HOW ICT CAN BE USED EFFECTIVELY TO ENHANCE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN TERTIARY EDUCATION: A STUDY FOCUSING ON SPEAKING AND LISTENING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

English is a lingua franca (ELF) which is critical to tertiary education since a substantial amount of learning and teaching resources are available in English. This information era demands that undergraduates be armed with language competency if they are to reach the global pool of knowledge and technology. Sri Lanka has one of the best literacy rates in South Asia, but it does not reflect theinformation and communication technology (ICT) literacy in the country. This paper discusses how ICT can be used effectively in tertiary education, to enhance listening and speaking skills of the Sri Lankan undergraduate. Many academics and researchers have proposed different methodologies to learn English using existing technologies; i.e. educational software, CDs, DVDs, videos, e-mails, internet etc. However, the Sri Lankan undergraduate still lacks competency in English, especially in the event of speaking and listening, as only reading and writing is given prominence in the local school curriculum. Therefore, English competency is still a challenge for most of the students at tertiary level. Hence, authors propose a remedial analysis and framework to overcome the incompetency in speaking and listening. This paper focuses on the undergraduates of the Sri Lanka institute of Information Technology whose medium of instruction had been both L1 and L2.Quantitative and qualitative parameters will be used in the study. The main Methodologies used will be Questionnaires, interviews to constitute a framework in order to enhance speaking and listening skills thus enhancing the learner autonomy considerably.

Key words: ICT, L1 (first language), L2 (second language), listening skills, speaking skill

1. INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have had remarkable impact on all aspects of our lives, and education is not an exception. With the rapid development in society, computer technology and network now play a more prominent role in facilitating language learning. The traditional teaching and learning methods, which dismiss the practice of communication and application skills, are considered to be obsolete.The English Curriculum compiled by the English Language Teaching Unit of the Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology for undergraduate states that English language skills should be encouraged, with listening and speaking given more prominence.

The Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT) aims at enabling students to select materials suited to their individual needs, compensates for the limitations of the teaching of listening and speaking in conventional classrooms and tracks down, records and checks the progress of learning. ELS is a new learning environment established in response to the requirement of the reform in English learning, teaching and the needs of practicing .The purpose of this paper is to investigate, interpret and analyze the methods used by the undergraduates in order to enhance their English Skills and to provide suggestions as how to use ICT more productively to enhance their Speaking and Listening Skills.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

All the 15 universities and the three campuses [1] and all the other tertiary institutes offer English Language proficiency courses for their undergraduates irrespective of the Medium of Instruction of their degree courses. This reflects the importance of English Language as it acts as the vehicular language and plays a pivotal role in the global job market and the academia. These English proficiency courses

offered by the local universities vary extensively in terms of the curricular, pedagogy and the learning outcomes. Even though some amount of research had been carried out with regard to teaching English Language at university level there is still a noticeable research gap to be bridged as the issues and implications in the event of teaching English language vary in the heterogeneous student communities. The need for more research is more pronounced in the event of improving Speaking and Listening skills.

If one examines the Sri Lankan university student population, it is a significant minority that can call themselves competent English users even though they had studied English for thirteen years in the school system. In fact, only 10% of the population [2] is said to be competent users of the language. This implies that there is a fundamental impediment either in the pedagogical approach or the learning styles adopted by the ESL learners.

The authors observed that the majority of the Student population in this institute lack competency in English speaking skills and their Listening skills are below average. This scenario can be co-related to the insignificance attributed to those two skills at national level exams i.e. O/L and A/L since only Reading and Writing skills are tested. With the dawn of the ICT era the concept of language learning has been revolutionized and according to the ESL theorist Stephen Krashen [3]

"Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill."
"Acquisition requires meaningful interactions in the target language – natural communication - in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding."
"In the real world, conversations with sympathetic native speakers who are willing to help the acquirer understand are very helpful."

Even though computer aided learning is improving speaking and listening skills of the ESL learners, it has been met with skepticism. Thus the authors' intention was to examine the methods adopted by learners to learn English and whether ICT has been used in an effective manner. This study should expose the shortcomings of the methods used by our undergraduates in enhancing their English Speaking and listening skills and suggest some approaches of integrating computers in to the process of learning.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study took place at Sri Lanka Institute of information Technology, with fifty, first year undergraduates as the sample. The authors conducted a preliminary interview to determine on students' attitude towards learning the four aspects of English. A majority found Speaking difficult when compared to writing and reading. However, they scaled Listening as the least important of the four skills. Subsequently, a questionnaire was carried out to gather further information regarding students' computer literacy, awareness on online learning methods and their attitude towards technology assisted language learning with a special focus on Speaking and Listening.

