The Role of The Language Laboratory in Foreign Language Teaching

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Introduction

It is assumed that second language learning has a "skill acquisition mode" an "adaptive mode" and a "creative mode". The first two modes require a great amount of manipulation of language modules which can be effected through technological aids . This function can be fully assigned to the language laboratory while application of these skills to creative use must be the province of the teacher n the classroom .

The language laboratory is thus regarded as a component of the teaching system with responsibilities of its own and with competence to perform them so efficiently .

The aim of this study is to give an idea about the language laboratory , and its development , equipments , uses , and the teaching techniques used . Also this study is to evaluate its benefit for students as regards to understanding spoken language and expressing themselves freely and to its effect on their pronunciation , accent and intonation .

Historical Development

The development of language laboratory is closely related to the development of the tape recorder, which is the central piece of equipment in language laboratories . Around 1950, tape recorder technology introduced multi-track recorders which were essential for the development of audio-comparative laboratory with its possibilities of individual use . Before that , each learner working on his own needed two tape recorders . As early as 1924 , Ohio State University had already developed such equipment which they called language laboratories . In the U.S., the development of the language laboratory was simulated by the National Defence Education act of 1958, which made large sums of money available for foreign language teaching .

Stack (1960) and Helton etal (1961) publications were especially directed towards practical problems of language laboratory

work . After the boom of the 1960s a subsequent rejection of this medium arose . These objections were both of   a psychological and of a practical nature . Language laboratories were again discussed in a strikingly large number of monographs in the 1970s. (See Els, 1984 : 283-287)

The Structural Methods

An important tenet of structural linguistics was that the primary medium of language is oral . They believe that speech is language :

> "Since many languages do not have written form and we learn to speak before we learn to read or write, it was argued that language is "primarily" what is spoken and only secondarily what is written" (Brooks, 1964). Therefore, it was assumed that speech had a priority in language teaching .
>
> (Richard and Rogers, 1986:44)

Some of the structural linguistics , like Charles Fries and Leonard Bloomfield , applied the principles of structural linguistics to language teaching . (see Richards and Rogers, 1986 : 44-46)

El-Bettar sheds light on the structural methods of teaching   a foreign language and the role of these methods in developing the skills of listening and speaking . He defines the methods of teaching as follows :

> One can easily see that what is called "a method" is in fact the cumulative outcome of long experience with teaching, or an ingenious discovery arrived at through an endeavour to meet a certain need .
>
> (El-Bettar, 1965:51)

The Army Training Programme developed the Informant Method which uses a linguist as a guide and the native speaker as a model or informant . This approach to teaching arose out of necessity at the war-time .

In the Army Specialized Training Programme all the explanations are given in the learner's native language , so that method is called the Transliteration Method .

The Structural Approach of the University of London Institute of Education emphasizes the idea that the gradation of the structures in accord with the requirements of the English pattern is a vital factor in language teaching . The Structural Approach of the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan represents the discovery of the fact that language is not only a means of self-

expression, but also a means of communication , and that the presentation and gradation of the language teaching should be based on the results of comparative analysis of both the native language and the foreign language to be learnt . This means that it is not only the method of teaching that counts, but also the language materials prepared for teaching.

The Oral Approach was worked out as an adoption of the direct method , which considered 'reading' not 'speaking' its final goal .

The aural-oral approach means the development of the skills of listening and speaking . Reading is a by-product when this goal is attained . (see El-Bettar, 1965 : 37-53)

We can see now that all these approaches entail three things:

a. The rejection of the traditional purpose with its methods of translation .

b. The assertion of the priority of the spoken language over written

c. The insistence on the need for meaningful material and content . (see Adam and Shawcross, 1963 : 4).

Language-Laboratory Equipment

The equipment varies considerably from country to country and even from manufacturer to manufacturer within countries , but basically the "true" language laboratory is equipped as follows: in a room , chosen for its quietness and good ventilation , are installed a number of booths constructed on table tops on three sides by "walls" made of acoustic tiles or similar sound-absorbing materials . The side walls are at a sufficient height to isolate each booth from its neighbour and the front panels of acoustic material are slightly less high in order to enable the student to look over the top at a raised visual-side screen , while effectively isolating the occupant of the booth from the student in the booth in front . This privacy is important as it serves to overcome the different experienced by many people in saying anything in a foreign language in the presence of others . Nevertheless , there is immediate contact between teacher and student .

