

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24297/jal.v10i0.8154>

## Web-Based Language Learning for Enhancing Students' Soft Skills in Mount Kenya University

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### Abstract

The application of an appropriate teaching methodology plays an important role in the acquisition of language skills. Soft skills such as oral and listening skills are all important for young adults who are about to enter the working world. However, soft skills are not well captured in the curriculum at the university level. Thus, employing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) may hinder learners from noticing these important skills that are useful in real life. This study aims to demonstrate that the combination of TBLT and web-based language learning enhances student's ability to acquire soft skills that are paramount in their real life. The following hypothesis guided the study: soft skills are enhanced through the use of a combination of task-based language teaching and web-based language learning. The experimental research design was used for the current study where a pre-test/post-test methodology was utilized. The target population for the current study was 300 third-year students studying English as a second language. Therefore, thirty students formed a sample size of the current study and were subjects of the experiment during one semester. The experiment consisted of exposing two groups fifteen each, randomly sampled, to a set of activities but using different methods, one of which was Computer Assisted Language Learning. Participant observation method was also used and was deemed important for the interpretation of the quantitative data. Data were analysed quantitatively. Thus, the results of the current study were derived from statistical analysis. The mean in the performance of the control group and the experimental group was significantly different. The findings of the study show that when learners are exposed to the web and visual aids, they become actively involved in the process of learning unlike in an aural environment. The study recommends the use of Computer Assisted Language Learning as a method of motivating and enhancing student's development of soft skills.

**Keywords:** Task-Based Language Teaching, Web-based language learning Soft Skills

### 1. Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century global teaching workforce requires English Second Language (ESL) learners to be equipped with skills that allow them work effectively in a changing society. English has become the world's foremost lingua franca leading to pressure to improve English language education. However, from a study carried out by Othman & Shah (2013) it was noted that there is poor English proficiency among university graduates. The question that can be asked from the above findings is 'Why do we have ESL graduates that are not proficient in spoken and written English?' The answer could be the approaches that are employed in the teaching of ESL. Information technology has led to a shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred approaches where learners are considered to be active participants in the learning of ESL. Information technology has been used to support the teaching of English as a second language effectively. It helps learners develop their communicative competence since the focus on language learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is on communicative competence (Eaton, 2010). Previous studies have documented the benefits of computer-mediated teaching on learners such as aiding in the development of difficult language skills such as speaking and listening skills (Levy, 2009). Also, Yu (2011) argues that technology enhances six communication competencies that include: linguistic, discursive, strategic, sociolinguistic, socio-cultural, and affective skills.

The current curriculum of English as a Second Language at the university level aims at developing the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. However, absent in this vision is the pragmatic, discursive, strategic, socio-cultural and affective competencies mentioned earlier by Yu (2011). These deficiencies as discussed by Blake (2008) in a Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) hinder the development of soft skills that are needed in real life situation. In TBLT, language is presented by focusing on meaning by means of communicative tasks such as group work, pair discussions and role plays. The current study aimed at showing how a combination of TBLT and web-based language learning also called Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) can address such deficiencies.

Any language teaching class aims to create a communicative environment in which learners can express themselves freely in the target language they are learning. Following this insight, the researchers carried out a web-based language study whose purpose was to enhance soft skills among students learning English as a second language (ESL). Soft skills are personal attributes that learners need to acquire to succeed in their workplace. Such capabilities include; effective communication, listening, public speaking, time management, conflict resolution, teamwork, persuasion, presentation, negotiation, writing skills among others. Schawbel (2014) observes that soft skills also known as employability skills are significant during an interview by a potential employer. The ESL teachers should, therefore, cultivate the employability skills among ESL graduates to make them competitive globally.

