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Teaching Phonetics to Engineering First Year Students through CALL Lab: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

We, teachers, face so many challenges and possibilities in the use of Multimedia Digital Language Laboratories with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) facilities in engineering and technology institutes in India. Our traditional teaching methodologies (the chalk and talk method of teaching) has become obsolete and differentiated learning has become the norm of the day. Since teachers and learners today are looking beyond the traditional approaches to language learning, the methods adopted by language teachers must be continuously updated according to the needs of the learners. In this paper, an attempt is made to study and analyse the problems Engineering I year students are facing especially while learning Phonetics through CALL lab. Two major problems have been identified and discussed: 1-less interest or no interest in learning phonetics and 2-learning phonetics in a way that does not support the purpose of language and communication-as an end in itself. In this context, few useful strategies to create interest in the subject are suggestedto provide direction to both teachers and learners in the use of CALL facilities and the resources available to them such as Sky Pronunciation Suite(SPS) and English pronunciation Dictionary (EPD) as possible solutions. The solutions discussed here actually aim at helping learners with comprehensible input which may eventually help them to Internalise all these aspects of English speech rather than storing them up in their short-term memories where they will be quickly forgotten.

Introduction

Communication skills have gained great importance in recent times. Most of the professional colleges in India have established language labs to meet the insatiable demand for good communication skills. The English language, once considered as a subject to increase the percentage of marks, has now emerged as a skill essential to be successful in career and professional development. Jenson (2000) states that employers are looking for a number of new competencies coupled with an enhanced ability to communicate. In this backdrop, almost every professional college across Hyderabad has set up language labs to cater to this growing communicative need and to equip their learners with the required skills. English language laboratory is synonymous with multimedia lab, interactive lab and Computer Assisted Language Learning(CALL) Lab. The objective of these labs is more or less the same. They focus mainly on the two language learning skills Listening and Speaking. The prescribed lab syllabus includes awide range of activities and is mainly divided into two parts: Phonetics and interactive skills. Part-1, Phonetics includes the study of phonemic sounds, stress and intonation while part-2, interactive skills include public

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speaking, Jam, Role Play, Group Discussion, Debate etc. All these activities aim at providing enough practice to the learners in developingAural-oral skills in tandem. However, the CALL lab is mainly used to teach phonetics and its different aspects. It provides an awesome opportunity for students to learn and internalise the English Phonemic sounds, Stress and Intonation through CALL course material such asSky Pronunciation Suite(SPS)andEnglish Pronunciation Dictionary(EPD). These modules are infact suggested by the OsmaniaUniversity to which our college Muffakham College of Engineering and Technology and several others in Hyderabad are affiliated. Ease, live Action English and others modules are also used besides SPS and EPD in most of the Engineering colleges inHyderabad.

Problems and challenges

Although these modules focus on different aspects of spoken discourse of the language such as pronunciation, accent and intonation, I have always felt that students need more guidance in the use of these resources. The engineering students (I year) initially get excited to know about the English laboratory and wonder what kind of experiments they might be doing in the English Lab. Most learners enjoy the interactive lab sessions and love to interact with their classmates as they never had a chance to do so in their intermediate course. However, the phonetics part(phonemic sounds, transcriptionand stress marking) do not receive the same attention as interactive skills here because they had already tried their hands at it earlier in their intermediate but to little avail. As they find it very difficult to grasp, they always skip that part happily becausethe intermediatequestion paper-final examination offers ample choice.

Teaching English as a SecondLanguage to non-native speakers itself is a challenge.One of the biggest hurdles in teaching pronunciation is what is known as L1 interference or Mother Tongue Influence(MTI).A teacher usually faces two major problems while handling I year lab sessions besides many others. The firstchallenge for the teacher is creating interest in what has already lost its charm (phonetics) and the second one is to shake off their mother tongue influence which is so deeply embeddedin theirconsciousness. This paper while

discussing all these problems, would also suggest few strategies and methodologies useful for building interest in learners through the CALL lab and the suggested material **Sky Pronunciation Suite** and **English Pronunciation Dictionary**. These strategies were developed and used at Muffakham Jah College of Engineering and Technology, Hyderabad to teach phonetics to B.E. I year students.

Possible Solutions

Creating Interest

The beauty of English Language lies in its pronunciation

First and the foremost step is to discuss the importance of English language and itspronunciation with regard to its acceptability and intelligibility. This can be done by explaining what role pronunciation plays in making our communication effective, intelligible and free from MTI.As most learners take pronunciation for granted, they should be explained the strong co-relation between English communication skills and its pronunciation. Since English is a stress-timed language, not all the syllables in a word are stressed. Stress and pronunciation go hand in hand. Similarly, not all words in a sentence are stressed. Only important words signalling meaning are made prominent in a sentence. All these features and especially the Rhythm and Intonation (The rise and fall of the pitch)lend beauty to English language and play a crucial role in conveying emotions, feelings and mood of a person. This may provide all the more reason to the learners to be conscious about the use of these features and thereby avoiding wrong or mispronunciation which may cause embarrassment.

Spelling is poor guide to pronunciation

Secondly, teachers can provide learners with enough reason to create interest in phonetics. This can be done by explaining the problem of non-correspondence between the sounds of English speech and the letters of English alphabet. In other words, there is no one-to-one relationship between them. The Englishlanguagehas 44 sounds but it has only 24 letters. This means that there are more number of sounds than letters. To make this point simple examples can be cited from a day-to-day language where same letters are used to reflect different sounds. For Example**mission,same, vision,**

busy. In this set of words, the same letter "S" reflects differentsounds./ʃ/, /s/, /ʒ/ and /z/ respectively. On contrary to this there are words in which different letters reflect the same sound. For instance**: kind, quarrel,** and**chemistry.** In this set of words, different letters **k, q, and c**reflect the same sound **/k/**. Thus, we can assert that pronunciation cannot be mastered just by learning to spell for many English words are pronounced differently than they are spelt. A teacher can cite so many such examples from the day to day language in order to create reason and interest in learners.