In each booth is installed a special student's tape-recorder which enables the student to listen to pre-recorded material on the top track of the tape and at the same time to record his own responses on the bottom track . Each student's machine is provided with a head-set and microphone combined . This ensures that the microphone remains at a contact distance from the mouth under all circumstances and follows movements of the head , for example when reading or following visual-aid material on the screen situated above eye level . It is not

possible for the student to erase , or interfere with , the recording on the "master" track . On the other hand , he may re-record as many attempts of his own as he wishes , on each occasion automatically erasing his previous efforts . Having complete a recording , the student may then switch his machine to "play back", re-wind his tape to the beginning of the exercise and listen to his own efforts compared with those of the master-recording . The machine is equipped with a "pause" control which , when fully depressed , stops the tape from rotating and , when released , allows the tape to continue to rotate . This is useful if the student requires a little time to consider the answer he is about to give . Combined with this same pause control is the facility provided for the student to call the attention of the instructor at the "studio console" or control panel . The student stops his machine and then depressed the pause lightly several times . This causes a light signal to flash at the teacher's console corresponding to the number of the booth concerned . The teacher may then "switch-in" to this booth and answer the student's query , give advice or explanation . Conversely , a light signal placed on the student's machine can be made to flash if the teacher wishes for any reason to communicate with the student . In one type of language laboratory it is also possible for the teacher to stop and give student's machine remotely from the console . This is useful on the occasion when the student is so engrossed in his recording that he overlooks the flashing signal lamp .

Finally , each student's machine has a switch position which enables a master-recording to be transferred simultaneously to as many students tapes as there are student positions in the laboratory and this operation can carried out when the positions are not occupied by student all operations being controlled from the teacher's console . All the switch functions mentioned are indicated by coloured light bulbs on the student's machine .

The teacher's console or control panel is the never-center of the language studio. Basically it consists of a control panel carrying switch numbered to correspond to the booths, a "master" tape-recorder and amplifier system and a teacher's head-set and microphone . The switch enables the teacher to monitor or "eavesdrop" on any individual booth . The system provides two-way communication between the teacher and each individual student or enables the teachers to address all students simultaneously . From the teacher's console , moreover , the instruction can "dub" a master-

recording from a tape played on his own master tape-recording to give number of students' tapes . He can start all the student' tapes off at the same moment and stop them at the end of the exercise to be "dub". Such master-recording can also be produced directory by the teacher by speaking into his microphone and some makes of equipment made provision for read of broadcasts and disc recordings to be similarly "dubbed" on a master tape and at the same time on the student's tape . The central console may also carry a socket into which may be plugged a remote control for automatic film-slide projector and various devices for synchronizing sound and vision .

The laboratory should ideally have adequate storage space for tapes , both blank and recorded , for visual-aid materials , records , and accessories of various kinds . But , above all , it is very desirable that the laboratory should have a separate , sound-proof recording room or compartment where mater-recordings from microphone , radio , or discs can be made without using the teacher console for this purpose . (see Adam and Shawcross , 1963 : 4-7)

The Uses of the Language Laboratory

It is an extremely flexible aid to language teaching at all levels , and to all types of students . It is safe enough from the technical point of view to be used with confidence by children in primary schools . It is at the age of the primary school pupil that the power of mimicry and imitation , the uninhibited willingness to speak a foreign language , are most in evidence .

For the adult beginner desiring to obtain a rapid knowledge of the language , and this usually means the spoken language , language-laboratory techniques can be of great value . This particularly true in the case of pronunciation , intonation , accent , etc . As people get older power of imitation and mimicry tend to atrophy and the possibility of repeated listening , imitating and self-criticism provided by language laboratory is a great advantage.

Language-laboratory techniques are usually applicable to the very large and important class of adults who are well qualified in their own special field as executive, engineers, sales representatives, export manager, and technologists, who suddenly find it impetrative to acquire rapidly a basic working knowledge of the spoken languages for the purposes of their occupation . For them , a period of about eight weeks full time is perhaps the most efficient method of rapidly giving a "working knowledge" of the spoken language . In the language laboratory , it is possible to simulate the conditions of oral

use of the language which the secretary-linguist or foreign correspondent will be likely to meet with when he or she finishes training and takes up employment-telephone conversation , cases studies of reception of foreign business men , incidents on business trips abroad , and so on . The tourist industry , too , will require a large number of qualified "courier" and it would seem an obvious use of the language laboratory to train linguist-guides in oral techniques of conduct tours . Practical also be given in extempore oral translation , i.e., the student hears on his tape a sentence or phrase in his native language and in the following limited pause must say the translation . Also, the practice available in the language laboratory will play a big part in training professional interpreters to reach highest standard of which they are capable . At all events the oral ability of language graduates as a whole frequently leaves something to be desired , and it would seem that a language faculties . Even the teachers can use their own schools language laboratory from time to time . (see Adam and Shawcross , 1963 : 8-12)

