

Automated Language Teaching: A survey of students' and teachers' views

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How have computers changed language teaching today? What effect do they have on the students? Will teachers feel they are being replaced by a computer? How do students feel about being taught by a computer? Are computers really effective in ELT?

These and many other questions arose in the minds of worried teachers who are using a computer lab to assist students in learning a language at the University of Zacatecas. This article intends to summarize students' opinions and feelings as well as those of the teachers' regarding the automatization of language teaching.

Language labs have been in vogue since the fifties and sixties with the audio-lingual method. In fact, they were over sold. Students used a cassette monitored by the teacher. Students were to repeat the pronunciation and memorize the structures in a given lesson. The tapes available were based on the course book. John Higgins (1984) says in his book *Computers and language learning*, that the tapes available at that time were generally rather unimaginative and based on sentence manipulations. The underlying learning theory was behaviorism and the underlying structural theory was structuralism. Higgins also mentions that the greatest mistake seems to have been installing the machines. Why was this a mistake? Because the labs were devices for individualization, but they were used in batches of twenty or more machines for the whole class to visit once a week to do the same thing at the same time.

As time went by, language labs developed more sophisticated technology and there were two options: The teacher could monitor up to three groups on different tapes or the students could listen to individual tapes. These tape recorders used both tracks of the tape on the same side. In other words, the students were able to record the lesson on their tapes on one track and their own voice on the other in order to compare their pronunciation. The students were then able to take

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the tape home to study. This method was still teacher-controlled, but, by grouping the students, it attempted to individualize their needs.

Then the fashion changed to self-access labs which are still widely used nowadays. These labs are designed to individualize learning. Students work by themselves rather than in groups. The students should recognize their own weaknesses and work with the specific tape that will help them improve. A tutor may be available in the lab or may recommend certain tapes to the student. Tapes to reinforce the textbooks material are usually available. Language lab hours are independent of the class time. Students sign out a tape recorder and a cassette and listen to it as many times as they consider necessary. Teachers have no control over what students listen to. The only control they have is the time students spend in the lab. Hours should be kept in an individual log and be considered for class credit. Some courses require from twenty to thirty-five hours of lab time each semester. Teachers often devise worksheets to be answered with taped material from the language lab.

Unfortunately, many investments were not fully taken advantage of. In some cases, language labs have been regarded as "white elephants." Students would bring their rock 'n' roll tapes rather than use the language tapes. Usually it was because the material was monotonous and did not appeal to the students' interests. The latest trend in language labs now is computers! It has been called CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning).

The Language Center of the University of Zacatecas has recently acquired a set of Macintosh computers especially equipped for language learning. Each computer consists of a monitor and CPU (Central Processing Unit), a keyboard, a CD ROM player, four headphones, a mouse and a compact disk drive. The compact disks available to the students are: *Pronunciation of Consonants*, *Pronunciation of Vowels*, *Entertainment*, *Sports and Leisure*, *Travel and Daily Living at Work* and *Culture and Customs*. Pronunciation is reinforced through differentiation of vowel or consonant sounds. The words are presented with illustrations. Students listen to the different sounds; then they review them. It is a behaviorist system in which the student is "rewarded" by a "That's correct" for every right answer and a "That is not correct" (not an electric shock) for every wrong answer. After each review, the computer gives the percentage (40% - Try again, 80% - Very good and 100% - Excellent!). In the pronunciation programs, the students may listen to the paired sounds at the beginning, middle or end of the word. New vocabulary is introduced using pictures. The students are also able to record their voices and compare their pronunciation immediately. They may also listen to the words in context in a dialogue form.

The more advanced programs present dialogues with animated (cartoon-like) pictures. Students are able to listen to the dialogue with or without the text. They may choose to listen to the whole dialogue or just one segment of it. They can later listen to and read a text related to the topic. This text has the key words highlighted. If the students do not know the meaning, they can click on that word and they will hear the pronunciation and see an English definition of that particular word in a hypertext. They are also able to record the text to practice pronunciation. A multiple choice quiz is given at the end of the lesson to ensure comprehension.

