaching and learning a foreign language depends very tightly upon a certain number of determining factors among which the educational policy of the higher authorities (government), the institutional vision (school /university), individual teachers' philosophy and practice in adopting and adapting this new environment, and learners' ability, and motivation.

1. Introduction

There is a growing body of literature that recognizes the fact that second and foreign language learning and teaching renews and improves itself under three basic ways. The first one concerns innovation through change on teaching approaches and methods. The second aspect of renewal deals with innovation through language-related sciences and research i.e. highlighting its multidisciplinary nature. And the third core dimension is about technological innovation. Harmer (2001) observed that there is a close and vital symbiosis between teaching methods and technology use. In fact, teaching aids starting from the coursebook, the board, and the chalk to the overhead projector, the micro-computer, and language laboratory are referred to as technology (from the Greek technē meaning skill or craft) Technology evolves for the human mind is never satisfied with what is occurring around. There are always new habits, ideas, codes and behaviors that intensify our need to new skills, methods, and systems. Technology is everywhere, accessible to everyone.
Today's learners are digital natives or New-millennium learners. They use new technologies not only to learn and work but to socialize, get information, and entertain as well. They are prone to explore and exploit them in unprecedented manner and rate. It is a sterling fact that conducted us to reconsider our viewpoints vis-à-vis these learners, their needs and potentialities, and the urgent implementation of new technological facilities in foreign language classrooms. The present research paper is thoroughly allocated to digital dedicated language laboratories. We will define and situate it in relation to the evolution of philosophical theories and approaches as well as ensuing teaching methods and procedures. A description of language laboratory integration policy efforts at the governmental level, university/school level, and individual teacher-learner level is also necessary.

2. The digital dedicated language laboratory

2.1. Definition

These days, a considerable interest has been taken in the technological classroom. It is no more a futuristic vision but a classroom for today where 'all computing resources are networked and integrated to make information sources available to everyone who needs them.' (Heide & Henderson, 1994, p. 14). The digital dedicated language laboratory is a technology classroom. It is a setting where language is taught and learnt differently from a classical classroom. It must be equipped appropriately

to deal solely with language teaching and learning. A teacher of biology cannot exploit its facilities in order to make experimentations; neither does a physics or chemistry teacher. Henceforth, it is a dedicated language laboratory. If inadvertently or on purpose, the tools are not exploited, the laboratory becomes a dull, lifeless décor where learners sigh with discontent while time flies.

A very fundamental characteristic of a language laboratory is sharing. People share the space, the equipment as well as information, and results by working together. The term 'digital' refers to the fact that data and information are generated, stored, and processed via a new electronic technology. We can speak of digital satellites, television, recordings, computers, and tablets. Henceforth, today's language laboratories are said to be digital because, teachers and students can use all the facilities.

An effective use of a language laboratory depends on five components: space, teacher, learner, content, and media. For that very reason, the classical pedagogic triangle has to be reexamined so that the classroom will be in the foreground and the whole teaching and learning process will result in a pedagogical four-sided pyramid instead of a triangle as it is shown in the following figure:

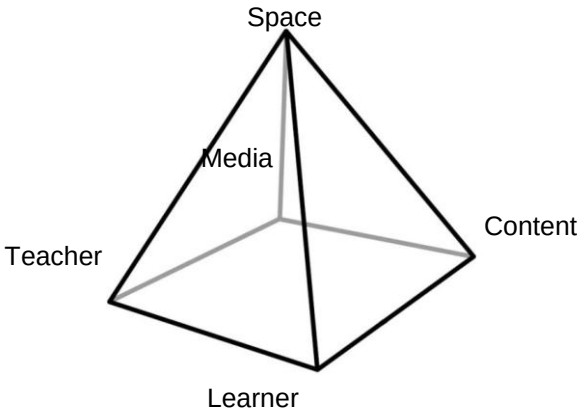

Fig.1. the Pedagogical Pyramid

'Space' is put at the top of the pyramid in order to reinforce the notion that it is dedicated i.e. it is made for just one purpose and the four other components revolve around it much like satellites. They coexist for a unique goal which is learning language.

Furthermore, it is important to claim that the DDLL is a three-pronged concept implying firstly, that the technology used is digital and exemplified by the computer; secondly it is used as a tool, as a means and not an end in itself and thirdly it is exploited in the very formal context of foreign language teaching and learning.