The digital generation has forced teachers to move from the traditional approaches to teaching and embrace

The notion of the learner's task in TBLT is central to implementing any language curriculum that addresses the four skills. A language task is a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome (Willis, 1996). Various scholars suggest that TBLT can be enhanced by the use of CALL (cf. Doughty and Long, 2003; González-Lloret (2015). CALL is succinctly defined as the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning (Levy, 1997). The network is used as an aid to the presentation, reinforcement, and assessment of material to be learned, usually including a substantial interactive element (Davis, 2002).

Teixeira (2015) observes that CALL programs that merely present electronic flashcards to students when they are learning new words and phrases help students in sub-vocalization. Other scholars emphasize on the use of CALL for development of appropriate oral speaking in ESL that depict correct prosodic features such as stress, intonation, and tone (cf. Raux and Kawahara, 2002; Hirata, 2005; Gorjian, Hayati, and Pourkhoni; 2013, Ong'onda and Muindi; 2016). CALL programs also provide students with the ability to improve their listening skills and perceptual hearing (Levie, 1987; Iheanacho, 1997). The current researchers attempt to demonstrate the impact of combining TBLT and web-based learning on the acquisition of soft skills.

## **2. Statement of the problem**

Soft skills such as communication skills, teamwork, negotiation, speaking and listening skills are all critical for ESL university graduates who are about to enter the working world. However, soft skills are not well captured in the curriculum at the university level or put rightly they tend to be neglected since they are hard to measure. Any language learning curriculum aims to help learners acquire the four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. However, the pragmatic, sociolinguistic, discursive and affective competencies of language learning are absent in this vision due to the task-based language learning methodologies that are used in a classroom setting. The current study, therefore, is an attempt to show how a combination of task-based language learning tasks with web-based language learning can enhance the acquisition of soft skills. Since they are not only valuable but they are transferable skills that are needed for any job market.

## **3. Research design and Methodology**

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of Web-based language learning also called CALL as a tool for enhancing the acquisition of soft skills in a higher education context. The study intends to combine both

TBLT and CALL as a mean of improving the growth of soft skills in learners. The current study concerns the process of teaching soft skills and attempts to prove the efficiency of combining TBLT and CALL process as a motivating device. Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forward: Soft skills are enhanced through the use of a combination of task-based language teaching and web-based language learning.

To test such a hypothesis, the experimental design was deemed appropriate for the current study. An experiment is a scientific investigation in which the researcher manipulates one or more independent variables, controls any other relevant variables, and observes the effect of the manipulations on the dependent variable(s) (Cresswell, 2003). The goal of the experimental research is to determine whether a causal relationship exists between two or more variables. Because the experiment involves control and careful observation and measurement, this research method provides the most convincing evidence of the effect that one variable has on another. The study was carried out for one semester; May-August (2018) which comprised of 14 weeks.

In the current study, the effect of combining TBLT and CALL on the acquisition of soft skills was the independent variable while the dependent variable is the difference in the level of motivation in the addition and improvement of soft skills between the two groups. An experimental design aims to determine whether a causal relationship exists between two or more variables. Therefore, pre-test, post-test group design and random sampling of the subject were deemed necessary for the assessment of the relationship between the independent and dependent variable. Random sampling gives equal chances to individuals of being in either treatment groups.

### **3.1 Sampling**

The target population for the current study was 300 third-year students studying English as a second language. Therefore, thirty students (10%) formed a sample size of the present research and were subjects of the experiment during one semester. Random sampling was achieved through an arbitrary selection of numbers in a table from a population of the third-year students of the English department at Mount Kenya University. Each group was assigned fifteen students; however, the experimental group will receive the experimental treatment.

