
Communicative Techniques and Materials for the Language Laboratory

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Abstract

In the 1960's language laboratories were often used for "programming students" employing repetitious, mechanical methods. The language laboratory was often a technological status symbol for a learning institution.

The argument here is in favour of accepting the "unreality" of the language laboratory and moving onto new goals like encouraging interaction among students and maximizing use of technology while emphasizing meaning rather than form.

As fascination with technology in the 90's increases, the language laboratory should grow to encompass newer audio visual facilities (videos, slides) which will aid both students and teachers. As technology moves away from the isolating "single booth" of yesteryear, the role of the teacher changes as well. The teacher becomes a facilitator whose presence in the lab is needed to set up, check and encourage group interaction.

Writing in the 1960's about the new technology of language laboratories, Richard Barrutia (1964) wrote :

'A system that will teach at least the surface structures of language almost completely by machine must be developed via descriptive linguistic science and then administered by automated programs. By presentation of automated audio-programming through properly constructed 'teaching machines', the skills of mimicry and memorisation can be more widely

developed. What is more, as in most disciplines, by the use of proper questioning and 'feedback' from student to machine and vice versa we can even bring about 'Gestalt' learning just as Socrates did with the slave boy, Meno, 2000 years ago.

.....However not until a sufficient number of good, automated programmes are developed will the laboratories begin to be real teaching machines and approach the panacea everyone is dreaming about'.

Barrutia is unusual among those early proponents of language laboratories in that although like others, he envisaged that programmes for the laboratory would release teachers from the more repetitious and mechanical aspects of language teaching, his vision also encompassed the possibility of developing a language 'gestalt' with technology playing a central role in developing students' competence in both initiating utterances and responding in the target language.

The dream of a panacea for the teasing problems of language teaching was never realised. The excitement and enthusiasm evident in Richard Barrutia's words, and widespread among the teacher-technicians of the sixties and seventies, turned to disillusionment as it became apparent that students did not respond well to the repetitious and often meaningless 'automated' programmes.

These programmes were based on assumptions which identified the nature of language as sets of predictable behavioural responses to language stimuli which could be atomised and sequenced for instruction. Such programmes were quickly developed for the laboratory, with stimulus utterances followed by regular intervals of silence for students to respond either with an imitation of the sounds uttered or with fixed responses to, or variations of grammatical items. Students quickly recognised that for most of their time in the laboratory, plugged into these learning programmes, their utterances had neither purpose nor meaning and moreover, no-one was listening.

These days the language laboratory is widely out of style - irrevocably associated, it seems, with those early audio-lingual programmes, which emphasised a relentless parroting of drills, rote memorisation and monotonous pattern practice, instilling in both students and teachers an abiding boredom with the 'new' technology.

Since that period many programmes for the

language laboratory have continued to focus upon the accurate reproduction of discrete items in response to the stimulus of a model utterance. Teachers' attempts to move away from this approach have often been restricted to the use of commercially produced listening tapes designed for use in the classroom rather than in the laboratory. Programmes for the laboratory have not always reflected the shift in teaching methodology from the behaviourist psychology of Skinner (1957) which inspired the audiolingual learning systems to the holistic psychologies of the eighties and the development of communicative approaches to language teaching. Current assumptions about the nature of language learning emphasise language as a vehicle for meaning, having always purpose, context and an intended audience. Language is no longer viewed as a 'subject' with immutable structures and units, which can be increasingly broken into smaller and smaller items for programmed learning.

However while the laboratory may be out of favour with many teachers and methodologists, the facility has high priority with administrators and directors of language learning institutions. Laboratories have been widely installed, throughout Europe, South-East Asia and Australasia and the Middle East, not so much because they are considered essential to teaching programmes, but because they have become technological status symbols. Often teachers are given only the most cursory instruction in their operation and little training in developing communicative teaching techniques for use in the laboratory. Consequently in many areas language laboratories are underutilised and poorly serviced. Students however are initially highly motivated by the computerised technology of the language laboratory and communicative language laboratory programmes can build this motivation into a sustained momentum for language learning.

