

# TESL

# REPORTER

Published by

Communication and Language Arts Division  
Brigham Young University—Hawaii Campus

Teaching English as a Second Language

Vol. 9 No. 4

Laie, Hawaii

Summer 1976

## IS THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY DEAD

by Lynn E. Henrichsen

Once upon a time the language laboratory was a mighty oak in the verdant field of audiolingualism. The prognosticators predicted a rosy future for this marvelous teaching machine. Manufacturers of lab equipment flourished as language teachers scrambled to get labs installed in their schools.

That was a generation ago. Today, cognitive learning psychology is in, and behaviorism is out. Communicative competence is the byword, and pattern practice is often regarded with a sneer. An inspection of many

rooms which once contained glittering machines and neat rows of student carrels would now reveal dust and dilapidation. Although some labs are making valiant efforts to survive, many modern-day prognosticators write off the language lab as a doomed relic of the audio-lingual past. Hence the question: is the language laboratory dead?

An examination of the lab and its history will help in answering that question. Great things were expected of the language laboratory when it first appeared on the scene with its gleaming steel, sparkling glass, molded plastic, and wonderful wires. Many teachers hoped it would be a cure-all for their language teaching problems.

These great expectations were later followed by an even greater feeling of disillusionment when it was discovered that the lab would not do everything. Besides not being a cure-all, the lab itself created some new problems of its own. The machines seemed to be always breaking down, and who knew how to fix them? Electronic repairmen cost money, and that wasn't in the budget. Machines which break and are not fixed do not aid in the teaching/learning process. They only frustrate. Frustration leads to disenchantment and eventual abandonment.

The original lab tapes were designed to relieve the teacher of conducting pattern-practice drills and to provide an untiring, unfluctuating, native-speaker model for the learner to imitate. The student could go to the lab and repeat patterns until they came

### CONTENTS

Is the Language Laboratory Dead By Lynn E. Henrichsen . . . . .	Page 1
Pronunciation Problems Different and Similar Among Cantonese and Mandarin Speakers By Mo-Shuet Lee . . . . .	Page 3
Discrete Structure-Point Testing Problems and Alternatives By Kenneth G. Aitken . . . . .	Page 7
Proverbs and Propredicates in English By Yao Shen . . . . .	Page 10
'Goldy Locks or Chocolate Cake? By Gary R. Oddous . . . . .	Page 13

out of his ears. This was good behaviorism. But when the learning theory changed, the tapes, in general, did not. The result was that, even today, whenever anyone thinks of the lab, the repetition of pattern drills come to mind.

Besides becoming outdated, the %@\*&\$% tapes also broke, got all tangled up, and occasionally even slipped away and unrolled down the aisle. And of course there was always the bother of threading them onto the machine correctly. As the tapes and records gradually wore out, sound quality deteriorated, and there were no more grants to buy new materials.

In retrospect, it is no wonder that the language lab was abandoned by so many. Machines were often not maintained, and they became obsolete as technology advanced. Materials also failed to keep pace with trends in teaching. And, to top it all off, when teachers tired of their new gadgets, they relegated them to lab assistants who were usually minimally-trained, part-time, student workers. Who could expect anything except dissatisfaction? What would happen to any part of a language teaching program if it continued to use generation-old books with torn and missing pages in classes taught only by student assistants?

What is being argued here is that the language laboratory is a tool, and the success or failure of any tool depends upon the way it is used. Used well, the tool should be valuable to more than one teaching method. In other words, the fact that the language laboratory was developed in the heyday of audio-lingualism does not necessarily mean that it is inextricably bound to that method of language teaching and that method only. With a few modifications in the equipment and some imagination and effort on the part of teachers and materials producers, the lab may be just as useful today as it ever was. It is encouraging to note that many current textbook producers are recognizing this fact and providing new types of tapes and tape-books along with their modern classroom texts.

Concurrently, several advances have been made in recent years in the area of hardware which make laboratories more reliable and manageable. Most notable among these are cassette-style tapes and players and solid-state electronics.\* Even "wireless" headphones are

available. What the future holds is anyone's guess. Predictable advances include an expanded role of television with video tape cassettes and even video discs being used in language teaching.

Another encouraging fact is the increasing familiarity with electronic sound equipment among the general public and, consequently, among teachers and students. Tape machines are no longer so intimidating, and the idea of a teacher producing his own, high-quality taped materials from "on the street" interviews, radio broadcasts, television programs, and narrated short stories and drama for use in the lab is no longer unthinkable.

Space being a limitation, it will not be possible in this article to discuss all the possibilities of using the language laboratory to support classroom activities. However, those who are contemplating investing in a laboratory or those who now have a lab and are trying

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to decide whether or not to keep it may be interested in the following candid discussion of advantages and disadvantages of the laboratory. No attempt has been made to order the items as to importance, and a "sales pitch" approach has been avoided. It should be helpful to those who are trying to decide whether or not to expend the effort to bring a dead or dying laboratory back to life.

#### LANGUAGE LAB ADVANTAGES

**HIGH VOLUME CAPACITY.** Few respectable programs would even think of assigning twenty, thirty, or even forty students to one class-

*(continued on page 16)*

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\*Note—At this point it may be important to mention that, despite advances in the field of audio electronics, the student-proof, wear-proof lab has not yet been invented. Anyone who invests in any sort of electronic media support for any educational program should realize that replacement of materials and maintenance and repair of equipment is a factor which cannot be ignored.



# IS THE LANGUAGE LAB DEAD?

(continued from page 2)

room or teacher; yet this number of students is what a language laboratory normally handles. This means economy in the long run. The initial hardware and software costs are offset by savings in the area of teacher salaries.