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods to interpret and analyze the data collected from the pre and post listening test, a questionnaire study on a total number of 100 Communication Skills (CS) students from SLIIT. The experiment was conducted in the CS class room of SLIIT. The new autonomous learning system has been installed on the computers in the lab, which is the English Learning System (ELS) with the intention of helping students achieve the objectives set by the requirements in the system. The teaching and learning resources of various kinds have been designed specifically for SLIIT undergraduates. The teaching system contains two sections in connection with Listening and Speaking. The Listening and Speaking part of ELS mainly offers two forms of exercises: listening exercise, and oral exercise. There is ELS course companion, listening CD/DVD, and text book, which are coherent, inter-related entities enabling the learners' use of multimedia facilities to the fullest while the teachers act as facilitators.

Authors conducted two classes. Both the controlled class and the experimental class were randomly chosen from first year of the institute and were both taught by one teacher. The controlled class with 50 students in total followed the routine learning mode in the conventional classroom, while the experimental classes with 50 students in total have 4 English classes per week, 2 periods for Listening and Speaking in the conventional classroom and the other 2 periods in the ELS. Both classes have similar listening level since they were selected to learn in these two classes, they had a listening test using the most recent IELTS listening material as the test paper. Their listening score is quite similar. The experimental class started their college English learning in the ELS at the very beginning of the first

semester, while the controlled class had their English course in the conventional classroom.

Materials and Activities: The experimental classes included resources, like BBC programs, movies, CDs, satellite TV programs, ELS materials in the computer and materials online for practicing listening, speaking, communicating, and information searching, and relaxing. There is also a material store for courseware to be downloaded through moodle course web, experience exchange, learning guide, and score inquiry. There are a variety of interaction

Table 1: Facilities Used By the Students

Facilities	Numbers	Percentage %
Internet	80	80
e-mail, Newspapers and magazines	40	40
CD, VCD, DVD	65	65
TV set	56	56
Other facilities	25	25

forms: student—computer, student—computer—student, students—teacher, students—computer—teacher.

4. RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Test Analysis and Findings

1) Both the experimental class and the controlled class participated in the listening test at the end of the semester. IELTS listening test was conducted in the same day in both classes to test students' listening skills. The author converts the score of the listening part from 142 points out of 710 (total score of listening) to that in percentage (20%) to make the data analysis more comprehensible. The test result shows that the experimental class has a higher mean score (19.284) than the controlled class (17.632). However, it is too early to say the experimental class did perform better than the controlled class. To find out more objective evidence that the experimental class made more progress in their learning practice in the ELS, the independent sample T-test between on-line time and on-line score in the tests provided by the system about the experimental class was also carried out and analyzed. The result shows that the correlation between on-line time and on-line score of listening is significant, thus they have a positive correlation (0.51837), therefore, it can be concluded that the more time students spent in the center

practicing, the more progress they made in Listening and Speaking.

4.2. Questionnaire

The close ended question collected the information from 162 students to find out how they used currently available facilities within the institute to improve their listening and speaking skills. Table 1: shows the fact that the facilities are the most important factors for language learners; definitely internet plays an important role within the institute. The open-ended section gathered individual students' opinions about the major problems they encounter in their learning practice in Speaking and Listening and their suggestions. With the response rate of 95% (143 in total), the results and percentage contrast are shown in the tables below.

Table 2: Percentage contrast concerning students' opinions of CS in the ELS

I enjoy ELS in the CS	26.47% vs. 40.56%
I love to drill language skills in different ways including ELS	55.15% vs. 50.44%
I dislike the new way of learning.	18.38% vs. 9.09%
ELS is more effective than traditional ways of learning	78.68% vs. 92.30%
I am not used to learning in the ELS	25.74% vs. 9.79%
I do not have a clear idea of ELS learning system	25.74% vs. 9.79%

Taking into account all the factors affecting the learning in the ELS, the students involved in the questionnaire study came up with at least two suggestions: a) there should be more teacher guidance and instructions in terms of the learning system and technical problems; b) Students should find more time to get exposed to the resources in the ELS and practice language skills regularly.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

After analyzing the open- ended questionnaires and the students' opinions presented, the following can be recommended.

- Additional supervision for listening and speaking activities

- Coherent learning objectives
- Monitoring of learner behavior
- Training for the facilitators

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the ELS played an active role in improving the students' Listening and Speaking ability. Learners are willing to accept and adjust to the brand-new learning environment, even if they have difficulty in this respect, they are also inclined to take advantage of the ample information and learning resources in the ELS, which can be used to compensate for the inadequacy in their Listening and Speaking training in traditional ways. As the findings reveal the students have not been using ICT to its maximum, hence not reaching their optimum potential in Speaking and Listening. This new learning environment provides an online platform for ESL learners where their Spoken Discourse/listening tasks can be practiced at their own pace and time. This practice reinforces learner autonomy which ultimately leads the students to become confident and competent users of English thus proving the effectiveness of integrating ICT into the learning environment of the ESL classroom.

7. REFERENCES

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