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ABSTRACT

Noting that foreign language requirements have been abolished, reduced, or modified between 1966 and 1971 in over 45 percent of the B.A. degree-granting institutions in the United States, the author probes into the current status and uses of the language laboratory. It is suggested that the widespread decline in language enrollments is due in large measure to a misunderstanding of the function and potential of the language laboratory. Ways in which the laboratory may contribute to the revitalization of language instruction are elaborated. (RL)

THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY: HARDWARE FOR HARD TIMES

Daymond Turner

"The present state of the FL teaching profession is analogous to the situation of the dodo bird in 1598 when the Dutch landed on Mauritius. As in the case of the dodo our protected environment has not conditioned us to the changes now required of us for our survival."[1]

Speaking to the National Council on the Humanities a little more than a year ago William D.Schaefer reported that: "Some of the most distinguished and prestigious of our graduate schools have either eliminated or sadly watered down foreign language requirements in the M.A. and even in the Ph.D. program. Foreign language requirements have been abolished, reduced, or modified between 1966 and 1971 in over 45 percent of the B.A.-granting institutions. Degree requirements which five years ago could be found in eighty-nine percent of all colleges, today exist in only 77 percent, and the percentage appears to be dropping more or less daily. Moreover, the college entrance requirements in foreign languages have fallen from 34 percent five years ago to only 27 percent last year (1970). I have no current figures on the impact this has made on high school enrollments, but at the college and university level between 1968 and 1970, when national enrollments rose 13 percent, enrollments in French and German declined by 7 percent, and there is no reason to

suspect that the decline will not continue for the next few years."[2] Or as a panelist complained at a recent meeting of foreign language teachers in my own state: "Since our courses became elective, they are not being elected."

Those of us who have dared to suggest that the teacher's voice, the printed page, and chalk and blackboard need not be the only nor the best means of second language teaching are getting our share of the blame. For example, in a recent issue of ADFL Bulletin of the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages a Professor of Classics from a well-known mid-western institution notes with ill-concealed glee that the three departments of modern languages on his campus were ranked 26, 27, and 28 among 28 departments in effectiveness of instruction as evaluated by their students. He goes on to cite as a major contributing factor "the singular, all-pervasive failure of the language lab whose sole merit is as a soporific." The same number of the Bulletin includes the following news items: "Hamline University reports that its language laboratory has been abolished in its conventional form; students may check out cassettes and hear them at home or on tape players at the library. At Texas A & I University the chairman reports: 'We have a large number of Spanish-speaking students in this area and a dearth of qualified language laboratory repairmen. In view of this, we have substituted native speakers for machines'".[3]

Truly the tide seems to be running against us. But in such a situation I am reminded of the statement I heard more than once from the lips of the late Henry Grattan Doyle to the effect that: "The existence and identification of a clearly defined trend in education does not imply that everyone should follow it or that it is basically sound, any more than an FBI report of a nationwide rise in sexual assault means that we should all become rapists."

If, as Professor Taylor suggests, the language laboratory has contributed to student flight, should all institutions follow the example of Hamline University and abandon it? Or does our hardware encompass potential benefits for our hard-pressed profession in these hard times?

As one who has been identified with language laboratory developments for nearly a score of years, I should like to explore briefly some of the reasons why the language laboratory director today may have troubles over beyond those which beset foreign language teachers generally; to reemphasize some of the strengths of laboratory instruction which are well-known to those who have taken the time to consider them but which are unknown or ignored by a substantial majority of our colleagues; finally, I would like to suggest several ways in which the effectively employed language laboratory can make a positive contribution

to a renascence of foreign language teaching.

First, let us admit that the increasing professionalization of the role of language laboratory director is not an unmixed blessing. As I have pointed out previously on several occasions, even with an adequately staffed laboratory, primary responsibility for the selection and scheduling of suitable teaching materials, or the modification and adaptation of unsuitable ones, should be that of the classroom teachers serving the several language areas.[4] The director should not be made the scapegoat for the failure of others to interest themselves in this important area of second language instruction.

In hardware, the problem may well be too much of a good thing. The suppliers of electronic equipment are blessed with some of the most persuasive salesmen on the road. Given the fondness of both public and private institutions for capital investment as opposed to support of personnel, maintenance and operating costs, it is not surprising that our academic landscape is becoming dotted with "electronic graveyards" and laboratories whose capabilities are minimally exploited. Decisions on choice of hardware are too often made by secondary school administrators or collegiate planning committees with total disregard for the needs of acoustical fidelity, reliability, ruggedness, and simplicity of operation and repair which are basic to successful laboratory instruction.

Scheduling is also a peculiarly difficult problem for the language laboratory whether it is a "broadcast" or "library" type operation, or whether, as I would prefer, it offers a combination of scheduled and voluntary practice. The conventional class meeting time, be it forty or fifty minutes, is just too long for uninterrupted laboratory drill. Even the insertion of the recommended five-minute break in the middle of a scheduled fifty-minute period is merely palliative. The "open classroom" concept being adopted by some of our secondary schools would seem to facilitate the use of the laboratory on a library basis, but might inhibit its use in testing and for scheduled drill on common problems.