## **4. Results and discussion**

The current study aimed at establishing the effect of the use of CALL and TBLT methods on the acquisition of soft skills. There is a range of soft skills ranging from communication skills, public speaking, listening, writing, reading, persuasion, confidence, negotiation skills to affective competencies. Technology has changed a lot with the development of new formats and the arrival of the era of the Internet, use of multimedia, and mobile devices (smart-phone, tablets) which have been changing the way we interact and collaborate with each other. The role of technology in SL learning has increased new formats to deliver and present SL teaching, which provides more interaction, such as live chat or discussion boards (Gill, 2011). The current study focused on how CALL enhances the acquisition of soft skills such as effective communication (Speaking and listening) and writing skills using as discussed below:

### **4.1 Enhancing effective communication skills using internet-based materials**

Communication skills are the essential skills for working in any organization. Effective communication entails speaking and listening appropriately. The ESL teacher needs to create a communicative environment where the L2 learners practice speaking skills by improving their fluency (pronunciation).

#### **4.1.1 Enhancing effective Speaking skills using ipads and watching video clips**

The current study sought to establish whether the use of ipads can develop speaking skills in ESL learners. iPads have many inbuilt features that can be used to support English learners. Some of these features include

texts with the spoken option, voice applications (video, recorded or live) and dictation. The experimental group of 15 students (8 female, 7 male) was given extra speaking online assignments on ipads. The learners were given task-based speaking assignments by using technology. The learners were instructed to record themselves speaking ESL. Learners were later requested to listen to their recorded speech with the intention of correcting their pronunciation and audibility. The task-based method focused on meaning rather than the syntax of L2. The study found that learners were able to improve their pronunciation due to the interaction with new computer programs with voice recognition that made learning interesting.

The second task-based activity that was given to the learners were video clips that were selected by use of Zaption which allows online annotations for videos. The researchers put into consideration the pragmatic, socio-linguistic and cultural information that was deemed to be crucial knowledge for the second language learner. The video clips exposed the learners to several conversations by native speakers of English. They provided the second language learners with the opportunity to practice on right accent, intonation and how to incorporate non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, eye contact, and gestures in their oral communication. Moreover, the video clips allowed the ESL to participate in the target language culture hence understanding the native speaker's worldview embracing cultural diversity.

The experimental group was also given online dictation tasks after explicit instruction on L2 sounds. Dictation exercises were carried online via the Dragon software. The Dragon application transcribes into the ESL the best guess as to what the learner said. If the Dragon ESL transcription contains errors, the learner knows that the pronunciation has deviated from the statistical norms programmed into this app. The dragon app obliges the user to analyse and paraphrase the utterance in a more understandable way. The restating of the statement provides feedback along the lines of forced output as described. The researchers provided learners with five problematic English words weekly to pronounce them as the dragon app provided input. The study established this follow up assignment on speaking enhanced the acquisition of speaking skills in learners that used the dragon app as compared to the control group.

A t-test was then conducted to see if the students who received additional speaking practice through iPads and video clips, and those students who did not, differed on their scores. The table 1 & 2 below show the means and standard deviations for both groups. The charts indicate that the experimental group performed better than the control group on the post-test. The t-test was run to compare the mean values of 2 independent groups. The mean was found to be statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level. The researchers analysed the student's fluency for both experimental and control group. Emphasis was placed on speech rate that was calculated as the mean number of words per minute excluding false starts, repetitions, and repairs.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Pre-test**

N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.	Deviation
Experimental Group	15	10.00	21.50	15.25	7.432
Control group	15	8.50	22.50	22.50	5.46

The research findings showed that there were no significant differences between the scores of the two groups (Group 1: mean =15.25; Group 2: mean = 15.50) on the pre-treatment of oral skills and in the performance of the two groups on the pronunciation pre-test. The results of T-test analysis also confirmed this.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Post Test in speaking skills**

N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.	Deviation
Experimental group	15	28.00	47.00	37.500	6.60
Control group	15	4.30	20.00	22.25	4.75

Group (N = 15, M = 9.16, SD = 5.23); control group (N = 15, M = groups on the pronunciation pre-test: treatment group (N = 15, M = 9.16, SD = 5.23); control group (N = 15, M = 9.80, SD = 5.65).

