



Fostering listening skill in English among the students of class viii through information and communication technology: An action research

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Abstract

Among the four basic LSRW skills in a language – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, the first and foremost one is the listening skill since it is the basic skill from which a child learns its mother tongue. English Language Teaching (ELT) would serve the purpose of enabling learners to acquire English as a second language only if the skill development of the basic LSRW skills is given priority. The learners should be given equal opportunities to acquire English language as they have acquired their mother tongue and the teachers of ELT should strive to find out innovative strategies to make their teaching process interesting as well as productive. In the contemporary educational scenario, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has found a slot as an effective medium to support ELT. This action research article deals with the possible ways of utilizing ICT to enhance the listening skill in English among the Class VIII students.

Keywords: language skills, LSRW, ELT, ICT, listening skill

Introduction

*One Language sets you in a corridor for life.
Two languages open every door along the way.*

– Frank Smith

Learning a new language is always like acquiring a new soul. English, learnt as a second language in India, has found a niche as the lingua franca of India in the multi-lingual milieu of the country over the years. A glance at the history of English in India reveals that the earlier methods of teaching English during the pre-independent era aimed at developing the learners' skill in reading and writing since the British rulers of India needed only clerks who could excel in written communication. However, the approach to ELT (English Language Teaching) in India has undergone many an evolution in the past decades since the post-independence era of India. Teaching of English as a content-based subject is slowly being replaced by teaching it as a skill-based language. Of late, much significance is being attached to the communicative approach to ELT which focuses on the listening and speaking skills.

Significance of developing listening skill in English

Among the four basic LSRW skills of a language – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, the first and foremost one is the listening skill, through which a child learns its mother tongue. It is not difficult to realize the importance of listening while considering the fact that it occupies about 45 per cent of the time the adults spend in communication. This is significantly more than speaking, which accounts for 30 per cent, and reading and writing, which make up 16 per cent and 9 per cent respectively. However, students and even

the teachers often fail to give the attention it needs. This is all the more remarkable as the learners often say that listening is the most challenging of all the skills in English.

The factors that contribute to the complexity of the listening skill are lack of visual clues, the listener's limited vocabulary, lack of knowledge on the topic and an inability to distinguish individual sounds. English is not a phonetic language. There is no one to one association between the written letters and the spoken sounds in English as there are 44 sounds for an alphabet of 26 letters. Moreover, in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in India, the learners are not exposed to the speech sounds of English as they do not get enough opportunity to listen to the language. Even if the opportunities are provided, the learners may not find it interesting to listen to a foreign language. In the contemporary context of ELT, the learners could be made to develop a favourable attitude towards learning English through activities based on ICT – Information and Communication Technology.

Role of ICT in fostering listening skills

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has been gaining impetus in the field of education and ICT-enhanced tasks are deemed to be effective in developing the language skills. Tasks designed using technology could kindle the interest among the learners in listening to English, thus promoting a classroom climate conducive to acquire the second language just as they have acquired their mother tongue. The use of ICT enables the teachers of English to make the learning experience motivating for the learners by providing them enjoyable activities. Apart from this, using variety of multimedia tools helps the learners get adapted to various learning styles that may induce creativity among them. Gadgets of ICT such as computer, MP3 player, tablet, smart

phones, etc. may be handy in creating an interesting classroom ambience to foster the language skills. Digital materials, either prepared or downloaded from the internet such as recorded songs, talking book which are audio visual stories, podcast which is a series of video or audio files that could be played on a desktop or an MP3 player, etc., could be effective in making ELT all the more appealing to the ESL learners.

Identification of the problem

It is often observed, by the investigator, that the students at primary and upper primary levels are not able to comprehend what is spoken to them in English and the teacher has to give the vernacular equivalent for each and every sentence spoken. This may be due to the fact that they are not familiar with the English speech sounds. They need sufficient exposure to the language through ICT-aided tasks so as to kindle their interest in learning the language. During school visits, it has been observed by the investigator that the listening skills of the students at upper primary level are not up to the expected level and it hinders the language learning since the listening is the gateway to acquire any language. Hence, lack of listening skill is identified as the problem for the present action research.

Need for the study

If the listening comprehension in English is fostered among the students at primary and upper primary level, they would be able to gain mastery over the language, which in turn would augment their academic achievement in English at secondary and higher secondary levels. Class VIII, being at the threshold to enter the secondary level, students must be provided with ample opportunities to develop their receptive skills so as to promote their productive skills. ICT is ruling the roost in the field of education and tools of ICT are identified as effective in ELT. Hence, the investigator finds it necessary to study the impact of ICT in fostering listening skill in English so that ICT-based tasks may be designed to develop the same.

