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Renovating Language Laboratories for Pedagogical and Technological Advancements in the New Era

Authors : Paul Lam, Chi Him Chan, Alan Tse

Abstract : Language laboratories have been widely used in language learning, starting in the middle of the last century as one of the earliest forms of educational technology. They are designed to assist students' language learning with technological innovations. Traditional language laboratories provide individual workstations that allow students to access multimedia language resources. In this type of facility, students can train their listening and speaking abilities, and teachers can also assess the performance of an individual student. Although such a setting promotes a student-centered pedagogy by encouraging students to work at their own pace and according to their own needs, it still favours a traditional, behaviourist language learning pedagogy which focuses on repetitive drilling. The change of pedagogies poses challenges to both the teachers and the facilities. The peer-learning pedagogy advocates that language learning should focus on the social aspect, which emphasizes the importance of everyday communication in language learning. The self-access, individual workstation language laboratories may not be able to provide the flexibility for interaction in the new pedagogies. Modern advancement in technology is another factor that drove our language laboratory renovation. In particular, mobile and wireless technology enabled the use of smaller and more flexible devices, making possible much clever use of space. The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) renovated nine existing language laboratories to provide lighter and more advanced equipment, movable tables, and round desks. These facilities allow more flexibility and encourage students' interaction. It is believed that the renovated language laboratories can serve different peer learning activities and thus support peer-learning pedagogies in language teaching and learning. A survey has been conducted to collect comments from the teachers who have used the renovated language laboratories and received forty-four response. The teachers' comments reveal that they experienced different challenges in using the renovated language laboratories, and there is a need to provide guidance to teachers during the technological and pedagogical transition. For example, teachers need instruction on using the newly installed devices such as touch-monitor and visualizer. They also need advice on planning new teaching and learning activities. Nevertheless, teachers appreciated that the renovated language laboratories are flexible and provide more spaces for different learning activities.

Keywords : language laboratories, language learning, peer-learning, student interaction
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