

Original Paper

Costless Portable English Language Lab: A Solution for the Institutions of Higher Education Having No Language Lab

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Abstract

The lack of the English Language Lab in the institutions of higher education namely the University of Kinshasa, the National Pedagogic University, and the Teacher Training College is the main problem of this article. The latter attempts to answer this research question “what should be done to solve the problem of lack of the English Language Laboratory in the University of Kinshasa, the National Pedagogic University, and the Teacher Training College?” To answer this question, an investigation was conducted in order to find out an English Language Lab which is costless. The data were collected through the interview and browsing. The interview aimed at finding the number of the second-year students and make sure whether they use mobiles or not. The browsing aimed at finding out the modern language labs that can be easily used by both lecturers and students in the departments of English letters and civilization at the University of Kinshasa and the National Pedagogic University and also in the department of English and African Culture at the Teacher Training College of Gombe. The analysis of the data revealed that 93.9% of the second-year students use mobile and these mobiles can help create a costless portable language lab. This costless portable English language lab is the answer to the research question.

Keywords

English Language Lab, mobiles, Mlab, Sanako portable Language Lab, and Costless English Language Lab

1. Introduction

1.1 Problem

The attempts to replace the traditional language lab have been manifested by the portable language labs such as MLabs, Sanako Labs, Orell Labs, etc. These language labs are very useful for English teaching and learning, but they seem to be expensive for the developing countries. These countries do not afford the prices of these modern language labs as it is the case of The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In the DRC, mainly in the capital city (Kinshasa) universities and colleges lack the language labs. The modern language labs are tremendously needed in the University of Kinshasa, the National Pedagogic University, and The Teacher Training College. These institutions of higher education lack the English language lab in the departments in which English language is the language of study. Since these institutions seem not to afford the prices of the modern language labs, there is an urgent need to find a costless English language lab for these institutions. Therefore, the lack of the English Language Lab in the mentioned institutions of higher education is the main problem that this article attempts to solve by suggesting a feasible and costless solution.

1.2 Research Question

The Language Lab is one of the essential and mandatory requirements for the teaching/learning English as a Foreign Language. Unfortunately, it does not exist in the English departments at the University of Kinshasa, the National Pedagogic University, and the Teacher Training College. My recent investigations on the impact of the lack of the English lab on the students' language skills have revealed that the second-year students' language skills are not developed effectively. This lack of the English Language Lab in these institutions of higher education has a negative impact on the students' language skills. Therefore, what should be done to solve the problem of lack of the English Language Laboratory at the University of Kinshasa, the National Pedagogic University, and the Teacher Training College? This is the research question that this article tries to answer.

1.3 Hypothesis

Normally speaking, the institutions of higher education have to buy some modern language labs such as MLabs, Sanako Portable Language Labs, etc., which can be carried and installed everywhere and at any time. As these modern language labs seem to be expensive for these institutions, lecturers and students' mobiles can be used to create an English Language Lab which does not cost much for these institutions.

1.4 Aim/Purpose

With regards to the research problem and research question, the aim of this article is to provide the above mentioned institutions with a feasible and costless English Language Lab in order to solve the problem related to the lack of the English Language Laboratory.

1.5 Technique and Method

To collect data the interview was used in order to know the number of the second-year students using mobiles. Furthermore, the browsing was used to collect the pricing of MLabs and Sanako Portable

Language Labs so as to make sure whether these modern language labs can be used in the English departments at the University of Kinshasa, The National Pedagogic University, and The teacher Training College.

As far as the data analysis is concerned, the data collected from browsing are analyzed on the basis of the explanatory analysis method. To put it clear, the data are analyzed to show the feasibility or the unfeasibility of using the modern language labs in the English departments at the above mentioned institutions of higher education.

2. Literature Review

The traditional language labs have some weaknesses such as lack of students' interactions, etc. To overcome the weaknesses of the traditional language labs, some electronic companies have invented language labs such as MLabs, Sanako Portable Language Labs, etc. This is confirmed by Alotaibi and the others (2015, p. 1307) when they say that "*the MLab system aims to replace the traditional language lab—which typically has a restrictive layout and lacks interaction—with a more user-friendly, low-cost mobile language lab*". As far as the definition of Mlabs is concerned, Vital Wave Consulting defines them as "*a physical space where mobile technology entrepreneurs can access the tools, expertise, and support network necessary to develop their solutions and start and grow their businesses*". Apart from MLabs, there is a series of Sanako portable language labs.

