Managing an Effective English Language Laboratory in a Polytechnic

Marlina Marzuki[*]

Politeknik Negeri Lhokseumawe, Lhokseumawe, INDONESIA

Abstract

Polytechnic graduates are required to have applied skills as well as communication skills in English. In most of the polytechnics in Indonesia, English courses are served as compulsory courses for students and in some institutions language laboratories are established in order to support their students. To run an effective language laboratory there are, at least four aspects that need to be considered, namely lab facilities, standard operating rules, students, and lab coordinators. Of all the agents, lab coordinators are classified as internal factors that can easily be empowered by the institutions in the management of the language lab. This paper aims to discuss leadership and management roles in improving an English Language Laboratory. The discussions are based on literature reviews, personal experiences and observations gained by the author whilst working at Politeknik Negeri Lhokseumawe for the last decade plus perceptions of teachers and administrators who have worked in the lab. Regarding the leadership and management in the language laboratory there are four items that should be improved: management of leadership, professional development, rewards, and the concept of educational management.

Keywords: Language laboratory, leadership, management, communication skills, TESOL.

1. INTRODUCTION

Under the Higher Education Long Term Strategy 2003-2010, the Directorate General of Higher Education of Indonesia (2004) expects higher education in Indonesia to be a moral force capable of (1) shaping the character and culture of the nation with high integrity, (2) strengthening national unity through the growth of a sense of belonging and togetherness as a nation that is united, (3) fostering a democratic society as a companion to the socio-political forces, (4) being a source of knowledge and fostering the formation of human resources that are responsive to the needs of people

---

[*]Corresponding author: nazlina090603@yahoo.com

in all social strata. Based on Law Number 20 of 2003 of the Republic of Indonesia concerning the National Education System (Republic of Indonesia, 2003), there are five types of higher education institutes in Indonesia, i.e. Academies, Colleges, Institutes, Universities, and Polytechnics. Polytechnics are institutions that focus on professional education that offer three and four year Diploma Programs. As providers of vocational education, polytechnics need to prepare students to have a job with specific applied skills.

On the other hand, globalization has positioned English as a means of communication which is very important nowadays. Globalization has been happening since last century. This has resulted in changes in the overall life of society hence higher education must adjust to liberalization and market restructuring and to the development of a knowledge-based society and must innovate to develop a range of methods and models of education (UNESCO, 2006). Students and lecturers readily move between countries providing a challenge for polytechnics to make comparisons between the quality of courses and the fit between graduates with the needs of employers. Consequently not only are polytechnic graduates required to have applied skills, they must also have good communication skills in English.

In most of the polytechnics in Indonesia English courses are considered as compulsory courses for students (Rifandi, 2013, p. 134). However to learn English it is not only necessary to attend lectures in classrooms, but students also need to couple up with practical activities in a language laboratory. The language lab plays a key role to learn the foreign language successfully in a comfortable atmosphere.

According to Antich, et al. (1988) in Brenes (2006, p. 2) the main objectives of the language laboratory are to make the individual practice of students more effective, and increase the productivity of language teachers who only need to focus on the student's production and correcting the mistakes made. To run a language laboratory effectively there are at least four aspects that need to be considered, namely lab facilities, standard operating rules, students, and lab coordinators. These four aspects must be well integrated with each other so that the laboratory activities can be run effectively. Laboratory coordinators are classified as internal factors. Thus, coordinators are the one aspect that can easily be empowered by the institutions in the management of the language lab. This paper aims to discuss the role of coordinators in improving English Language Laboratory operations. These discussions are based on literature reviews, personal experiences and observations at Politeknik Negeri Lhokseumawe for the last decade and perceptions of language laboratory staff.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Language Laboratory

A language laboratory is an audio or audio-visual installation used as a tool to assist language teaching. Most good secondary schools, universities and libraries are well equipped with language labs today. Alexander (2007, p. 2) explains that language labs established themselves as centers of language learning contemporaneously during the 1950s and 1960s; technological breakthroughs during this period were catalyzed by the enticing rewards of musical entertainment and language labs were on the whole fortuitous beneficiaries of these market-orientated advancements. The International

Association for Language Learning Technology (IALLT) was established in 1965; it is a professional organisation that attempts to provide leadership in the development, integration, evaluation and management of instructional technology for the teaching and learning of language, literature and culture.

