

Jean-Philippe Aubert, Gilbert Taggart,  
and Jacques J. Rebuffot

## The Language Laboratory

### A Personal Experience and a Discussion

*The history of the following group of papers is not irrelevant. Aubert's talk, given first to teachers and then submitted to the Journal, had appealed to the Editor as a beguiling glimpse of attentive, down-to-earth teaching in a university milieu, and was prepared for inclusion in a previous issue. However, objections had been raised by reviewers, and were sustained by the Editorial Board, on the grounds that contemporary scholarship in the teaching of second languages tends to discredit the use of language laboratories; publication was therefore suspended while various ways of acknowledging the conflict were discussed. It was finally agreed to publish the article unchanged (the talk had not been designed as an argument) and to append two commentaries, taking their positions for and against.*

*Aubert describes the lab as it actually operates in contemporary McGill: a converted house, swarming with students who are learning — with some apparent enthusiasm, with different degrees of accomplishment, and with varying aims — one second language or another. He concentrates on the French Language Centre. Taggart acknowledges the absence from any laboratory of that context of communication which a language requires to fulfil its purpose, but he recognizes a place in learning a language for drills, and for the conditions of security and detachment in which its forms can be mastered. Rebuffot, noting the several misleading impressions that concentration on grammatical correctness can cultivate in a learner, illustrates his disagreement by drawing this odd picture: students rushing indoors to learn from a machine the language that is being spoken by four out of every five people walking abroad in the streets of Québec.*

*Admittedly, many of those people abroad are not averse to exploiting the secrecy of their code, and few of them have anything like the patience of the machine with a learner. But it does seem an apt illustration of an ancient discontent with schools and universities: whereas there is no doubt of how satisfying it can be to learn the order that careful minds have evolved out of a reality, satisfaction with order alone will isolate you from that reality.*

## The language lab at McGill

Language labs are not exactly an innovation; they have been with us language teachers in Canada for maybe 15 or 20 years. (As a matter of fact, language labs began being used in the U.S. universities as early as the late forties.) Practically all universities, colleges and most high-schools on this continent have a language lab of some sort or other.

The debate is still going on as to whether it was a great waste or an effective investment. At some point, the language lab was believed to be the panacea, the indispensable key to any modern teaching of language; others became completely disillusioned about it, at least about the way it is used in many institutions. Let me quote, for example, an article from a recent copy of the *Journal of the National Association of Learning Laboratory Directors* (the NALLD Journal). Here is how Prof. C. S. Chadwell describes it: "Too many students spend too many hours slumped in the booths, thinking of something other than the material they are supposed to be practising, doing assignments for other classes, or sleeping, but managing to produce rote utterances in the event the monitor is listening. The mechanical atmosphere soon loses its intrigue. The lack of personal contact has a deadening effect on the motivation of most students."<sup>1</sup>

As with any sophisticated tool, the debate on the pros and cons of the language lab could continue indefinitely. My point of view is non-partisan and unpretentious: I am not an expert on the matter, I am a *user*, like most of us here; on the whole, my experience at McGill University has definitely been positive. I have some strong convictions on how a language lab should be used and how it can be misused. I would like to share this experience and these convictions with you, hoping that a concrete and fruitful discussion and exchange will result from it.

Let us consider some general facts about language labs as they are used at McGill University; I will further concentrate specially on my own experience in the French Language Centre; this will enable me, I hope, to outline the conditions of a really effective use of language labs.

## A polyglottic centre

At McGill, I can think of 6 locations around the campus equipped with language lab facilities, plus a sophisticated apparatus in the Linguistics Department for phonetic research purposes. Every *foreign* language Department, needless to say, uses these facilities according to its needs. Each language instructor whether in German, Russian, or Italian has his own philosophy: some believe in using a master tape for a whole class, some send their students to practise by themselves, others insist on being with the students to instruct or assist them. I will later discuss the relevance of these various approaches. Let me also mention the large number of languages available to any individual learner in the university. In the many hours I personally spend in the lab, I sometimes hear most exotic sounds coming from such and such a booth: a student is practising Turkish or Urdu or an Amerindian language such as Inuktitut or Cree. Twenty-four languages are thus accessible to the community.

The Department of Classics has innovated, I believe, in setting up a project for the teaching of Ancient Greek. Though Ancient Greek is a dead language meant to be read and not spoken, the initiators of this course, Professors C.D. Ellis and A. Schachter, have chosen a basically audio-lingual method, which has led them to a thorough study of the sound system of Ancient Greek. They had of course to record basic dialogues and drills as an important part of their course, so that the Greek of Plato and Xenophon (or something very close to it) can also be heard in the earphones of McGill's language lab.<sup>2</sup>

What about the physical aspects, the "hardware" of language labs? I was recently discussing the matter with the language labs' Director at the University, Professor J. Lemyze. We both agreed that the basic requirement is *flexibility*: a lab must enable the instructor to come with a class so as to listen and practise collectively, as well as allow each student to come individually. Technically, it means of course that each booth must be equipped with an individual tape — or cassette-recorder. It is important too that the instructor in charge of a lab be in a position to listen to everybody, but also that he be able to *stop* the tape of the student automatically as soon as he chooses to communicate with him. Labs where the instructor speaks and the student simultaneously continues to hear his own tape present scenes of great confusion.