2.2. History of DDLLs

Most researchers who dealt with the birth and development of language laboratories agreed on the fact that this evolution goes hand in hand with the most popular second language teaching theories, approaches, and methods. There is a kind of balance between pedagogy, linguistic content, and technology (McCarthy, 1999)

The language laboratory progressed in three main phases: behavioustic, communicative, and integrative. In 1955, the term language laboratory became a recognized technical term more particularly with the outstanding development of the tape recorder using magnetic tapes. New teaching methods emerged and the principles of using the language laboratory were very well understood. During this period of time, the language laboratory was on the structuralist / behaviorist theory. Students imitate the sound they hear and receive a positive reinforcement. They practice new items until they are solidly grounded in their systems and build up habits of correct language use.

In the late 1970s and early 1990s, the behaviouristic theory came under criticism and consequently language teaching specialists showed more interest in Communicative Language Teaching stressing on the fact that "the value of the language laboratory lies not so much in the kind of equipment you have, but in the way you make use of it." (Croft, 1972: 396) The so-called Digital Computer-Assisted Language Laboratory was born and a comprehensive set of principles have been developed for Communicative CALL.

The Communicative CALL, in its turn, came under criticism by the end of the 1980s. Critics felt that the computer was being used in an ad hoc and disconnected fashion. (Kenning & Kenning 1990). Language learning must include a communicative context done in an integrative manner. This led to a new perspective called Integrative Technology-Enhanced Language Laboratory.

2.3. Integration policy of DDLLs

According to Davies (2008), the whole process of implementing language laboratories in schools and universities consists of three main interrelated and complementary levels:

a) At the institutional level.

ICTs are viewed as central to raising the standards of achievements in education for all students. Consequently, substantial sums of money have been invested to equip thousands of schools and universities with new machines, networked language laboratories and free-access centers. Several acts such as the famous National Defense Education Act (1958) in the United States, the New Deal for British Schools in 1998, and the Common European Framework in 2001 have been passed.

As far as the Algerian context is concerned, the ongoing policy of reforms relies upon the urgent introduction and use of the latest ICTs in all Algerian universities. Some partnerships with international institutions such UNESCO, and ALESCO took concrete form during these few last years. Statistically, all 48 universities and 10 centers have been equipped with DDLLs placed at the disposal of students of foreign languages.

b) At the university level.

At this level, a policy of a successful integration of DDLLs presupposes the existence of a strategic university technology planning. This latter must include not only what will be done, but also how it will be done. In fact, a good and strategic plan of technology integration within a university is a whole process of change. It is more than just adding technology to an existing learning environment. It requires university agents, administrators, teachers and learners, to change their ideas about how teachers teach and how students learn.

c) At the teacher level.

At the university, for most of foreign language teachers, the integration of new technologies into their teaching is a tradition. They have always embraced them in a way that is likely to improve learning. Yet, many others believe that they would never become a mainstream activity. (Davies 2008). They are disinclined to give it a try because of two main reasons. First, they think, rightly or wrongly, that DDLLs will not work. If the conventional audio-lingual laboratory has proven serious limitations, the same thing will likely occur with the new models. Second, teachers have their own beliefs and theories about how people learn languages and they have their own favorite teaching methods. So, if they see the DDLL as an imposition by colleagues or bureaucracy, there is every chance they will respond negatively. To overcome such attitudinal problems, Davies (2008) thinks teachers need training, information and clear demonstration that the use of DDLLs enhances existing teaching by leading students to better understanding, manipulation or use of languages.

In addition to the three levels of satisfactory or successful integration discussed above, McCarthy (1999) listed two key factors, time and students' motivation and attitude. The constraint of time is conspicuous in the need for teachers to become acquainted with the medium i.e. developing their own technical skills, keeping abreast of technology, reading manuals, and examining critically available software. The second key factor dealing with the efficiency of learning within a DDLL context, presupposes the generation of positive attitudes on the part of learners.

2.4. Case of Souk-Ahras University, Algeria

In 2008, the department of foreign languages at Mohamed-Cherif Messadia University has been equipped with a new digital dedicated language laboratory, a SANAKO 100 Lab. Since then, it has never been exploited but rather used as an ordinary classroom. All students asserted that they have never manipulated such facility. Instructions not to touch them were very clear. As for teachers, they argue that they do not have any idea on how to exploit the DDLL for three reasons: (1) they did not get any training; (2) they were instructed not to try it, and (3) the new learning/teaching model does not conform to their ideas, and so they choose to go on with the conventional teaching practices.

3. Conclusion

The present paper aimed to explore the perspectives of implementing the DDLL as a valuable part of foreign language instruction. As far as the Algerian context is concerned, change policy is a reality in terms of logistics. However, teachers and administrators are far to be fully committed and involved. They are reluctant to give it a try. Practically, the DDLL is a delusion and a pipe dream. Perhaps we are waiting for Bellerophon to rally round and help us kill the frightening Chimera

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