The language laboratory is in itself a specialised and unique language environment.

Similar language contexts are unlikely to be encountered in the world at large except perhaps by air traffic controllers or telecom operators. Consequently materials developed for the language laboratory must to a degree accept its 'unreality' and make maximum use of the opportunities offered by this technology to develop purposeful and interactive pedagogic tasks. Such tasks will focus on meaning rather than form, involve students in dynamic interaction, emphasise fluency as well as accuracy within the context of integrated activities.

Defining an index of communicative tasks is useful in providing a basis for teachers to develop activities and materials which have an interior logic, a clear pedagogic purpose and which facilitate interaction and collaboration,

Such an index would include :

- 1 Problem-solving / Conferencing
- 2 Information Exchange
- 3 Information Transfer
- 4 Rehearsal/Revision
- 5 Reflection/Response

PROBLEM-SOLVING/CONFERENCING

Problem-solving tasks are those which require students to process information using skills of inference and deduction. Puzzle Listening, Jigsaw and Jumbled listening tasks all involve this kind of information processing and such materials can be designed or adapted for the laboratory quite easily. In an example of Puzzle Listening, items of information are given on tape in random order and these must be processed by students so that the information can be used to fill in a chart.

All types of problem-solving activities become interactive when students are required to collaborate in order to produce and confirm a correct result. This conferencing should be structured into these activities, say after the first listening, and again when students have listened as often as they wish and completed as much of the chart as they can. In many newer

laboratories students can consult one another simply by removing their headphones and conversing, however where students are isolated from one another in booths Conference Mode can be used to allow small groups to collaborate.

INFORMATION EXCHANGE

These tasks involve students bridging an information gap through the exchange of information and are particularly suited to the language laboratory where the Group Mode can be used to allow different groups of students to receive different information, which is then exchanged by students swapping consoles and recording the new information on their partners tapes.

INFORMATION TRANSFER

The transfer of information from one form to another can provide a basis for effective language lab tasks based on giving and following directions or instructions, for example constructing a map from spoken directions, building origami forms or simply drawing from instructions. These tasks become interactive when students record their own directions and then swap consoles to follow the directions recorded by their classmates.

Many information transfer tasks make use of maps in one form or another. Students may be asked to mark the bus route on a given map after listening to the tape, or to plot an accident on a junction sketchmap from a taped description. All these activities require an accurate ear and an awareness of the conventions of mapping. Whenever Individual Mode is used students should be required to confer and confirm their results.

REHEARSAL / REVISION

The language lab provides an ideal facility for the rehearsal and revision of oral presentations, conversation strategies and pronunciation skills. Scripted pronunciation exercises, unscripted dialogues and one-sided dialogues are all

activities which require students to record dialogue or individual responses which can then be played back, analysed and revised.

Pair mode can be used in many labs to record short unscripted dialogues which students then transcribe and revise, ultimately setting aside the revised transcript to record the dialogue again. Some laboratories do not have a record function in Pair Mode but it is sometimes possible to record dialogue nevertheless by plugging two sets of headphones into the same console.

For Scripted Pronunciation Exercises only two short recorded paragraphs are needed - one for each group. These act as models; students listen and annotate a transcript marking in one specific pronunciation feature, such as linked words. They then practise reading the passage and record it immediately after the model paying particular attention to the specific marked feature on the transcript. Finally each student swaps consoles with a partner from the opposite group and makes a transcript of the partner's recording.

REFLECTION / RESPONSE SHARING

Some of the most entertaining tasks for the language laboratory are of this type where an initial input requiring comprehension and reflection on the part of the student is followed by a recorded response which is shared with other students by means of Spot Listening, ie. students move from one 'spot' or console to another listening to the responses recorded by their classmates. For example, students first listen to models which demonstrate the use of answerphones. A recorded 'Home' message is followed by a series of messages left by callers. (Students are asked to note the gist of these messages). Then each student records his or her own 'Home' message onto the tape. All students then move around the tape leaving prepared messages on their classmates 'answerphones'. Finally, students return to their own consoles to listen and note the messages they have received.