Teaching Techniques

The language laboratory makes possible relatively prolonged exposure of the students to the spoken languages and provides them with extensive practice in speaking it under the best conditions for both teacher and student . The laboratory period should not be shorter than thirty minutes and with more mature students longer is desirable . Taking three periods (not necessarily immediately consecutive) as the basic unit these might be apportioned as follows :

1) Period Before Laboratory :

This is basically a preparatory period for the practice to be carried out in the laboratory and it contains essentially of: Pronunciation, Vocabulary preparation, Introduction of grammatical point and Preparation for laboratory practice drills, Cultural or "Background" presentation .

2) The Laboratory Period :

Following upon the preceding class-room hour , the students go into the language laboratory , knowing precisely what they are going to do. For the next hour they will be hearing and talking nothing but the foreign language. The repeat patterns, imitate pronunciation, hearing and practicing the correct answer in every case. They are able to play back and assess their efforts , to perceive objectively their own mistakes and all this without self-consciousness or embarrassment in the knowledge , however , that the instructor is immediately available

should it be necessary to enlist his help . At the same time , practice in facilitated . But this by no mean exhausts the possibilities language-laboratory activity and the following applications have been found to be useful :

a) Oral Dictation : That is to say the student should have tapes on to which the instructor records through the microphone in the same manner as for a written dictation . In the pause between the "master" phrases the student repeats what he thinks he has heard.

b) Oral Narration and Description: as soon as the earliest stages of the course are complete , considerable value is obtained through encouraging students to express themselves orally by recording a brief account of a simple action sequence presented on a series of cards , pictures , cartoon drawings , film-strips , or film slides

c) Oral Comprehension: very useful at all stages are laboratory exercises in comprehending, and showing orally comprehension of spoken passages . Such exercises take the form of question and answer on the content of the spoken passage . It is desirable to record the questions as a whole first so that the student will listen to the passage with some idea of what to look out for . The student should listen to the complete passage twice before going on to answer the individual questions . A generous pause should be allowed after each question , followed by a model or master version of the appropriate reply which the student repeats . No re-winding to pick out isolated sections of the passage in order to find an answer to an individual question should be allowed. Otherwise, it would be as the same as the type of questionnaire sentence in the text and repeating it word for word .

Another useful exercise for more advanced students is oral précis . Here the student listens to a spoken passage twice and then is invited to give the main of the passage in his own words within a limited tape length .

There are only a few of the types of exercise which carried out in the laboratory period .

3) the Post-Laboratory Period :

In the post-laboratory class-room period the effort is made to build on the foundations laid in the two previous periods . This can be apportioned through these stages :

a) Flexibility Exercises . b) Natural Conversation . c) Cultural Background . d) Reading and Writing . e) Homework . (see Adam and Shawcross , 1963 : 15-28)

The present consept of the language laboratory is based on group activity at appointed hours in the schedule and , therefore , not compatible with student-centred instruction , expert to the degree that each student may willing devote added time to laboratory exercises in order to keep pace with standard rate of learning set the entire group . The language laboratory has actually intensified the lockstep of the classroom by even removing the individualized intention. (see Perren and TRIM , 1971 : 377)

Conclusion

From this study "Language Laboratory" which includes historical development , structural methods , language-laboratory equipment , uses of the language laboratory , and teaching techniques , one can conclude the following :

1) The language-laboratory practice is necessary , but by no means sufficient , condition of the successful application of the oral approach .
2) It is an aid and not a self-contained method .
3) Language laboratory is regarded as a component of the teaching system .
4) The development of language laboratory is closely related to the development of the tape recorder , which is the central piece of equipment in language laboratories .
5) Speech has a priority in language teaching .
6) Language laboratory is equipped with standard specifications.
7) In additions to its many uses , language laboratory could be used to a great advantage in modern language faculties .
8) The language laboratory makes possible relatively prolonged exposure of the students to the spoken language and provides them with extensive practice in speaking it under the best conditions for both teacher and student .
9) The present concept of language laboratory is based on group activity as appointed hours in the schedule .

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