In light of the foregoing and in view of the suicidal tendency of certain colleagues who would turn back the clock of foreign language teaching to the grammar-translation method which nearly destroyed us as a profession in the 1920's and '30's, the time is clearly at hand to reaffirm our faith in the fourfold audiolingual approach to language learning, the relevance of a second language for all students as opposed to a hand-picked group of "majors" or potential majors, and the unique contributions that the electronic laboratory can bring to foreign language teaching. The language laboratory director is aware of these contributions, but how many of his colleagues are viscerally aware that:

1) The laboratory makes more efficient use of instructional time. In any class of more than one pupil, the learner's opportunity to participate actively declines in inverse order to the number of learners, with the possible exception of choral drills where he will not only fail to hear himself accurately, but will be misled by the errors of fellow students. Given a class of twenty-five meeting for a fifty-minute period - not an unusual situation, you will admit - and allow each class member an equal opportunity to participate, he can speak the language for two minutes, assuming no participation on the part of the teacher for explanation, cuing or correction. Place the same class (and two or three others at the same level) in the language laboratory for a twenty-five minute period, allow time for model, cuing, and reinforcement of the correct response and the same pupil will have from eight to twelve minutes of controlled oral practice per day within the framework of half the allotted time. And even if there are fifty or a hundred learners in the laboratory, every one may respond to every cue or question.

2) The laboratory lets the learner hear himself as others hear him. Those of us who are old enough to remember when the tape recorder was a novelty will also remember that the reaction of

many learners on first hearing a recording of his own voice was a burst of laughter. Because of bone conduction we do not truly hear ourselves while producing sounds unless we have the benefit of a tape recorder or microphone and headset.

3) The laboratory can provide a variety of authentic native models for the target language. No teacher, however gifted, can provide the frame of reference afforded by the voices of persons of different sex and age levels. These may better serve the needs of certain pupils in learning to produce the desired sounds; they are a sine qua non for mastering auditory comprehension.

4) The tape is a uniform and tireless drillmaster. This does not mean it need be a boring one. With proper pacing and choice of materials, quite the contrary. However, it is, alas, too true that the teacher is more easily bored than the student, and that certain secondary school teachers are not as fresh and vigorous near the end of the seventh period as they were at the beginning of the first. I have observed the effective use of taped drills in classroom as well as language laboratory situations.

5) The language laboratory booth offers privacy. The older learner is prone to be self-conscious, "afraid of making a fool of himself" before others. In the privacy of the booth he is less

likely to be distracted by the mistakes of fellow students or to be embarrassed by their presence. If the laboratory is provided with monitoring and intercom facilities, any corrections can be made individually without subjecting him to ridicule.

6) The laboratory can provide important language experience beyond drill and testing. For example, recordings by casts of native speakers of great works of drama and poetry. Sound motion pictures with valid cultural background. Songs and music. News broadcasts, live or recorded.

7) The opportunity for additional practice as needed, plus the chance to make up work missed. Most laboratories, even those that are primarily broadcast in their philosophy, are sufficiently flexible to permit these opportunities. The learner who is unavoidably absent can be assured that he will receive the same instructional material as those who reported at the scheduled time. The one who needs additional practice will find the same model constantly available.

Eight years ago I committed to paper a job description of the post of Language Laboratory Director.[5] On reviewing that today I find that I omitted the one most important qualification: salesmanship. The

effective language laboratory director must be a supersalesman, not sporadically or off-handedly, but with a day-to-day dedication of time and talent that will persuade the most difficult of potential customers, his colleagues and his students.

The language laboratory has at times been misrepresented as a means of reducing instructional costs or the need for instructional personnel. Both of these assumptions are false. Language laboratory installations are very expensive when compared to more traditional tools for foreign language teaching, and the proper selection of, design and utilization of materials will take more staff time, not less. The only justification for such investment of cash and talent lies in the capacity for better results. Let us concede that our critics may be right - that lab sessions can be soporific and unproductive. Is this the fault of the hardware, the software, the laboratory staff; or just possibly, can it reflect the attitude of a majority of teaching staff?

Any honest and perceptive teacher will admit that the attitude of his class toward course content and related activities is a mirror image of his own. If he is bored, they are bored; if he fails to understand what is going on in the laboratory, they will lose interest also; if he does not test them in the laboratory on materials presented in the laboratory, they may well conclude he thinks it a waste of time. So our first task is to persuade our fellow teachers that what they are

doing is relevant, vital and interesting, and that we can help to make it more so.