During previous decades, language laboratories were tape based systems (Roby, 2004, p. 524) but now current installations are generally multimedia personal computers. The original language labs have now become very sophisticated. They allow a teacher to listen to and manage student audio with a computerized system. Therefore Alexander (2007, p. 1) says that language labs are also referred to as language resource centers, multimedia labs, centers for language study, language learning centers, interactive media centers, language and technology centers, media centers, open access centers, foreign language centers, open learning centers, open access multimedia centers, self-access centers, individualized language learning centers, independent learning centers, CALL centers/labs, world media and cultural centers, language acquisition centers, and language and computer laboratories. Modern language labs also need to have a highly developed and functional technology infrastructure; some of the technology considerations include: Web CT, lab services, lab equipment and services, PC classrooms, video viewings in class, Mac classrooms, studio recordings, technology services, media conversion and duplication, software and hardware, technical related links, and equipment available for short-term use.

The purpose of a language lab is to involve students to actively participate in language learning exercises and get more individual practice than otherwise possible in a traditional classroom environment (Brenes, 2006, p. 15). There are some common components in a modern language lab as listed as the following: (1) the teacher has a computer with appropriate software for conducting language exercises. (2) Teachers and students wear headsets that block outside sounds and disturbances. (3) Students have a media player/recorder for listening to audio and recording speech. (4) Teacher and student positions are connected via LAN (local area network), in some cases also via separate audio cabling. (5) A server computer or a separate storage device is often used to store lesson materials in a digital format. (6) With a language lab, all students in the class can speak simultaneously without distracting each other regardless of the class size. Without a language lab, in a class of more than 10 students, each student gets very little time for individual speaking practice.

2.2 Language Lab Coordinator Roles

At the early development, Cooper (1970, p. 46) mentioned that one of the most serious criticisms of the use of the language laboratory is that it is at best a dialogue between the students and an electromagnetic tape and at worst the apotheosis of the system of parrot learning. In short that it is a dehumanized method of language learning. Furthermore, Rivers (1970) in Brenes (2006, p. 6) makes three important statements related to the use of the language laboratory: (a) the language laboratory is not a method, (b) the language laboratory is not a teacher, and (c) language laboratory work must be an integral part of a language learning program. It is important to understand these three different ideas in order to comprehend some complaints that have been linked to the use of the language laboratory.

Modern language labs require a well-developed administration. According to Alexander (2007, p. 11) some typical administrative tasks comprise responding to

questions at (a) a faculty/staff help-desk, (b) a student help-desk, (c) a Web help-desk or (d) a technology help link. Other duties involve presentations by lab staff, providing materials & purchase information, submitting recorded materials, giving information about contacts and locations and adhering to lab opening hours. Another important administrative undertaking pertains to audio-tape check-out, tape drop-off and pickup, lab check-in and checkout and general lab scheduling. Modern language labs offer an extensive and growing range of services to users. Most of the services relate to offering a variety of modes of learning foreign languages and developing a corresponding assortment of materials for such languages. As a result, such language labs often have highly developed IT administration and state-of-the-art technical infrastructure. Another area that modern language labs are entering pertains to innovation and development in learning techniques.

Language labs help people learn foreign languages or improve their English-speaking skills through the aid of computers, software programs and other technologies. Language lab coordinators maintain these facilities by creating lab use schedules and providing training sessions for users (Alexander, 2008, p.1). Coordinators may also hire new staff, collaborate on lesson plans with language teachers, write budget reports and make recommendations on technology purchases, upgrades, training and staffing.

Language lab coordinators require a strong understanding of technology, so they may consider taking instructional technology courses. Based on study at Queen Mary University of London, Barge (2009, p. 13) shows that in order to become a fully effective user of a multimedia language lab, language teachers need to be both technically and pedagogically proficient. It is therefore incumbent on institutions and managers to provide sufficient teacher training and development to meet this complex need for multi-skilling. At the undergraduate level, instructional or educational technology courses must be provided to teach students about utilizing different software programs in classroom settings. Most of these courses provide training in digital multimedia applications, methods for preparation of instructional programs, computer networking and development of instructional materials.

