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In Defence of the Language Lab

One evening not too long ago, a well-known American TV news analyst just back from his summer holiday travels was giving wry consolation to less fortunate stay-at-home viewers by sharing his opinions on a few of the risks today's vacationer might encounter upon venturing beyond his own computer-free back yard. To support some pithy comments on the universal phenomenon of the dehumanizing influence of machines upon us all, he drew upon his own recent experience at a large Italian airport while on his way home. It appears that he and a large number of other passengers, having had their seats confirmed on the capacity booked return flight, arrived at the airport check-in counter only to be told that the computer had classified them all as being on "stand-by" status, with the result that their seats were already occupied. In the ensuing clamor of protests, accusations and threats, the harried airline clerk, after vainly attempting to obtain redress from the computer, turned toward the increasingly hostile crowd and raising hands to heaven blurted out in self-preservation: "I am nothing, the machine decides!" This underlies once again the utter frustration and feeling of impotence many human beings have felt in this day and age when faced with the apparent impossibility of communication with computers.

Similar frustration, leading even to violence, may occur in a language lab. However, lab recorders are not entirely to blame nor are the computers in the airport muddle the supreme authority, though the clerk and many others might like to think so. It is so easy to pass the buck for human error on to a machine that cannot object.

lab potential

Faced with vastly increased technological complexity, especially over the last decade, more and more individuals seem to be drifting toward the simplistic, all-encompassing generality of blaming any contretemps on “the machine” or “the government.” In the language lab, such reasoning on the part of some users not only obviates the advantages offered by use of the lab but demonstrates ignorance of present technological facilities available to assist in language learning. What can one expect from a language lab — defined in broadest terms as a combination of hard- and software — in a foreign language program?

Among the major assets to the student is the easily controlled, consistent repetition of new language sounds. The recorder is eternally patient — no small advantage when coping with today’s hectic life. Because of this patient repetition, the lab can minimize time required to assimilate the new sounds and patterns of speech thus, paradoxically, helping students maintain that very same hectic pace. For the self-conscious person, the assurance of knowing that, in the lab, eavesdropping on ego-denting errors can be eliminated relaxes and even removes inhibitions. Furthermore, the language lab is flexible: it can be a modular course *per se*, permitting students to proceed at their own pace; it may be integrated with classroom instruction; it may present remedial work only; it can handle students individually or in groups, at one or many levels, and all at the same time. It is the next best thing to living in the foreign country or associating with native speakers in or out of the classroom. Not the least of its advantages is that of being able to hear one’s own voice immediately after speaking and so be in a position to compare, correct, or improve the articulation of sounds, intonation and expression in general.

lab limitations and misuse

There is, however, one major limitation to the effectiveness of the language lab and that is frustration on the part of both students and instructors. Apart from logistical difficulties stemming from inadequacies of money and space, the causes of frustration include: (1) the panacea concept, (2) the software morass, (3) the credibility gap, and (4) the machine syndrome.

1. *The panacea concept* may be held by students, instructors and administrators in the belief that a language lab will solve all language learning problems for all people. Students feel that attendance *in corpore* will propel them to the heights of A pluses; instructors feel that any student difficulty will vanish after a few extra lab sessions, and administrators feel that the institution's reputation remains untarnished in the language area if they can tell other administrators that they supply language lab facilities. Many students fail to realize that what is of paramount importance is not the frequency of attendance, but the quality of the lab work they do. For many victims of the panacea concept, the end of the course or the visit to the foreign country — the real test — often results in more frustration. Instructors who blithely ignore their own pedagogical inadequacies, sloughing off their teaching responsibilities onto a machine or a lab program where supposedly all the work is done for them, still get the same questions or poor oral performance from students who have conscientiously attended the lab. The situation deteriorates even more when these instructors do not or cannot attend the same lab periods as their students and fail to audit and correct their students' tapes.

2. *The software morass* offers a more complex and murkier picture. Its complexity arises in that the publishing business, one-upmanship, imitation, salesmanship quotas, and academic rivalry amongst many other factors and pressures contribute in varying degrees to producing the available texts, exercises, lab books, readings, cultural notes, conversations, plays, comprehension tapes, etc., etc. The frustration of encountering mediocre quality, not to say erroneous or irrelevant material, in all this software is exceeded only by the student's boredom at having to sit through a bad lab period and his lack of enthusiasm at having to look forward to more of the same. In an attempt to be all things to all people, many lab programs are not only abysmally dull and utterly confusing but a waste of the student's valuable time. There is hope, nevertheless, that the general quality of the software will improve. Meanwhile, an ancient principle can still be followed advantageously: *Caveat emptor*.

3. *The credibility gap* seems to be part and parcel of the times, between the government and the people, the advertiser and the consumer, the language lab and the student. In addition to helping correct pronunciation, offering grammar exercises,

increasing fluency, drilling speech patterns, vocabulary and verbs, is the language lab expected to solve the credibility gap into the bargain? Students are told right and left that lab is the *sine qua non* to learn fast and pass the course. However, because of the software morass, failure of the instructor to follow up, or the student's failure to absorb quickly the simple mechanics of using the lab facilities to personal advantage, many students fall far short of the expected results and the lab is blamed for all inadequacies. There follows an understandable lack of confidence in any kind of lab work, the credibility gap has been established and the lab is "turned off."

4. *The machine syndrome* mostly affects students. Some find it difficult to accept tuition from an inanimate object. If the aversion to the machine is strong, the lab program no matter how helpful will be useless. Some students (and some instructors) suffer from the "numbing of consciousness," a deadly sin as described in Konrad Lorenz's latest book *Civilized Man's Eight Mortal Sins*. Professor Lorenz says that the search — through technology and pharmacology — for a world without pain, effort or annoyance may have succeeded in so dulling man's feelings and perception that the ability to experience joy, achievement or enthusiasm has been all but destroyed. The great joys in life, he insists, "Seldom come to pass without some labor pains. Instant coffee is a bit like instant copulation — you save time, but you lose something else."

conclusion

The disappointing record of the language lab does not stem only from sub-standard software but also from the behavior and attitudes of the individuals involved. Failure to use the lab hardware efficiently, as well as inadequate supervision, correction and follow-up on the part of instructors or lack of preparation, personal effort and concentration by the student are some of the more significant human failings that prevent the language lab from living up to its potential. The principle behind it needs no defence really, it is only an extrapolation of the work the competent language teacher has always carried out in the classroom. In the light of all arguments pro and con, it might well be time to take a softer look at the hardware and a harder look at the software before attempting to blacklist the language lab!