Statement of the problem

Based on the need for the action research, the problem identified is stated as follows;
'Fostering Listening Skill in English among the Students of Class VIII Using Information and Communication Technology'

Objectives of the action research

The remedies for the identified research problem are proposed through setting up the following objectives;

- Enabling Class VIII students to identify and differentiate between various sounds in English
- Enhancing their skills in pronunciation and comprehension of English words
- Fostering their listening comprehension
- Shifting the learning process of English language to acquiring the language unconsciously

Probable causes of the problem

The following are identified as the probable causes;

- English speech sounds are unfamiliar to the students since English is not a phonetic language like Tamil and it has 44 speech sounds for 26 letters.

- Students are unable to comprehend what they listen to in the English language due to the variation in pronunciation and accent used by the teachers.
- They do not get sufficient exposure to the English language as it is used only in the English classroom and even in that case it is used only scarcely.

Probable solutions to the problem

The following may be considered as the probable solutions to the identified problem;

- Students may get familiarized on the different sounds in English through practice in listening and repeating minimal pairs of words.
- Pronunciation of commonly used words may be taught through interesting activities utilizing technology oriented resources.
- The students may be exposed to the English language ambience by creating opportunities to listen to English songs and stories and through communicating with them only in English.
- Favourable attitude among the students towards learning English may be induced by introducing technology based tasks that kindle their interest.

Action Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are framed for the present action research;

- ICT-enhanced tasks foster the skill of identifying the sounds in English among the Class VIII students.
- ICT-enhanced tasks foster the level of listening comprehension in English among the Class VIII students.

Sample

Class VIII students of Panchayat Union Middle School, Gandhipuram in Nambiyur Block of Erode District are considered as the sample population.

Research Design

Adopting single group experimental method, the present action research has been carried out systematically in three phases as follows;

1. Pre-Test
2. Interventional Activities
3. Post-Test

1. Pre-Test

Pre-Test was prepared by the investigator to test the level of the listening skills of Class VIII students of the selected school.

a. Description of the Pre-Test

The aim of the pre-test is to test the listening skill of the sample population in terms of the following aspects;

- Identification of English speech sounds
- Listening Comprehension

Hence, the test has been designed in such a way that only the above two aspects are considered to be evaluated. In the first part of the pre-test, the students are made to listen to an English song and a worksheet with the lyrics of the song with

some missing words is given. They listen to the song and fill up the missing words. In the second part, a story is narrated by the investigator and questions are asked to test their listening comprehension.

b. Administration of the Pre-Test

In the first phase of the research, the researcher visited the school and informed the head teacher of the school about the action research to be conducted. With the cooperation of the head teacher along with the other teachers, it was arranged to administer the pre-test to the students of Class VIII, forty one in number. In order to assess the students' skill in identifying the sounds in English, a song named, 'Joy is like the rain' was sung by the investigator and a test with missing words is conducted. A short story in simple English titled, 'Nila's Birthday,' was written and narrated by the researcher and a test with comprehension questions was given. The students were instructed to write their answers on their own and it was ensured that they did so by supervision without offering any help. After the pre-test was conducted, the answer sheets were collected, evaluated and the students who had scored below five out of ten were selected as the sample for the study.

2. Interventional Activities

After conducting the pre-test and selecting the sample, interventional activities were conducted using the materials improvised by the investigator.

a. Interventional Materials

Since the present action research aims at developing the listening skill of the students using Information and Communication Technology, a digital package comprised of the following was constructed by the investigator;

1. Digital Booklet on Pronunciation Practice - 'Sound it like English!'
2. Talking Book (Audio-Visual Stories).
3. Work Sheets.

b. Description of Interventional Materials

A brief description of the materials used for interventional activities to which the sample was subject is given below;

▪ 'Sound it like English!'

(Handbook for Pronunciation Practice)

Mother tongue interference in pronouncing English words in terms of accent and stress pattern is inevitable since English is not a native language for the student. However, teaching English as a second language needs to be improvised to suit our learners. Though it is almost impossible to train the students to speak English with the British accent, they should be aware of the correct pronunciation of simple English words that are actively used. Knowledge of correct pronunciation would enable the learners to develop their listening skills. So, a booklet named, 'Sound it like English!' has been prepared by the investigator with the aim of guiding the learners and giving them practice in pronouncing simple English words precisely. The booklet is supported by a compact disc with the sounds recorded by the investigator to go along with the print matter.