In order to achieve a better service in a language lab, Davis (2011, p. 216) mentioned that it is of more benefit to invest in training than devices. Over the years, he has visited institutions in which he often encountered one similarity: abandoned, discarded or underused pieces of technology. This can occur due to inadequate assessment of students' needs or over-realistic expectations of what technology can do to enhance learning. What is actually true with technology is that even with the best tools, little can be accomplished without significant investment in on-going, in-service training.

Based on investigations in Bangladesh reported by Hafiz (2013, p. 11), it was discovered that a good number of universities had not yet established a language lab. But in the universities where well-equipped labs were available, English teachers were sincere in making use of them for the betterment of the students. However, in a few universities, labs were not well-maintained due to a lack of funds according to the teachers. Few teachers actually had formal training for operating labs properly hence they did not show much confidence in using them. Formal training for operating labs properly is greatly needed so that teachers will get confidence in using them.

Similar problems were found by Hashmi (2013, p. 8) in Pakistan. She states some of the problems in the operation of digital language labs in technical/engineering universities included: (1) in a technical or engineering university/department, educators,

management and students do not give the same rating to English language as to technical subjects. These institutions focus on their core subjects as they are more concerned about their students' technical knowledge rather than their language abilities. Therefore priority is given to the core subjects; (2) often no lab is available for the enhancement of English listening, speaking, reading and writing [LSRW] skills; (3) even when there is a lab, most of the English language teachers are afraid to use the technology and panic quickly when one of the buttons is not working as per their intent. They are more comfortable with traditional ways of teaching as they find them more convenient.

Yeong and Chiew (2009, pp. 77-81) described three important factors that should be considered affecting the effectiveness of the language laboratory instruction system namely human elements, strategies, and software. For the human elements, there are two main types of regular users of the language laboratory i.e. the instructors/teachers and the learners/students. For effective utilization, the instructor has to have a complete mastery of the operation of all the gadgets on the console panel. It looks easy, though, for one to read the labels and know their functions, but to manipulate them skilfully to get the desirable results, one needs constant and regular practice. Besides, it is also necessary for the instructor to master the programming techniques and to be able to use the programming editor to tailor-make master-tapes to meet lesson objectives.

Almost all English teachers find the job of designing, editing and modifying digital materials as tedious and time consuming. Lee (2001, pp. 43-50) says "Therefore, instructors may resist Internet based activities or projects that require substantially more preparation time". The lack of facilities such as audio-visual aids, OHPs and, above all, uninterrupted supply of electricity for providing a smooth and convenient environment for teaching and learning, are seen as major limitations. Such technical issues stop some English teachers from incorporating on-line language teaching.

Technophobia due to lack of experience with computers is another reason handicapping some English language teachers. Similarly, Towndrow and Vallace (2002) highlighted a number of negative impacts of computers on education. Some of these are: information overload can lead to techno-stress; computer mediated synchronous communications have generated more text with minimal interactions; learners are disappointed due to lack of immediate feedback; without enough training for English teachers, teaching simply results in learner apathy, disorientation and abuse. English teachers must be open to update and adapt to the contemporary age of technology. They should try to incorporate multimedia-printed materials supplemented with electronic means, i.e. audio/video, TV, computer/internet, educational periodicals, etc., into their daily teaching rather than just following traditional teaching methods. Administrators often have the mistaken belief that buying hardware by itself will meet the needs of the language lab devoting a lion's portion of the budget to such and ignoring the software and training needs. Sometimes they even cut-down the number of teaching staff and funds for management & maintenance of equipment and infrastructure. Such notion needs to be totally changed. The institutes that teachers are working for must provide adequate funds as an incentive to support their English teachers. In the absence of this, some teachers may feel it is not worthwhile to spend much time designing and updating their web-based or self-tailored teaching materials. English teachers need to be given competency-based well organized specialized prerequisite in-service training in order to provide more audience-targeted instructions for teaching English. Management needs to arrange for learner-training sessions that

promote efficient and effective language laboratory learning. Learning strategies include bringing about situations through which students can become more aware of their present learning strategies, by comparing them with those of fellow learners.