**HIGH FACE VALUE.** A language lab look impressive in program brochures and to visitors. It makes even a new and inexperienced program appear professionally established. Students also feel that they are getting more for their money when they see all the expensive equipment available for their use.

**COINCIDENCE OF PROGRAMS.** Most labs are able to play several programs at once and allow the students or teacher to select the one they need most. Thus, the experienced lab teacher can conduct several classes at the same time.

**INDIVIDUALIZATION.** Especially in a library-style laboratory, the student has more freedom in choosing his own program of learning and is able to move ahead at his own rate of speed.

**LAB AS AN EXTRA.** Students who might never sign up for an eight-hour class do not seem so awed by a four-hour class supplemented with an additional four hours of lab, especially if an attempt is made to make the lab work interesting and meaningful.

**SCHEDULING FLEXIBILITY.** Students do not always have to go to lab together with all the other members of their particular class. The scheduling of "lab hour" may be flexible and fit into their class schedule wherever it is most convenient.

**EXPOSURE TO NATIVE SPEAKERS.** This is a particular advantage to programs located in areas where very few or no native speakers of the target language are available. Lab exposure to native speakers may be in drill or in communicative situations.

**EXPOSURE TO A VARIETY OF SPEAKERS.** Even in programs which have native-speaker teachers, the exposure to different native-speaker pronunciations and voices is a definite advantage in preparing students for the real world.

**CONSISTENCY OF INFORMATION.** All

students who listen to the same tape hear the same lesson, regardless of their position in the classroom, the hour of the class, or the mood of the instructor.

**ACCOUNTABILITY.** Although the value of some types of laboratory practice may be debated, there is little argument about the definite accountability of laboratory practice. The student who has been to a well-supervised lab for an hour has had an hour of practice. There is no guarantee that the student sent out on his own "to talk to people" has done anything worthwhile.

**TEACHER FREEDOM.** Without interrupting other students in the group, the teacher is free to concentrate on an individual student and his particular problems while the group's teaching program continues.

**SENSE OF ISOLATION.** The use of carrels and headphones gives a sense of isolation which is often helpful. Shy students who avoid speaking in a classroom group situation need no longer be afraid of others hearing their errors. This sense of isolation is often an effective aid to concentration also.

**PHYSICAL FACILITY.** A large, acoustically well-designed room with individual carrels may be useful for more than listening to tapes. It is often an ideal area for testing (listening comprehension or other skills). The privacy afforded by carrels makes looking at another student's paper less of a temptation. Also, in a program using a number of small classrooms it may be the only large room and a reasonable substitute for an auditorium.

## LANGUAGE LABORATORY DISADVANTAGES

**EXPENSE.** The cost of quality materials and equipment is increasing along with everything else. Although the lab may pay for itself in saved teacher salaries over a period of time, the initial cost is sometimes prohibitive for small or beginning programs. The continual expense of materials replacement and equipment repair must also be taken into consideration.

**OUTDATED MATERIALS.** Many of the available commercial tapes are pattern-practice relics which, besides being at odds with many current teaching methods, are usually boring to students and deadening to their motivation to learn.

**STILTED SPEECH.** Many voices on prepared tapes are artificial in both pronunciation and grammar. Although there are encouraging moves to a more natural style of speaking by some producers, care should still be exercised. All lab materials should be thoroughly examined before purchase.

**BINDING COMMITMENT TO CHOSEN MATERIALS.** Once lab materials have been purchased or produced, there is a great commitment to that particular set of materials. Deleting a few inapplicable parts of a lesson or adding a few more questions is very difficult. On-the-spot improvisation is next to impossible.

**EQUIPMENT FAILURE.** No piece of equipment will serve forever without ever needing repair or maintenance. Some brands are worse than others and require constant repair work. It is wise to check equipment thoroughly for durability and to provide for proper maintenance beforehand. *Caveat emptor*.

**DIMINISHED AUDIO QUALITY.** Even with today's electronic technology, sound quality is rarely as good in a lab as it is in real life. This problem can be minimized by insisting on top-quality equipment and materials and regular maintenance.

**LACK OF PERSONALITY.** Person-to-person, eye-to-eye contact is not available with an impersonal machine. The result may be student apathy and loss of motivation. Interesting materials and individual teacher attention may help remedy the situation.

**LOSS OF EXTRA-VERBAL SIGNALS.** In the typical audio-only setup, the student is unable to observe important gestures or facial expressions which may be important to the meaning of an utterance. Television provides one solution to this problem, but is beyond the means of most labs.

**INDIVIDUAL MONITORING.** Individual student monitoring is not always an advantage. While listening to one student, the teacher must ignore the other thirty-nine (see Hammerly:1974).

**DUAL TRAINING OF PERSONNEL.** The laboratory teacher must be skillfully trained in two areas: language teaching and laboratory operation. To have an effective laboratory, a trained lab instructor should be in control. Turning everything over to part-time student assistants is just asking for

trouble. This does not mean that student assistants should not be utilized at all. It only means that they should be under the direction of an experienced lab director.

**MINDLESS REPETITION.** After long periods spent in the lab listening to pattern drills, many students develop a talent for mindless repetition. They parrot an utterance perfectly while thinking about a completely different subject. Careful selection of materials and activities is the only way to avoid this bad habit.

**PHYSICAL INFLEXIBILITY.** Although portable models are available for small groups, a full-scale language laboratory is very difficult to move or store in a closet. Likewise, it is hard to conduct a normal language class in a room of carrels. In other words, having a lab means dedicating one room to permanent laboratory use.

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