Dressel and Delisle, in their recent study on the preparation of college teachers, point out that: "Language as a discipline . . . investigates formal structures of symbols by which meanings are expressed but, although it may become abstract, it always refers to the real world."[6], a concept too often overlooked in our classroom situations today. We also ignore the fact that "Development of insight into literature as a record of human thought and a means of insight into human behavior must be no less important than the knowledge and appreciation of particular works and of literary form."[7] Despite these self-evident truths, language teaching, both in and out of the laboratory, has too often been focused on the mastery of symbols qua symbols. The laboratory, by effective use of visual materials and imaginative employment of authentic records, can help to bridge the link between the classroom and the real world where the play or the poetry was written, where the auditory and visual symbols are means of everyday communication about the realities of the human spirit as well as day-to-day communication.

It is true, as critics of the audio-lingual approach are wont to assert, that the student of a foreign language who visits a country where

that language is spoken, is unlikely to encounter a native speaker who has learned the other half of that dialog he was required to memorize in freshman Spanish. Nor will he, as he becomes immersed in the target culture, be exposed to a list of model sentences and then be expected to run through a series of rapid-fire substitution drills based on that model. However, I personally find it highly unlikely that anyone will ask him to recite a long list of rules, in English, for agreement in gender and number, nor will he have the opportunity to fill in blanks in grammar exercises, to give a synopsis of an irregular verb in all simple and compound tenses, nor translate, in halting fashion, with frequent references to non-existent footnotes, end vocabulary or a pocket dictionary, the content of this morning's newspaper.

On the other hand, if he has been conditioned by proper laboratory experience, the traveller will have a much better chance of understanding what the citizens of the host country are saying to or about him. He will have learned lexicon in meaningful context and not from unrelated vocabulary lists which force the groping learner to speak: one - word - at - a - time. His response to a simple question need not be delayed by a confused cerebral churning of mood and conjugation, if he has learned structural manipulation by adequate pattern practice.

Language laboratory directors and classroom teachers must unite to convince parents, students and colleagues in other disciplines that second language learning need not and should not be limited to a hand-picked group of potential majors chosen on the basis of I.Q. or parental pressure. Too many of us have supported this viewpoint for too long. Even in the days, which will not soon return, when foreign languages were a required part of many curricula, there were never enough advanced students in high school, college, or university to provide employment for more than a small fraction of foreign language teachers. I would like to remind you that it has been demonstrated experimentally that there is slight correlation between language aptitude and overall intelligence. "Foreign languages have been successfully taught to blind students, insane patients in state hospitals, and low-IQ prisoners in penitentiaries."[8] Today more than ever, our survival as a profession depends on our ability to develop offerings that will be attractive to non-majors. This implies more emphasis on the use of the second language as communication, since many students are "turned off" by the critical study of literature, even in their native language.

Directors and teachers need to more thoroughly master the mechanical potential of the language laboratory and more fully exploit

the expensive options, often acquired at the insistence of the latter, which may be overlooked or neglected because effective use demands additional planning and preparation.[9] I agree with my former colleague, Professor Kirch, that we need to find and use more visual materials in our laboratories.[10]

Initiative in seeking more flexible scheduling is also a prerogative of the language teacher, whether in classroom or laboratory. Shorter and more frequent periods of laboratory practice are recognized as desirable, but hard to arrange without taking into account the institutional schedule as a whole.[11]

Almost all academic disciplines today are experimenting with "individualized instruction". While competent teachers have always recognized and attempted to meet differences in ability, prior preparation, and motivation among their learners, the term "individualized instruction" as used today carries also with it the implication of advancement based on achievement rather than the amount of time served and the flexibility which will allow individuals to proceed to the mastery of a given body of material in different ways and at different speeds. The language laboratory with its privacy, provision for self-analysis and self-correction, and simultaneous availability of material at different levels would appear to be ideal for these purposes. Hence it is

not surprising that in the recent Berkeley experiment with individualized instruction in beginning German, approximately fifty percent of the students in the individualized instruction program used the laboratory regularly and thirty percent of them found it "essential." However, in all fairness, it must be noted that another twenty percent didn't use the laboratory at all.[12]

Because of its title, and because of the fact that the author is a teacher of English as a foreign language, a number of you may have missed Cartier's delightful article: "Is English Worth the Trouble, Miss Fidditch?" when it appeared in Foreign Language Annals recently. I would commend the whole to any language teacher. But of particular interest to the audiolingual teacher is his discussion of "boredom" which he defines as the ability to do one thing well and without conscious effort while your mind is on another. "As long as you must concentrate on producing the language, you communicate rather badly in it. The language skills must be so habitual you can perform them with your mind on the subject, on the listener, on your purpose for speaking . . . (students get bored) when they can perform an exercise or drill with such ease that no mental effort is required . . . " He goes on to suggest that those who reach this proficiency more rapidly may escape boredom

if the teache[illegible]ir aid in evaluating or drilling those whose progress is not so rapid.[13]

Let me close on a note of optimism that is also a tribute to our beleagured colleagues in the secondary schools. According to "a report released in October 1970 by the Educational Testing Service: 'An analysis of interest shown in twelve school subjects by over 15,000 high school juniors in a nationally representative sample shows that among girls foreign languages rank third and among boys eighth, and that in both cases languages are more popular than art, English, or music."[14] Take courage, we have just begun to fight!

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