Activities like this are entertaining, easily set up, and promote both fluency and accuracy in students' use of English. Many other activities can be based on this same principle of Spot Listening, with students moving around the laboratory listening to ideas recorded by their peers.

TECHNOLOGICAL MODES

The technology of the modern language laboratory lends itself to language tasks which are interactive and collaborative. Older laboratories often isolated students in booths and the technological modes were designed to promote the language stimulus / response types of programmes which so dominated language laboratory programmes in the seventies and early eighties. Modern laboratories have become audio - visula resource centres with facilities for video and slide viewing as well as computer assisted language learning. Consoles are consequently less likely now to be walled in and this in turn makes communication and interaction between students much simpler and more natural. Even in those laboratories which still favour booths, Pair Mode and Conference Mode can be used to allow conferencing and collaboration where this is appropriate. The five major modes now incorporated in most laboratory systems are :

- Individual Mode (Audio-Active/Comparative)
- Pair Mode
- Group Mode
- Conference Mode
- Library Mode

Audio - Active / Comparative or Individual Mode is the one teachers and students use most. It allows students to listen to taped material at their own speeds and to record and re-record their own utterances. Using this mode students can take part in Puzzle Listening activities, (switching to Conference or Pair Mode to collaborate or check their solutions) or popular Spot Listening activities, which require them to move around the laboratory listening to their

classmates's recordings at a number of consoles or 'spots'.

Pair mode links students so that they can listen and work together in pairs and is useful for conferencing and collaboration in laboratories where students are isolated in separate booths. Unscripted dialogue can usually be recorded on Pair Mode so that students can then transcribe and revise their own 'mini' dialogues.

In some laboratories the pairs cannot be selected by the teacher but are fixed, comprising students sitting adjacent to one another and this arrangement has limited use in a lab equipped with consoles (not booths) where adjacent students can communicate simply by removing their headphones and talking to one another.

Group mode allows consoles to be divided into three or four groups. Students in each group can listen to, and work with different material. It is particularly suited to the kind of information-gap activity where students swap consoles to exchange and record information. Jigsaw Listening Activities for example, where each group listens to only part of the story and students must confer to complete their understanding, makes an appropriate use of this mode.

Conference mode is similar to Group Mode but links students within each group so that they can communicate with one another. Conference mode enables students to confer in order to compare and check answers, or find solutions to problems, particularly in those laboratories where students are isolated from one another in booths and cannot easily communicate.

Library mode is designed to allow only one student to work on material which is different

from that being used by the rest of the class group, and may be appropriate when one student wishes to catch up on material missed, or to study a separate programme. It can also be used to enable one student to communicate with the whole class group.

The teacher's role in using the activities described in this paper is that of facilitator and organiser, rather than expert and monitor. The traditional arrangement with the teacher seated at the control console using the monitoring facility to listen in to students and correct their grammar and pronunciation, is less relevant to activities designed to promote fluency and purposeful interaction. Teachers need to be working among their students to facilitate the processes of conference and collaboration and to check diagrams and charts in those activities where students must note information accurately in order to exchange it with their partners. The student 'Call' facility (whereby students can call the teacher at the control console) consequently becomes less important.

The positive response of students at all levels to communicative learning activities in the language laboratory indicates that such programmes can build students' initial fascination with this technology into a motivation to use the laboratory in interesting and challenging ways. The reputation of the language laboratory as an aid to language teaching is undeservedly negative. In general laboratories have been blamed for the tedious and unimaginative programmes which have so often been used in them. The development of interesting materials and interactive programmes must be a priority if optimum use is to be made of these facilities now so widely installed.

Reference

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