One way to learn about language labs while still in school includes working at these facilities. Many labs have entry-level tutor or staff positions available to college students. The majority of language labs offer pre-scheduled laboratory training sessions, and the topics covered in these sessions may include pronunciation workshops, cultural studies, language skills or online language laboratory learning resources. Language lab tutors and staff members can supervise these training sessions and help students learn about using on-site technology and software programs.

Although it is not absolutely required for language lab coordinators to speak other languages, it is preferable that the co-ordinator is bilingual. People can learn foreign languages through formal classes, private tutors or individual study sessions. There is not a particular language that a lab coordinator should be fluent in; the decision on which language to learn rests with that particular person.

There are teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) certificate programs available for undergraduate students or for those who already hold bachelor's degrees. Courses in these programs may include language analysis, lesson plans, teaching methodologies, linguistics and classroom preparation. TESOL certificate programs mainly train people to teach English to non-native speakers, but many of the basic principles can be applied to any foreign language acquisition, which is important for language lab coordinators to learn.

Besides working directly in language labs, the language lab coordinators should have management experience. They should be professionals who can prepare budget reports, maintain datasets and implement policies. They should also have significant experience working at academic institutions, which could include purely administrative duties or previous teaching experience. Working in an administrative, teaching or management position at a University can lead to a language lab coordinators job. Overall, the lab coordinator needs to have three types of skills namely key skills, computer skills, and technical skills. In key skills the coordinator must be capable of developing relationships and helping people, must be familiar with English grammar and punctuation, must have knowledge of other languages and must be able to work without supervision. In computer skills the coordinator must be familiar with spread sheets, language lab and word processing software programs and must be able to maintain electronic records. In technical skills the coordinator must know how to use and maintain the language laboratory equipment: computers, printers, copiers, calculators, audio systems, tape recorders, CD & DVD players, TVs and camcorders, MP3 and PP projectors.

3. METHOD

This research involved a literature review, documentation of the author's personal experiences gained whilst working in the language lab at Politeknik Negeri Lhokseumawe for the last decade and interviews with teachers and administrators who had worked in the lab. Four semi-structured interviews, each about 30 minutes in length were done with five staff from the language lab for the research. Qualitative research methods were used to address three research questions; (1) how has leadership and

management affected the development of the language lab, (2) how can leadership and management be used for better development of the language lab, and (3) what solutions can be proposed to develop a more effective language lab in the future.

4.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following is a summary of the findings from the language lab at Politeknik Negeri Lhokseumawe. This laboratory has been developed in order to support compulsory English courses for students there. In addition, the lab also provides English training in order to improve the skills of students and teachers in English. In practice, these aims can only be fulfilled if the lab is managed and operated properly. With regards to leadership and management there are five items which need to be improved in the language laboratory: better management and/or better leadership, professional development, rewards, nepotism and the problem of management for education.

According to Sapre (2002) in Bush and Middlewood (2005, p. 3), management is a set of activities directed towards efficient and effective utilization of organizational resources in order to achieve organizational goals. While, Eriksen (2001, pp. 22-23) states that leadership is a matter of co-operation, and that the success of leaders depends on the quality of the co-operation they are able to establish between themselves and their subordinates. Leadership concerns the relationship between actors who are dependent on one another to get things done. It is a relationship between actors, in which some are in a position to influence the behaviour of others.

Firstly, problems were found related to management or leadership for example the leader [of the lab] may not involve all the staff in the organization as appropriate. Thus members of staff are not fully trusted to do their duties as set out in their job descriptions. Actually, leaders are people who shape the goals, motivations, and actions of others and managing is maintaining efficient and effective current organizational arrangements (Cuban, 1998) in Bush and Middlewood (2005, p. 4). Thus unclear, inadequate or conflicting job description may create internal conflict in the organization.