The booklet includes minimal pairs to differentiate certain

consonant sounds as well as vowel sounds. Minimal pair of words is that in which other sounds are the same except for the sounds that are to be distinguished.

▪ Talking Book - Audio-Visual Stories

Talking book or an Audio book is a recording of a text being read. Originally, it was meant for visually challenged people. Later, audio-visual stories also came to be known as talking books in which the subtitles are highlighted as the story is narrated. Stories from Bookbox.com namely 'The Wind and the Sun,' 'The First Well,' 'The Flying Elephant' 'School Topper' and 'The Princess Farmer' were downloaded and copied in compact discs to be played for the students.

▪ Worksheets

The worksheets consist of questions based on the stories selected from talking book series testing the skill of identifying the sounds as well as the listening comprehension level.

c. Process of Interventional Activities

The following activities using the technology-enhanced package had been administered to the sample for a period of 20 days;

▪ Pronunciation Drill

The students were given drill in pronunciation, distinguishing between various sounds which seem to be similar but not similar using the digital and print package, 'Sound it like English.' The booklet was used for oral practice with the aid of the digital display. Letter denoting a particular sound in a word is coloured and the students were given practice to associate the letter with the sound they hear and read the words aloud. The list of words chosen for practice consists of different letters denoting the same sound and the same letter denoting different sounds.

Example: sheep, sugar, nation, ocean, machine – Here, the highlighted letters denote the same sound - 'sh' represented phonetically by /ʃ/

▪ Practice in Identification of Sounds and Listening Comprehension

The talking book series were played for the students to watch and listen to the stories at the first level. Pause was given at regular intervals and their attention was drawn to new words with focus on the pronunciation of the words. In the second level, audio was played and they were made to listen to the story once again. Meaning of new words was also given so that they understand the narration. Oral questions were asked to test their comprehension. It was observed that most of the students were found to guess the meaning of words on seeing the visual of the stories.

▪ Reinforcement through Worksheets

Worksheets were used to reinforce their understanding. Students tried to answer the questions based on the stories. They were helped by the investigator in their first attempt. Later on, they were encouraged to answer on their own. The worksheets were evaluated and the progress was analyzed.

3. Post-Test

After the interventional activities, post-test was conducted

using the same test used for pre-test. No assistance was provided and the answer scripts were evaluated and comparative analysis of pre and post-tests was carried out.

Analysis and Interpretation

In order to analyze the gathered data, the mean scores of pre-test, post-test and gained score are tabulated with respect to the attributes of listening skill viz. Identification of Sounds and Listening Comprehension in Table 1 as follows;

Table 1: Pre-Test, Post-Test and Gained Score - Identification of Sounds and Listening Comprehension

Attributes of Listening Skill	Mean of Pre-Test	Mean of Post-Test	Mean of Gained Score
Identification of Sounds	16	61.75	45.75
Listening Comprehension	23	67.75	44.75

It is clear from the above table that the mean post-test score in identifying the sounds has increased from 16 to 61.75 by a gained score of 45.75. Similarly, the mean post-test score in listening comprehension has increased from 23 to 67.75 by a gained score of 44.75.

It also shows that the performance of the students has, indeed, improved considerably after the intervention using the instructional materials based on ICT. The result is graphically represented in Figure 1.

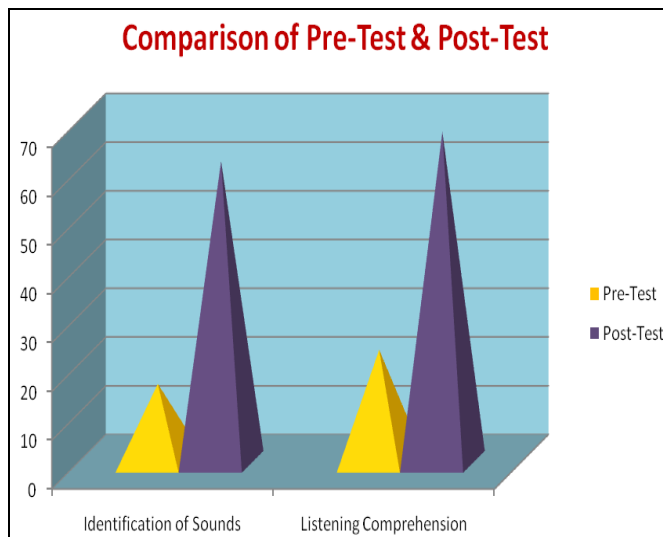


Fig 1: Comparison of Mean Scores of Pre-Test and Post-Test – Identification of Sounds and Listening Comprehension

In order to have an additional interpretation, the data were analyzed with respect to the gender of the students and the scores are tabulated in Table 2.

