



Language Laboratory as an Instrument for Active Learning of a University Student.

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Abstract

The principle of second language active learning can be significantly enhanced by application of the latest technology within the framework of university language laboratories. Computer assistance together with the widely offered language software (plus other supporting means and techniques) are likely to greatly influence both the power of instruction and the motivation of students so that a climate of positive interaction is created. The long-lasting exposure to the laboratory active learning environment should result in all-round improvement of the university graduates' endowment with active foreign language skills, which, in turn, would increase his/her chances to participate in international study programs, and cope with the growing saturation of the labour market. A positive side effect might be an increase of applicants for a particular university.

Key words

Active learning, instructional process, dynamic learning environment, empowerment, motivation, technology-assisted teaching techniques, language teaching programs, teacher-pupil-computer interaction, language laboratories.

Foreign language literacy is undoubtedly one of the crucial factors for a university student to be able to obtain a scholarship abroad or lucrative job after graduating. The rate of demand for graduates from certain universities by national and supranational companies, as well as a magnet attracting potential university applicants to make the right choice is, among others, the level and quality of teaching foreign languages.

One of the principle approaches of language teaching as well as an important precondition for practicing all the aspects of a language is *active learning*. Active learning refers to the level of engagement by the student in the instructional process. An active learning environment requires students, and the teacher, to commit to a dynamic partnership in which both share a vision of a responsibility for *instruction*.

In such an environment students learn content, develop conceptual knowledge, and acquire language through a discovery-oriented approach in which the pupil is not only engaged in the activity but is also concerned with the *goal* of the activity. Essential to this approach is the view of the pupil as “responsible for discovering, constructing and creating something new”.

Active learning derives its theoretical basis from cognition theorists such as Paolo Freire, whose main pedagogical philosophy revolves around the idea that instruction is most effective when situated “within a student’s own knowledge”. In an active learning environment the students should gain a “sense of empowerment”. To pursue this theme, such a method or instrument must be employed which elicits the kind of natural interest in the pupil (so desired by every teacher) – the student’s motivation.

As students of technical universities are presently literally “connected” to the computers, the introduction of *technology-assisted teaching techniques* seems to be a powerful instrument of active learning. The concept of active learning can be, therefore, fully integrated into the framework of *language laboratories* where both an informed educator and computer-assisted instruction will play an important part in their *mutual interaction*, creating a dynamic learning environment.

The interactive communication skills laboratories - equipped with ultramodern audio-visual tools together with the contemporary language *teaching programs* - offer pupils an unparalleled opportunity to pursue this concept developing their speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills without the limitation of having to wait his or her turn to answer a question. In other words, they give the pupils the advantage of proceeding their own way and at their own pace. The latter options infer an extremely important aspect - especially with *crowded classes* - to the students who fall behind or are lacking in communication skills, as a result of little exposure to conversing in the second language.

In a lab setting, lessons are organized and practiced with the help of a system which allows the pupil to enhance his/her knowledge through all sorts of *activities* ranging from standard techniques to creative activities fostering personality development. The role of the teacher is no less important than before, only slightly different: the teacher must still carefully organize the lessons, give clear instructions at the beginning of every activity, and offer guidance whenever necessary; mingling with the students, and approaching every student individually.

Here are a few examples out of a complex of techniques used in language laboratories to stimulate and accelerate the language learning process in the spirit of active learning.

Speaking. An interactive audio program allows students to practise dialogues: with microphones for input and headphones for output the computer creates a virtual mini-media unit. In the case of interactive video, the cultural aspects of the video recordings are to be stressed. In both cases not only speaking, but also listening comprehension is possible, as well as reading comprehension if written material accompanies the recording. Students learn by playing and reversing the dialogue at their own learning pace, and as many times as they wish. A further step may be recording parts of the dialogue and practicing it with another student.

Listening. Depending on their language level the students listen for the gist of a segment, or they listen for specific facts in the audio or the interactive audio-video program. Other task-based listening and speaking activities can be incorporated. Students also learn the nuances of speech like pronunciation, accent, rhythm and intonation. The system allows the learner to record his/her voice in the master cassette, and note the differences while listening to the recording.

Reading. Reading skills can be substantially developed using instructional programs containing activities such as word recognition tasks (every nth word of text deleted), anagrams, jumbled words, text reconstruction, ordering sentences within a paragraph, article or story length reading with accompanying comprehension questions.

Writing. Activities such as fill-in-the-blanks, multiple choice, and true/false questions help students to write at the word level. Word processors may be added for compositions or free writing practice at the discourse level. Ideal for writing compositions is the assistance of bilingual or explanatory dictionaries, spell checkers and grammar helps, and/or an on-line link providing students with the sort of information required.

From the above stated list of activities, which is far from being complete, it can be seen that the language teaching systems integrated into language laboratories can provide a large scale of activities which, if properly used, dramatically enhance the idea of active learning.

In conclusion it can be said that language labs undoubtedly mean a significant innovation to the learning process as they add *effectiveness* and *productivity* to procedures, techniques and activities normally presented solely by the teacher, thus helping the teacher to strengthen the impact of the instruction and increasing the pupil's hunger for information. Therefore, these facilities are well able to act as strong motivators for the students on the one hand and be powerful allies for the teachers on the other hand. There is no doubt that computer-aided language training centres may significantly *cultivate* the knowledge of foreign languages thus making any educational institution, including a university, more attractive for potential applicants, recruitment agencies and the public at large.

Resources

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