Sanako has tried to solve the problem related to the lack of the English Language Lab in the institutions of higher education by introducing a series of portable language Labs such as the Portable Sanako Lab 100, Sanako 300, etc. In the link http://www.tandbergeducational.com/downloads/brochures/SANAKO_Portable_Cart_Brochure.pdf they promote their portable language lab by saying that

No longer do students have to move to a separate location for language learning activities because this language-teaching environment moves to them! SANAKO Lab 100 language lab on wheels is easy to set up and take down, and no separate language lab location is needed as the Lab 100 portable system provides teachers with innovative and stimulating tools for language learning-anywhere! The Lab 100 cart can be used in classrooms with or without fixed cabling, making it a flexible option for any environment. The sturdy cart also provides storage space for the User Audio Panels and student headsets - it's a compact lab-on-wheels!

Apart from Sanako Portable Labs, the EnglishEdge Portable Lab tries also to solve the problem of lack of the English Lab in the English Language Teaching settings. In the link <https://digitallearning.eletsonline.com/2012/03/introducing-4th-generation-english-language-learning-portable-language-lab/> they praise their portable English Lab as follows:

The English Edge Portable Language lab leverages technology to make learning interactive, interesting and engaging. It is an innovative model that provides multiple tablets ranging from 21-30 on a single trolley. The trolley comes equipped with a centralized charging unit and provides a wireless

environment for the tablets. The wireless connectivity provides strong real time student-teacher interaction. Internet access opens up new channels & provides access to variety of relevant online content. This content can then be used to create engaging discussion scenarios.

In the same view, mobiles also seem to be very useful in teaching/learning process. Some researchers have used the term m-learning to refer to the use of mobiles in teaching/learning. Hashemi and the others (2011, p. 2478) say that “*mobile learning involves connectivity for downloading, uploading and/or online working via wireless networks, mobile phone networks or both, and linking to institutional systems, e.g., Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and management information systems (MIS)*”. Ally (2009, p. 1) writes “*mobile learning through the use of wireless mobile technology allows anyone to access information and learning materials from anywhere and at anytime. As a result, learners have control of when they want to learn and from which location they want to learn*”. Ozdamli and Cavus (2011, p. 938) affirm that “*with the mobile technologies learners and instructors should make different activities which are more motivational and more interesting from traditional activities*”. Santiago Criollo-C and the others (2021, p. 1) support the idea by saying that “*mobile devices have become a complete set of applications, support, and help for educational organizations*”. UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education (2010, p. 1) recognizes that “*learners’ everyday uses of mobile phones and other devices such as games consoles, which can also be used for learning, are now major drivers for the rapid uptake of mobile learning throughout the world*”.

Adnan Majeed Hajvery University (2015, p. 40) states that

The terminal connected with the infrastructure inside the university Local Area Network (LAN) and also connected with the external network environment. The university offer server platform for course management system for educational resources and it is connected on the university LAN. A student might access the platform directly from the university LAN or through the internet in order to collect the learning materials. The student can access the data center of the university from WLAN as well as from Local LAN network.

There are electronic devices which can help share information between teachers and students. In the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bluetooth and WhatsApp applications can be used through mobiles because they are the most applications used by both teachers and students. Ullah (2009, p. 7) states that “*Bluetooth devices typically operate over a very short range of 1 to 10 meters and hence consume very little power. Bluetooth can hence be used to connect peripheral devices wirelessly thus eliminating the need for various types of communication cables*”. Arati and the others (2020, p. 2259) add that “*Bluetooth is a modern wireless short-range RF technology that is designed to communicate wirelessly between various machines*”.

As far as WhatsApp application is concerned, Zarei and Fathi (2020, p. 23) argue that “*the use of WhatsApp in education enhances social interaction, students’ motivation, sense of belonging, and it supports learning anytime and anywhere*”. Minhas and the others (2016, p. 71) support this idea in saying that “*WhatsApp Messenger is a proprietary, cross-platform instant messaging subscription*

service for smartphones and selected feature phones it uses the internet for communication. In addition to text messaging, users can send messages, images, video and audio media as well as their location”.

It is clear to notice that Bluetooth and WhatsApp applications are essential in creating a costless portable English Language Lab so as to solve the teaching/learning problem related to the lack of the English Language Lab in the institutions of higher education such as the University of Kinshasa, the National Pedagogic University, and the Teacher Training College.

3. Methodology

My recent investigation conducted in the second year of the undergraduate level in the three institutions of higher education (the University of Kinshasa, the National Pedagogic University, and the Teacher Training College) has revealed a remarkable lack of the English Language Lab. This present investigation is conducted to know whether mobiles can be used to create an English language lab. Here below are the numbers of the second-year students who use mobiles and those who do not use them.