Students who are not familiar with computers need only learn how to use the mouse or cursor keys. However, it is recommended to teach the basics (parts of a computer, risks of improper use, how to enter and leave the program, etc.) to avoid misuse or unpleasant surprises.

A wide variety of software is available from different computer companies. These programs or applications are designed to enhance vocabulary, reading strategies, spelling, listening comprehension, etc. There are also language games available for children and for adults. Another option obtainable is the test-making programs, which help the instructor devise a test that can be answered on the computer or on a print-out. These tests can be marked and graded by the computer as well. The options for writing questions are limited to the user's creativity.

In the case of CALL the investment is an important factor to consider. Are computers really worth it? Are we going to experience the familiar problem of teachers getting more time off during class by being able to set the students on "automatic pilot" and having one more coffee break? Are teachers going to feel free to leave the students unattended because the computer is doing their work?

We must keep in mind the fact that not all language labs have been a disappointment, Higgins (1984) says:

Not all labs were so unimaginatively [designed], and they did provide teachers with experience of handling tapes well before personal tape-recorders became widespread in people's homes. Teachers experimented with songs and authentic listening tasks and so were ready for the real breakthrough in the late sixties when cassette recorders became generally available [...] The technology of the recorders no longer frightens teachers or learners, and the machines are quite properly seen as aids, not threats [...] Computers then, become aids under the control of teachers and learners; they are slaves, not masters. (p. 12)

The reason for conducting this survey was to know more about the students and teachers' anxieties concerning "dehumanized instructors." For the last twenty years we have heard of computers taking over and have worried about the possibility of their depriving human teachers of employment. In the back of their minds, teachers might feel jealousy or rejection toward a "robotization" of the classroom, in which students will be programmed rather than taught. It is not only the computer they fear, but also all the audiocassette and video programs available that claim to teach fluent English, satisfaction guaranteed! How many teachers are really able to guarantee their students' learning? Are teachers right to reject computers? "I have never heard of anyone who learned English fluently solely by using any of the courses available on the market. Desperate students buy them because they would like somebody to inject the language to them," replied one disenchanted teacher. He continued, "I agree with modernization and all of the innovations to language teaching. What I do not agree with is the misinformation students have received and how they are deceived to buy these methods as if they really could replace, not only the human teacher, but the classroom environment."

We must realize that the computer programs available are not intended to be the sole teaching element. They are used to enhance a syllabus, to make teachers' jobs easier and to strive for more effective learning.

We should not, however, disregard the fact that computers cannot be introduced as quickly as tape recorders were. Computer literacy is not a common feature of the adult Mexican student or the teacher population. Teachers and students might feel pushed into computers. Then again, the computer wizard students just might prefer, given the opportunity, to learn a language only with the aid of a computer.

This survey was conducted at the Language Center of the Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas with thirty-five students. They have used the computers as supplementary material to the program for three trimesters. Anonymous questionnaires were used. Students were asked the following questions:

- Do you like to use the computers? Why?
- How have they helped you (in listening, writing, reading, speaking and thinking in English)?
- Do you think you could learn a language only by using a computer?
- Would you prefer a computer over a teacher?

The great majority of students said that they enjoyed working with the computers because it took them away from the monotony of the classroom. "I like computers because they break the monotony of the class. They are very instructive, and help you to have better spelling and also to recognize the sound of the English words." (An intermediate student). "I like them because they offer a different and fun way of learning." (A lower-intermediate student). Others felt that a computer provided them with a shelter. Although they usually work with three other classmates, they felt more at ease. "I like them because I have the chance to repeat and repeat until my pronunciation is better. If I make a mistake, I can correct myself." (An upper-intermediate student). Out of the thirty-five students, only three stated that computers were boring because they did not like to talk to a machine and that the headphones annoyed them and gave them a headache.