The above discrepancy in the post-test show that combining TBLT and CALL methods leads to the critical acquisition of speaking skills. Therefore, table 2 on descriptive Statistics for Post Test reveals that CALL is effective in meaningful discourse. CALL features such as iPads, video clips, and dragon app help learners to get involved in real-time conversational activities that motivate learners to know more about the TL and make learning enjoyable. The speech rate of the control groups was high. The researchers listened to the speaking projects of the experimental groups weekly to provide feedback, trace development, and monitor student progress. The regular speaking practice contributed to the development of students’ oral proficiency. The statistical scores for the experimental group were better than the those of the control group on dragon dictation assignments. Thus, the difference in statistical findings indicates that exposing learners to CALL is beneficial for their overall speaking proficiency. Video clips lessons sent to the experimental group on WhatsApp allowed the students to interact with speakers of the target language visually, orally, and in a written format and this engaged them into real-life situations that enhanced their language ability and their use of body language.

**4.1.2 Enhancing listening skills using digital audio, podcast and watching video clips**

Listening is similarly as vital as speaking appropriately especially when paying attention to people around you. One needs to practice on useful competencies such as empathy, problem-solving skills, and compassion which are an essential part of the soft skills that learners should acquire for professionalism. However, the teaching of listening at the university level merely emphasize testing is attending rather than teaching on how to listen.

To prove the hypothesis that guided the current research: soft skills such as listening skills can be enhanced through CALL; the researcher used a T-test. Both groups were exposed to tests before and after treatment. The preliminary study discovered that twenty-two (73%) students found it difficult to recognize words spoken in strings of utterances. That is the learners were unable to separate sounds into words. The learners could not use the right intonation and stressed syllables. All this information is essential for word recognition which is a micro skill or basis for successful listening (cf. Rost, 2002).

The experimental group was exposed to the podcast. The podcast is an Internet-based listening material in the form of mp3 that can be easily segmented and adjusted into short sentences, clauses and phrases by making use of the audio software. The learners were to listen to the materials selected for four weeks and think aloud on the same content. After four weeks the researchers described the mental process involved during the listening processes. These listening practices in metacognitive processes were valuable for helping learners listen effectively.

The students were also sent listening materials on their WhatsApp group through digital audio, and they were given tasks to watch the clips. This method was deemed necessary since learners, have the opportunity to pause at will, and listen and read a transcript. Learners also had instant feedback on what they have done. The results of the post-test show that students who used web-based materials performed better than the control group as shown below: Before and after the treatment period. They got different scores.

Both groups (control and experimental) were exposed to tests before and after the treatment period. They got different scores.

**Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Post Test in listening skills**

N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.	Deviation
Experimental group	15	27.00	46.00	36.500	6.50
Control group	15	3.39	29.00	22.25	4.55

Group (N = 15, M = 9.16, SD = 5.23); control group (N = 15, M = groups on the pronunciation pre-test: treatment group (N = 15, M = 9.16, SD = 5.23); control group (N = 15, M = 9.80, SD = 5.65).

English as a foreign language enhanced the students’ motivation, hence improved their performance in listening for the experimental group. The results above show that websites were an appropriate tool for practicing listening skills outside classroom anywhere and anytime. The researchers observed that the use of the website is convenient for students to practice soft skills such as listening skills. The sites provide various topics and students can choose the items they prefer and or those related to the issues they are studying in English class. In the process of development of listening skills, students could also learn other skills such as problem solving and teamwork. The students could explain the learning problems they experienced. For instance, they reported having repeated listening materials again and again until they get the information they were looking for. Thus, websites provided a free environment for developing soft skills such as listening. Learners reported that they were able to improve other soft skills such as such as pronunciation, speaking, reading, vocabulary learning, and kinesics. Learners stated that they could follow and repeat the pronunciation and intonation of the speakers.