The University of Kinshasa

- The total number of the students in the second year of the undergraduate level: 57
- The students using mobiles: 53
- The students who do not use mobiles: 4

The National Pedagogic University

- The total number of the students in the second year of the undergraduate level: 37
- The students using mobiles: 37
- The students who do not use mobiles: 0

The Teacher Training College

- The total number of the students in the second year of the undergraduate level: 21
- The students using mobiles: 18
- The students who do not use mobiles: 3

The total number of the second-year students in the three institutions is 115. Out of this number 108 (93.9%) students use their own mobiles and only 7 (6%) students lack mobiles.

The second part of this investigation deals with the pricing of the modern language labs which can be portable and used everywhere and at any time. The following are the modern Language Lab pricings with their sources:

- Mlab; \$ 15per GB (source: <https://sourceforge.net/software/product/mLab/retrieved> on April 30 at 9:55)
- Sanako (source: <https://sanakolabs.ru/pricing/retrieved> on April 30 at 9:57)
 - Starter Package: \$26.95 /mo
 - Standard Package: \$ 56.95/mo
 - Platinum Package: \$86.95/mo

Nowadays in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 1 GB costs 1 dollar for 24 hours. Considering the Mlab pricing, one can notice that Mlab is fifteen times superior to the price of GB in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is important to note that the most of the students are not able to spend 1 dollar per day in order to buy internet data. As far as Sanako pricings are concerned, it is clear to notice that they are far more expensive in the context of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

4. Results

The analysis above leads to the following results:

- 93.9% of the students use mobiles (phones, tablets, and Ipads).
 - The famous modern language labs are extremely expensive to be used in the English departments at the University of Kinshasa, The National Pedagogic University, and the Teacher Training College.
- These results lead to say that there is possibility to think of a costless portable English language lab based on students' mobiles.

5. Discussion

To develop the students' language skills in an EFL context, the Language lab is of paramount importance. Since the University of Kinshasa, the National Pedagogic University, and the Teacher Training College lack the English Language Lab, the students' mobiles can be used to create a portable English Language Lab. This can be designed as follows:

- The teacher shares the material with the students via Bluetooth, whatsApp, xender, etc;
- Each student gets the material in his/her mobile.
- Each student listens via the earphones and watches or reads the material.
- The teacher gives appropriate tasks to the students.
- The students interact with each other or respond to the teacher's task via Bluetooth, WhatsApp, Xender, etc.
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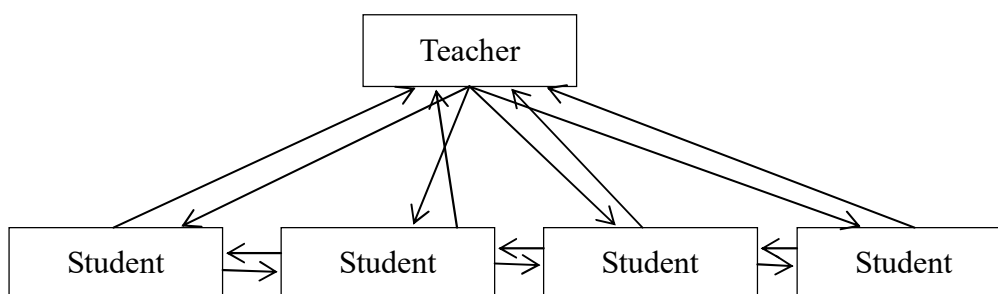


Figure 1. Interaction

5.1 Suggestion

Since any foreign language should not be taught without a language lab and as the institutions seem not to have enough money to buy expensive language labs, I suggest to these institutions to try this costless portable English language lab which is easy to use in all teaching/learning situations.

5.2 Conclusion

This article dealt with the lack of the English Language Lab. The research question was “*what should be done to solve the problem of lack of the English Language Laboratory in the University of Kinshasa, the National Pedagogic University, and the Teacher Training College?*” To answer this question, it was essential to know the number of the students using mobiles in the mentioned institutions so as to make sure whether the modern language labs can be used in these institutions or not. Furthermore, it was also important to get the pricing of the modern language labs so as to know whether they can be afforded by the named institutions or not. The results and their discussion led to suggest a costless portable English Language Lab based on the students’ mobiles. This is the answer to the research question. This answer matches with the hypothesis which was “*lecturers and students’ mobiles can be used to create an English Language Lab which does not cost much for these institutions*”.

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