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Technology Enhanced English Language Labs in Multilinguistic Public Schools in India – Pilot Intervention

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Abstract: Technology in the 21st Century is inescapable. However, in India, the use of it is mostly disassociated with school core subjects. In an attempt to explore the utility and integration of technology in language learning and construction, Technology Enhanced Language Labs (TELL) have been implemented in selected government schools in India. Three approaches have been used in three distinct states with native speakers of respective regional languages. In this paper, an attempt has been made to draw parallels from the different approaches of implementation of these Technology Enhanced Language Labs (TELL) for non-native English students in India. This qualitative study tries to establish common positives, opportunities and challenges in TELL in reference to different stakeholders involved in the process. It also acknowledges the differences emerging from regional realities. And that it does influence the learning by creating different environmental experiences for each learner towards English language development. Technology is used more as an enhancer, not as a mere medium to interact.

Keywords: Technology enhanced Language labs, India, multilinguistic classrooms

1. Introduction

English is one of the official languages of The Government of India; but less than 0.1% of the population are native English speakers. The Supreme Court of India in December 2015 ruled that English would remain as the language of the Supreme Court and High Courts, making the language more relevant. However, learning this language with extremely minimal access is challenging for students from multilingual environments. Though students in secondary schools in India study English as second language, this language continues to be difficult to master. The English teachers fail to provide environment to develop proficiency and communication skills. The 'National Focus Group on Teaching of English', 2006 clearly states the need for input – rich environments for language development. But a typical English class in India only reflects literary inputs of textbooks or some limited access to libraries with seldom any use of media support. In 21st Century; paradigm shifts that leverage the advances of technology, have occurred in every sphere of life. In Education, meaningful use of technology is essential for optimal outcomes. Thus, as a rich English environment exposure to students, Technology Enabled Language labs (TELL) were introduced in selected government schools to help teachers differentiate instruction, adapt activities towards language learning and facilitate the building of communication skills among students without the fear of making mistakes. It is expected to assist English learning through engaging student experiences.

2. The Intervention

In an attempt to provide opportunities to non-native English students from challenged rural backgrounds with complex linguistic environments, TELL was piloted in three different locations with limited exposure to technology. With electricity and connectivity as perennial problems computer Labs were set up within Government schools, and administered by school teachers with support from community facilitators. The modules used are part of a program called the 'Connected

Learning Initiative' (CLIx), a collaboration between Tata Trusts - India, Massachusetts Institute of Technology – USA and Tata Institute of Social Sciences – India. The program offers scalable and sustainable quality teaching and learning not only in Communicative English but also Mathematics and Science; it is currently implemented in approximately 475 schools across India. In this paper, the discussion is on the implementation of English modules in TELL pilots specified below (Table 1). School computer labs were upgraded as per the requirements of the modules which sit on a platform that can be installed on stand-alone devices or accessed through a local area network. Accordingly, the modules were installed and hardware equipment (splitters and headphones) provided.

The results discussed are qualitative, based on classroom observation, focus group discussion, field notes and project reports.

Table 1:

Details of the three pilots

Location*	Languages Spoken	Application Models	No of children
Yadgir, Karnataka	Official Language: Kanada Dialect: Lambani, telegu	Within School Timetable Using computer labs Ongoing (90 minutes/week)	850
Bahraich, Uttar Pradesh	Official Language: Hindi Dialect: Awadhi	Summer Camp during vacations – Using Laptops One time (=15 sessions of 2 hours/day)	15
Nalbari, Assam	Official Language: Assamese, Other linguistic groups: Bengali & Bodo	Within School Timetable – Using computer labs One Time (~ 40 sessions)	90

*The three listed states are in the South, North & East regions respectively, where the linguistic environment is three-fold. The language at home often differs from the medium of instruction in school with English adding a third dimension.

3. Key Results and Discussion

3.1 Collective Results across Pilot Locations

In spite of the differences intervention modes, the pilots had similar effects on the learning environment. Though it is too early to comment on the change in learning levels of the students, this section describes the commonalities that these pilots have drawn together on school environment.

3.1.1 Infrastructure Development and Usage

The ICT@Schools program of the Government of India works on establishing computer labs in schools but many of these labs remain dormant. These pilots have stimulated repairing systems of 13 computer labs for facilitating the implementation. For the camp based pilot, 10 laptops were provided from the pool of hardware already available. During the TELL sessions, the computer labs become vibrant and alive with children speaking, listening, recording and creating stories through the modules, leading to language learning using technology.

3.1.2 Teacher Professional Development

TELL as a method of teaching is comparatively new to the government school teachers who have had little or no exposure to technology. Also, most Indian classrooms see a traditional form of teaching-learning involving a lecture mode. The pilots have inspired and trained 15 language teachers and 6 community facilitators on 'Using CLIx for English language development' to develop their own capacities and explore the use of Technology in Education.

3.1.3 Creating Student Agency

The pilots displayed student ownership over the TELL which broaden their exposure to English language learning. They considered this as not a curricular requirement and beyond for self-growth. Students have expressed the importance of the global nature of the language, and that TELL is a process that could help them learn this global language. Currently 850 children in Yadgir, Karnataka and 100 students in Assam and Uttar Pradesh have experienced CLIx sessions during the pilots.

3.1.4 Input – Rich Environment

The main pillar of these modules comprises of interesting audio-visual stories in local contexts and familiar accents. Accompanied with sub-titles and post – scripts to address every type of input for the students, these stories create an atmosphere of active learning with tasks for communication, collaboration and comprehension. Students can verbally record their responses to questions, giving them an opportunity to play back and self-correct. Designed for learners to set their own pace of progress and participate in peer feedback, it establishes a model environment for Communicative English language learning within the backdrop of non-English multilinguistic groups.

3.2 Differences and Challenges

In spite of similarities, certain differences were witnessed. In one site, hands-on non-technology based activities e.g., language games were conducted as ice breakers, which seems to have created enthusiasm to work on TELL. Educators' Scaffolding differed as well. These sites also exhibited certain perennial challenges of maintenance of infrastructure and power supply, when there are no dedicated funds. Non-native English speaking educators who are part of the multilinguistic culture, with limited professional development and basic discomfort with technology add to the difficulties. Regardless of the sessions being in English, the mode of instruction often is in the local language.

4. Conclusion

The TELL pilots have investigated a pertinent and evolving pedagogy of using technology in core subjects. It has created a platform for students from underprivileged backgrounds, to use technology in language development by providing space, opportunity and time with special focus on listening and speaking with contextual relevance. The pilot has provided an opportunity to school administrators, teachers and students to work along with NGO partners and technical personnel, in trying innovative solutions to achieve educational goals. The evolving role of the teachers as facilitators is evident. In the process, a collaborative model has evolved around language learning.

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