Life-longlearning and use

Another important reason which can possibly trigger interest is highlighting the advantage of learning phonetics "**Life-longlearning and use".** Since the English language has emerged as a global language, it is quite impossible to imagine anything without it. Everything ranging from social media, the internet to informal and formal situations, English is indispensable. In the course of life, we come across so many new words that are difficult to pronounce or we just do not know their pronunciation. One obvious reason for this is, its potential to grow. It has extravagantly borrowed words fromalmost every language of the world. And this poses a serious problem to a learner. Here exactly where phonetics comes to his rescue. If learners are familiar with all the sounds and their symbols they can easily figure out its pronunciation by looking it up in a dictionary as most modern dictionaries provide pronunciation guidelines besides meaning and usage.

The above-mentionedproblems and facts may be discussed with the learners to gain their interest in the subject which in turn makes our job easier. Having gained their interest it is now time to implement strategies which can really benefit learners using the available resources. One such strategy which has yieldedfruitful results is suggested below to provide assistance to teachers in this direction.

Brief and interactive Discussions

As mentioned earlier, most colleges use SPS and EPD as a tool to teach pronunciation, stress etc. through CALL lab. It is customary to start with the first topic " introduction to English phonetics" which

serves as a basis for understanding basics of phonetics, technical words and different aspects of the spoken discourse of the language. However, the explanation should be kept brief so that learners do not get bored and lose interest. While doing so, lecturing must be avoided and the lab sessions are to be made interactive and two-way.

The CALL Lab

Learners begin to learn to practice all the phonemic sounds inthe second topic "The Sound system of English" which requires conscious efforts by learners as well as teachers. Here where effective methodologies must be used to help learners identify and learn all the 44 phonemic sounds of English speech using CALL lab. The following steps would help:

Step-1: abrief discussion of all the vowel sounds; starting with short, long and diphthongs. Learners should be encouraged to take notes making a table with three columns as given below.

No .	Phonemic symbol	Examples.
1	e	Egg, hen, pen.

All the vowels (short,long and diphthongs) may be recorded in the similar fashion in separate tables.

Sky Pronunciation Suite (SPS)

Step-2: As SPS offers excellent practice in vowels, consonants, stress,intonation etc., we can now have them compared their notes with the sounds and symbols on SPS by clicking each phonemic symbol. This way, learners can get to know the individual sounds and their examples in words and finally can also take a test matching the sound with the symbol and vice versa.However, there is one constraint to developing complete comprehension of phonemic sounds for SPS does not offer a wide range of exercises of sentence type which are essential for internalising these sounds. Moreover, learners find it very difficult to relate individual sounds with their corresponding letters in a word or in a sentence.Meunier(2002) advocates the use of learner data in class room, and suggests that "exercises such as comparing learner and native speaker data and analysing errors in learner-language will help students to notice gaps between their interlanguage and language they are learning"

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English Pronunciation Dictionary (EPD)

Step-3: To overcome this problem we can ask them to use EPD alongside SPS. Both the modules should be used simultaneously as EPD provides awide range of exercises on short and long vowels and diphthongs. In an EPD exercise, a particularsyllableis underlined in a word. After listening to the sentence learners are supposed to choose the right option from the given phonemic symbols. Such exercises can be taken after practising all the three types.This would not only help them identify the individual sounds but also to relate them with their corresponding letters in a word and in a sentence. Thus by practising both SPS and EPD in tandem, learners can easily learn and internalise all the phonemic sounds of English speech.

Example:An apple a day keeps the doctor away
Options : 1) /ə/ 2) /I/ 3)/U/,4)/e/5)/æ/

Before making a choice, learners can go back to SPS which is kept open next window and once again listen to the individual vowel sounds to confirm their choice.Similarly, they can also come back to EPDto listen to the given sentence any number of times by clicking the speaker icon next to it. Thus, by toggling between SPS and EPD learners can easily identify and learn to relate sounds with words used in a sentence.

Consonant sounds

Most consonant sounds are represented using the same symbol as that of their letters for example: / P/ = pen, /l/=long. However, certain consonants use symbols other than their own, for example: / θ/, /ʃ/,/ᵑ/ etc. for sounds**t, s,** and **ing** respectively**.** This poses a serious problem to learners as they find it very difficult torelate these odd symbols with their corresponding sounds. A better co-relation between such sounds and symbols can be ensured by using the same method i.e. using SPS and EPD together. This method holds good for learning other aspects of phonetics such as number of syllables, stress marking intonation etc.

Conclusion

Most students consider Phonetics uninteresting and tiresome.Creating interest in the subject which is considered dry and boring is surely a formidable task for a teacher. The real challenge is to bring such students from a state of alienation, frustration and resignation to that of involvement and motivation. In such a situation a teacher has to have a lot of patience and perseverance. Instead of adopting the run of the mill,cliched approach to teaching, a teacher should adopt a dynamic approach; he or she should innovate and improvise, and create interest in the learners to move beyond a motivation that simply desires to pass a test or an exam to one that views language as a key to unlock opportunities.

Studying only the individual sounds may not provide comprehensible input unless they are learnt in a way that supports the purpose of language and communication, not as an end in itself.

If a teacher can effectively provide comprehensible input to learners as discussed in this paper coupled with the resources available such as CALL and multimedia lab, teaching pronunciation will no more be a daunting task. This may help them eventually internaliseall these aspects of English speech rather than storing them up in their short-term memories where they will be quickly forgotten.

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