All students agreed, however, that they would not be able to learn a language only by using a computer. "A computer has the advantage that it will never, never be angry at you. It does not make us do homework or study for a test. But all this is necessary and only the teacher can do it." (An intermediate student). "Computers help us to learn more vocabulary and the pronunciation, but they cannot really communicate with us." (An advanced student).

Regarding the question: *How have they helped you?*, twelve out of the thirty-five students said that computers had helped them in all the skills. Five said that they were helped especially in reading and pronunciation, but not in oral expression. Eight said that computers had helped them only with pronunciation and spelling. Four others said that they had been helped in listening, spelling and reading and six said that the computers had helped them to read, understand and think in English because there was no translation.

The negative aspects that some students mentioned were:

- They would like to have the option to work by themselves (individually). "Sometimes I want to go slower, but my friends are finished and I must continue with them." (An intermediate student).
- They would like to have an option in Spanish for the really difficult words.
- They wish all the programs did not follow the same pattern because they become predictable.
- They complain that students speak loudly and this hurts the other students' ears (especially if somebody sneezes or coughs). "I get impatient when

another student cannot pronounce and says the word louder or takes too long over his turn." (An advanced student).

- Their own expression is limited because they cannot always give the exact answer the computer expects.

Teachers who are afraid of being taken over by a computer will be happy to know that not one single student preferred a computer over a teacher. Most students regarded guided learning as imperative. "A computer could never replace the warmth of my teacher's smile when I say something. (An advanced student). However, they liked the fact that the computers were a complement to the program. "Of course not! I like to have my teacher; the computer is only to practice with." (An intermediate student).

When teachers were asked if they felt that computers helped their students, the majority said that they saw improvement in their students' pronunciation and vocabulary learning. An honest teacher replied, "I do not know if they have really helped my students, but my students love to work with them."

When asked for the advantages and disadvantages of the computer program as part of the syllabus, the teachers said that time was a factor because if the computers were to be self-paced, they could not really advance as much as the teacher would like. One teacher said, "I have never liked drilling patterns or teaching pronunciation; now we have a machine that can help us teach the important, but boring topics and I get to do the fun and creative activities."

When the word jealousy came up, none of the teachers felt that computers would ever take over. "Everyone likes something different and new at some time." Some of the teachers felt that computers could not provide the authentic need of the students to communicate. "Speaking to a machine can never be the same as speaking to a human."

When asked about the students' level of interest, teachers admitted that there were some students who were not inquisitive enough and just zoomed through the program. They said that most of the time they tried to keep active and let students know that they were aware of their scores.

Conclusions

- A language lab has never been absolutely necessary in ELT. Institutes are right to be afraid of making a large investment in a new "white elephant."

However, with proper management and with the proper use of computers to individualize learning, they can be a great source for reinforcement of all the basic skills.

- Computers are merely aids under the control of the teacher. It is up to the instructor to take as much advantage of them as possible. If an institution does not want the big investment to be turned into a "white elephant," they fear, they must be innovative and up-to-date, not only by buying new programs, but also by training and orienting the teachers that will use them. What good will an expensive, well-equipped lab be, if it is combined with unmotivated, bored and tired users?
- Computers are meant to make the teacher's job easier, not to do it for them. It is up to the teacher to make computers as effective as possible. Instructors will decide if computers have come to make their lives miserable or easier.
- Computers must help teachers individualize learning. Taking the whole group once a week to do the same thing at the same time may discourage those who have mastered what is being shown or discourage those who cannot yet master it, but are being forced to continue with the program. Remember that computers are an opportunity to help the students learn at their own pace, not to frustrate them at the pace of others.
- The programs used should be a challenge to the learner. However, at the same time, this challenge must not be a source of frustration. Under-challenging the learners can discourage them.

References

Higgins, John. 1984. *Computers and language learning*.