Table 2: Comparison of Mean Scores of Pre-Test & Post-Test of Girls and Boys with respect to Identification of Sounds

Gender	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Girls	17	62.5
Boys	15	60

Table 2 indicates that the mean post-test score of both girls as

well as that of boys has increased from 17 and 15 to 62.5 and 60 respectively. Hence, it is obvious that the difference between the pre and post test scores is significantly high in both the cases. The graphical representation is shown below in Figure 2;

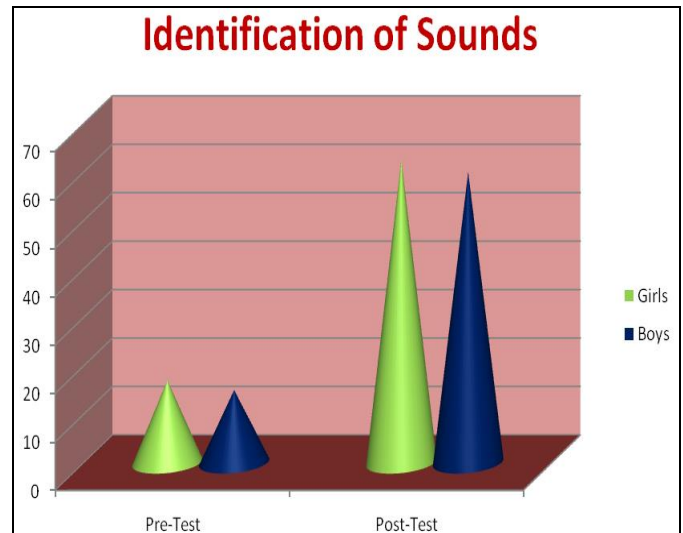


Fig 2: Comparison of Mean Scores of Pre-Test and Post-Test of Girls and Boys - Identification of Sounds

Similarly, the mean score of pre and post-test of girls and boys has been compared with respect to listening comprehension in Table 3;

Table 3: Comparison of Mean Scores of Pre-Test and Post-Test of Girls and Boys - Listening Comprehension

Gender	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Girls	25.5	72
Boys	20.5	63.5

Table 2 shows that the mean post-test score of both girls as well as that of boys has increased from 25.5 and 20.5 to 72 and 63.5 respectively. Hence, it is obvious that the difference between the pre and post test scores is significantly high in both the cases. The graphical representation is shown below in Figure 3.

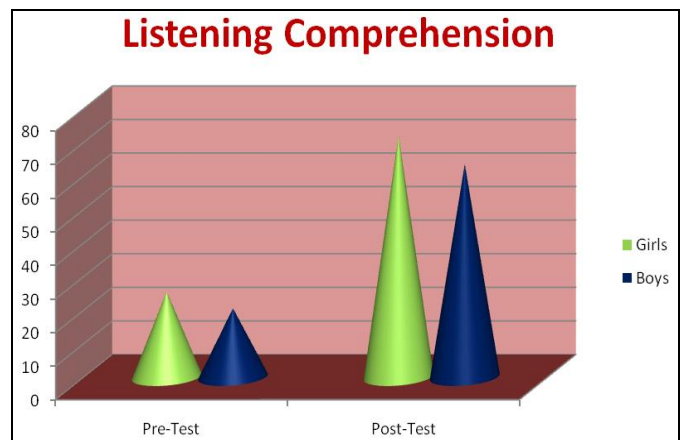


Fig 3: Comparison of Mean Scores of Pre-Test and Post-Test of Girls and Boys - Listening Comprehension

The gained scores of girls and boys in both the sub-skills are

tabulated and the mean gained scores are found out from Table 4.

Table 4: Gained Score - Identification of Sounds and Listening Comprehension

Attributes of Listening Skill	Gained Score of Girls	Gained Score of Boys
Identification of Sounds	45.5	45.5
Listening Comprehension	46.5	43.0

The comparison of gained scores with respect to the two attributes of listening skill shows that the mean gained score of both girls as well as that of boys is found exactly to be the same in identifying the sounds. However, in listening comprehension, it is observed that the gained score of girls is slightly higher than that of their male counterparts. The graphical representation is shown below in Figure 4.