Secondly, according to Bush and Middlewood (2005, pp. 22-27) professional development can be regarded as a vital dimension in improving a teacher's professional skills and capabilities. Professional updating is essential for teachers and associate staff. This is likely to involve enhanced knowledge of both content and pedagogy. Professional development provides a 'win-win' situation for school leaders as it meets the individual's needs for career development while contributing to school development and encouraging staff retention. Professional development is an essential part of lifelong learning and is likely to be beneficial for schools [and for labs] for two reasons. First, effective professional development is likely to improve motivation that provides the basis for teacher retention and at least the potential to enhance performance. Secondly, it also makes a direct contribution to performance development (Bush & Middlewood, 2005, p. 22).

Operation and improvement of the organization actually not only depends on the leader's efforts alone, but is also an integrated part of the efforts of the whole organization and its resources. This is what is called transformational leadership in which people are inspired to achieve an agreed vision of a better future for the

organization and its clients (Bush & Middlewood, 2005, p. 19). Transformational leadership focuses on developing the organization's capacity to innovate; it also seeks to build the organization's capacity to select its purposes and to support the development of change. Furthermore, transformational leadership is viewed as distributed in that it focuses on developing a shared vision and shared commitment (Hallinger, 2003, p. 330).

Of course better performance of the organization and its resources may reduce the workload of certain individual members of staff as well as the leader. In this way, the organization can become more efficient. On the other hand, upgrading of the skills of members of staff has been shown to increase their loyalty to the organization; training events can even be considered as a kind of reward for them.

Thirdly, according to incentive theories proposed by Handy (1993) in Bush and Middlewood (2005, p. 21), individuals work harder if given specific rewards or encouragement for good performance. Therefore, the third area that calls for improvement here is the area of rewards. Regardless to how high or low the intensity of our loyalty to the organization, we need to get a satisfactory reward for the work that we have done. Actually, rewards are one of aspect of management that can increase the motivation of staff. The rewards may not only be in economic benefits such as tips or bonuses, but may also be in immaterial form such as a word of thanks from the leader. For example, in designing programs for the organization, the leader may sometime ask his/her staffs to propose ideas. On the one hand this is good as members of the staff are involved in improving the organization's programs. In the other hand, if when the ideas are proposed and presented to the government and the leader declares that the ideas are his alone this can demoralize the staff because their efforts have not been recognized.

The fourth area of concern is nepotism; this problem might be a result of bad practises that came from the previous government in Indonesia before the reform era. Nepotism was then not only practiced in the political domain but it also contaminated the area of education: Education is an area that should be filled with high morality as proposed by Noddings (1995, p. 365). Because of nepotism, sometimes a person who has no suitable qualifications or capability to lead a government educational organization is put in charge.

A good leader is not only able to implement the instructions from the government but also wants to adopt ideas that come from his staff in order to improve the organization. Transformational leadership can be characterized by this bottom-up focus on approach to school improvement as suggested by Hallinger (2003, p. 337). By adopting ideas from the staff, the leader at the same time empowers his staff; this can help the staff to develop confidence and to feel ownership of change. This method can lead the organization's improvement (Bush & Middlewood, 2005, p. 28).

The other problem identified is related to the concept of management for education. Bush (2003, p. 3) states that educational management should be centrally concerned with the purpose or aims of education. Contrarily, the leader may prefer to establish programs that have economic benefits for the teachers such as training for the teachers than the programs that are specially proposed for students. Gobbo and Giradi (2001, p. 63) claim that the teacher's competence plays a major role in how technology is implemented and whether teachers will be motivated to implement it. Thus the need for effective training should be highlighted and also the need for organizational support (Coles, Richardson & Tuson, 2000, p. 178). Moreover, this sets forth the notion that

confidence and levels of lab use are directly affected by teacher competence or lack of competence in using the lab technology.

5. CONCLUSION

Finally, in order to solve all the problems of leadership and management, the organization needs to arrange self-evaluation meetings between the leader and the staff. The self-evaluation program is urgently needed to improve leadership and management within the organization. This program will help to improve the performance of the leader and also the staff and can also be used to evaluate programs for the future.