#### **4.3 Enhancing writing skills through online discussions and forums**

Writing skills are part and parcel of our language classes and can be influenced by computers. However, writing skills are an integral part of soft skills that any employer in almost every industry looks for in an employee. The ESL in the current study were given an essay writing to rate their writing skills. The preliminary research discovered that twenty (66%) students found it difficult to express their thoughts.

The second phase exposed the experimental group to web-based activities that would engage them in writing. The first tool that was used by learners was an online discussion forum. Learners were given tasks to accomplish by the end of each week. Learners were requested to build their own digital stories online. The learners in the experimental group were grouped into groups of three for writing an assignment. The first assignment was to create a narrative from a line that the researchers gave them such as: Once upon a time. Learners were expected to engage in advanced techniques such as online role plays where the learner takes on the role and post from that viewpoint. Learners, therefore, involved in other soft skills such as teamwork, support, and collaboration to build a story to send to the researchers. Learners made use of word processing software that provided some automatic feedback while doing writing tasks. Learners, therefore, had a privilege to correct their errors regarding spelling, some grammatical points, organizing, editing, and revising different texts. Researchers noticed learners could improve their writing skills and organization of digital stories weekly. The stories developed by learners were made available to the rest of class to reflect further on content, form and language use.

Web-based writing, therefore, allows students to collaborate hence enhancing the development of teamwork skills that are paramount in any working environment. The success of the three groups depended on their teamwork skills and negotiation. Discussions of topics allow learners to collaborate by extending communicative abilities and a wide range of discourse structures.

Therefore, such peer interaction promotes L2 production and constructive criticism as they wrote their digital story. Learners also through their WhatsApp group engaged in discussion forums where they discussed topics that they were sent by researchers. Researchers were passive members of online discussion forums where they observed that online forums provided learners with complex scenarios where learners showed their different personalities.

#### **Learners were asked to discuss the introduction of CALL in Kenyan language classes.**

The use of discussion forums allowed critical thinking before they responded or debated on the topic at hand. Discussion forums gave learners the opportunity to think before they returned to the views of other members hence improving their writing, discussing and critical thinking skills. Moreover, as learners addressed the importance of CALL, they engaged in the negotiated interaction that also enhanced their grammatical competence.

At week ten a post-test was given to the participants of the study. The finding showed that the experimental group performed better 86% than the Control group 42%. Worth noting is the fact that both the experimental and control group advocated for the combination of TBLT and CALL methods in language learning classes. Moreover, forums gave learners an opportunity to freely express themselves through informal social interaction their opinions and exchange ideas on the assigned topics. Shy learners felt that the online group forum gave them an opportunity to express themselves. Thus, the online discussion forum offered great active support to the shy students so they could carry out the shared task without feeling pressure as intensively as they would in front of the class. Shy learners through internet-based networks improved shy learner's confidence and encouraged those who were reluctant to participate in presentations in class. Thus, the researchers conclude that new technologies such as blogs, forums, wikis, WhatsApp tools provide a fertile ground for the development of soft skills such as critical, writing, negotiation and teamwork skills.

## 5. Conclusion

The experimental study held in this one semester period illustrated that combining TBLT and CALL methods in SL classes enhances the development of soft skills of learners. The difference in the gains between the two groups was noticeable and the result of the t-test / post-test data for the experimental group was statistically significant. Learners developed soft skills such as listening, speaking, writing, negotiation, team writing, and confidence among other skills through web-based tools. The use of ipads, video clips and online dictation as additional instructional tools facilitated the development of speaking skills in learners. The purpose of listening skills using digital audio, podcast and watching video clips motivated learners to engage in listening skills practices. Thus websites provided a free environment for developing soft skills such as listening. Discussions of topics allow learners to collaborate by extending communicative abilities and a wide range of discourse structures. The study concludes that web-based activities empowered learners to be actively involved in the process of own learning web-based learning systematically provided constructive feedback to learners. Therefore, through the use of web-based resources learners enhance the acquisition of soft skills.

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