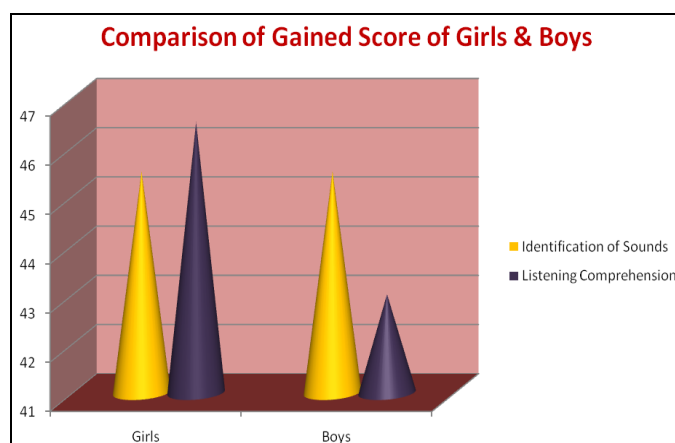


Fig 4: Gained Score - Identification of Sounds and Listening Comprehension

Findings of the action research

The following findings are inferred from the interpretations made through the analysis of the data;

- In the pre-test, the performance of both the girls and the boys were found to be low and as far as the attributes of listening skill are concerned all the students, irrespective of their gender, have performed comparatively better in comprehending the text read out to them than in identifying the sounds in English. Comparison of the performance in the pre-test with respect to their gender shows that the female students have scored higher than their male counterparts in both the aspects of listening skill.
- All the students, irrespective of their gender, have performed comparatively better in comprehending the text read out to them than in identifying the sounds in English in the post-test also. As in the pre-test, girls show better performance than the boys.
- Comparison of the pre-test and post-test reveals that the post-test score of the students is observed to be higher than their pre-test score in identifying the English speech sounds.
- In the skill of listening comprehension also, the post-test score of the students is found to be higher than their pre-

test score.

- With respect to gender, the analysis indicates that girls show better performance in identifying English sounds than the boys.
- The girls have performed better than the boys in the skill of listening comprehension.
- The Gained Score value of girls and boys in their skill in identifying sounds is found to be the same.
- The Gained Score value of girls and boys in their skill of listening comprehension is found to differ slightly; with the score of girls on the higher side.

Summary of the findings

The findings of the action research carried out with the purpose of finding a remedy to rectify the lack of listening skills in English observed among the Class VIII students of Panchyat Union Middle School, Gandhipuram in Nambiyur of Erode District is summed up as follows;

- Technology based activities namely digital story-telling and pronunciation practice using digital as well as print materials have improved both the attributes of listening skill in English, i.e. identification of sounds as well as listening comprehension of the students irrespective of their gender. However, girls displayed a better listening competence than boys comparatively.

Thus, the following Hypotheses framed for the action research is found to be accepted on applying the findings of the study;

- ICT-enhanced tasks foster the skill of identifying the sounds in English among the Class VIII students.
- ICT-enhanced tasks foster the level of the listening comprehension in English among the Class VIII students.

Recommendations for educational implementation

Based on the findings of the present action research the following educational implementations are recommended;

- ICT-enhanced activities could be effective in developing the listening skill of the students at any level. Hence, digital resources such as talking book, English songs, speeches, etc. may be prepared or downloaded and used in the class room so as to enable the ESL learners to acquire the basic language skills.
- Regular drills in pronouncing English words should be given to the students so that they get an idea of speech sounds in English. It is also recommended that teachers also must be aware of the correct pronunciation of actively used words in English.
- The digital resources may also be utilized to foster the other skills in English namely reading, speaking and writing. In addition, they may also be used for the vocabulary development of the students.
- In order to construct technology-based activities, teachers must develop a positive attitude towards using ICT in the English classrooms. Moreover, they should equip themselves with digital competence so that they could utilize the innumerable resources available on the internet to invent interesting activities to foster language skills in their students.

Conclusion

True to the quote, 'By changing nothing, nothing changes,' by Tony Robbins, the teaching learning process needs a change from time to time in accordance with the contemporary context in terms of methods and approaches to teaching, techniques applied in the classroom and materials used for effective learning. According to Stephen Hawking, 'Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change' and the teachers, as the agents of change, should adapt themselves to change their attitude towards teaching strategies. The rapid progress in information and communication technology offers myriad resources that could be exploited by the teachers to revamp their pedagogical skills. Teaching of English should aim at facilitating the learners to enhance their language skills and efforts must be made to teach English as a language, rather than a subject.

Thus, in line with the findings of the present action research, it is proved that technology forms a sound basis to augment the listening skills of students in English and it is suggested by the investigator that ICT could be an effective tool to stimulate the basic language skills among the learners so as to realize the objectives of English language teaching.

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