REFERENCES

Alexander, C. (2007). Language labs: An overview of trends. *Teaching English with Technology Journal, 7*(3), 1-16.

Alexander, C. (2008). Humanising management software. *Teaching English with Technology Journal, 8*(1), 1-17.

Barge, M. (2009). *Teaching techniques for multimedia language labs (Final Report).* London: Queen Mary University of London.

Brenes, C. A. N. (2006). The language laboratory and the EFL course. *Revista Electrónica Actualidades Investigativas en Educación, 6*(2), 1–25.

Bush, T. (2003). *Theories of educational management* (3rd ed). London: Sage.

Bush, T., & Middlewood, D. (2005). *Leading and managing people in education.* London: Sage.

Coles, L., Richardson, A., & Tuson, J. (2000). Integrating information and communications technology in professional practice: an analysis of teachers' needs based on a survey of primary and secondary teachers in Scottish schools. *Journal of Information Technology for Teacher Education, 9*(2), 1-16.

Cooper, D. (1970). Verbal fluency and the language laboratory. *Kivung, 3*(1), 46-50.

Davis, R. (2011). Retooling perspectives on technology's role in language education. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal, 2*(3), 212-218.

Directorate General of Higher Education (2004). *Strategi jangka panjang pendidikan tinggi 2003-2010 (HELTS): Menuju sinergi kebijakan nasional.* Jakarta: Directorate General of Higher Education, Ministry of National Education, Republic of Indonesia.

Eriksen, E. O. (2001), Leadership in a communicative perspective. *Acta Sociologica, 44*, 21-35.

Gobbo, C., & Giradi, M. (2001).Teachers' beliefs and integration of information and communications technology in Italian schools. *Journal of Information Technology for Communications Technology in Italian Schools, 10*(1/2), 63-85.

Hafiz, K. D. (2013). An investigation into CALL in English language teaching through language laboratory. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS), 6*(6), 08-14.

Hallinger, P. (2003). Leading educational change: Reflections on the practice of instructional and transformational leadership. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 33*(3), 329-351.

Hashmi, S. (2013). Need of an English language laboratory in engineering universities. *IJCSN International Journal of Computer Science and Network, 2*(5), 8-10.

Republic of Indonesia. (2003). *Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 20 Year 2003 on the National Education System.* Jakarta: Ministry of the State Secretariat.

Lee, J. (2001). The Internet for English language teaching. *The Reading Matrix, 1*(2), 43-50.

Noddings, N. (1995). A morally defensible mission for schools in the 21st century. *Phi Delta Kappan, 76*(5), 365.

Rifandi, A. (2013).Mutu pembelajaran dan kompetensi lulusan Diploma III Politeknik. *Cakrawala Pendidikan, 1*, 125-138.

Roby, W.B. (2004). Technology in the service of foreign language teaching: The case of the language laboratory. In D. Jonassen (Ed). *Handbook of research on educational communications and technology* (2nd ed.) (pp. 523-541). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Towndrow, P. A., & Vallace, M. (2002). *Using information technology in the language classroom.* Singapore: Prentice Hall.

UNESCO. (2006). Growing legitimacy and recognition, trends and developments in private higher education in Europe. *Higher Education in Europe, XXXI* (1). Retrieved on August 21, 2014 from http://unesdoc.unesco.org/Ulis/cgi-bin/ulis.pl?catno=147260&set=4AEF32FD_2_4&gp=0&lin=1&ll=s

Yeong, K. T., & Chiew, P. S. E. (2009).Effective utilization of a language laboratory. *Teaching and Learning, 1*(2), 77-89.

THE AUTHOR

Marlina Marzuki was born in Pante Pisang on September 16, 1978. She graduated from TEN (Tarbiyah of English, or English Language Department) of UIN (Islamic State University) Ar-Raniry, Banda Aceh, Indonesia, for her first degree. She completed her Master's degree at Stockholm University, Sweden, focusing on the field of pedagogical work in trans-national global context. She is now on the teaching staff at Politeknik Negeri Lhokseumawe, Lhokseumawe, Aceh, Indonesia.