The question of checking of attendance is rather important. It is linked with the fundamental problem of motivation. Ideally, students attend the lab whenever necessary, and there should be no need to "police" them. It may be the case in some instances, but I personally think that a system whereby the professor is consistently informed of who attends the lab, and what tape has been borrowed and for how long, is indispensable. A time-clock punching-card system therefore seems to be a necessary component of our "hardware".

Some older labs at McGill are equipped with reel-to-reel tapes; I much prefer the cassette system, which saves the students a lot of time and trouble. Another gadget which I appreciate in the lab is the following. The student must be able not only to rewind his tape rapidly; if he has made a mistake or needs to hear a question again, a button of "recapitulation" is available. By holding it for a few seconds, the tape will wind back past the point he just recorded; it enables him to go back promptly, as often as necessary, to a point where he needs correction or reinforcement.

Except to expose students to recorded pieces of poetry, drama, and so on, the Department of French Language and Literature normally does not need the lab. One course, however, entitled "Phonétique corrective," does make use of it. It aims at helping students already fluent in French to improve their pronunciation, accent and intonation. The course, set up by Professor J. Lemyze, reviews systematically the sound system of French, starting not from isolated sounds but from phonetic groups, going then to syllables and finally to phonemes. Here, attending the lab is a component of the course. After hearing a theoretical presentation of the point of the day in class and reading a text exemplifying this point, the students go to the lab with their professor; a master tape is played from the console and practised collectively. Students are advised to go to the lab on their own for extra practice or revision; highly-motivated ones do so independently. The originality of this approach lies in its attempt to humanize the machine, and to give the student the impression that his instructor is really around, supporting him as he struggles with the subtleties of French accent and intonation.

## **A variety of needs**

My department, the French Language Centre, deals with French as a *second* language; its role for Anglophone students who live in Quebec is therefore quite important. It is not surprising that we are probably the best customers of the language lab at this point. The French Language Centre is therefore distinct from the Department of French Language and Literature. Our aim is to bring the students to the point where they can "function" in French. Obviously, there is a great variety of needs to be met, depending on the linguistic background of each person; not every level requires the use of the lab.

Our most advanced students have already been exposed to a lot of French in the Quebec schools; what they need is to be placed in a situation where they can utilize *actively* what they have already acquired in a *passive* manner, and also to be corrected systematically. This is the kind of interaction which a tape cannot give. Under the heading "Functional French" we have organized three types of courses which gather groups with a limited number of students. To prepare them for acceptance in these groups, we are now offering a new modular remedial course: comprehension and grammar problems are handled in

modules, including work in the language lab. The lab enables students to practise individually and to reinforce the newly acquired patterns. Thanks to the lab, each module can combine oral and written practice.

In our Centre, three more courses are open to students coming mostly from outside the province of Quebec; they all make good use of the lab to meet their specific needs.

### **Exposure to reality**

The intermediate level is meant for students with an average background of 2 to 3 years' French. Some of these badly need revision of basic grammar structures: they are advised to go to the lab individually and practise elementary structural exercises designed for the two lower levels. Depending on motivation, quite a few take advantage of the lab by themselves. But at this stage, as in "Functional French", what they principally need is more exposure to real French. To that effect, beside activities offered by the course, they are required to listen to a set of tapes, in the lab, for which no text is available to them. We have chosen a series entitled *Les Ecoutes*, produced by two professors at York University and published by Prentice-Hall of Canada. These tapes offer a variety of dialogues, interviews, monologues, which have been recorded live for the most part. They provide a language that has not been specifically designed for the class-room. If the student is exposed to this kind of dialogue without introduction, it can be overwhelming. A preparation in class by the instructor is therefore necessary. Under such conditions, these tapes represent a valuable exercise for comprehension and ear training. It really helps to break through the confines of the artificial linguistic framework of the class-room.

The point is to expose the students to different accents and different levels of speech, and also to a wide range of new vocabulary. This experience enables them to try and understand standard French, conversational as well as more academic French, Quebec French spoken by a priest (for example) or a working-class woman. Students can listen to them as many times as they choose in the lab: at first, hearing a passage in "joual" for example, they don't understand; they try again and again (the tape never gets nervous!); they may write down a bit of a sentence causing problems and ask the instructor in class about it; another listening session, and a dialogue which was quite upsetting at the beginning finally becomes a rewarding experience. It can later be exploited in class in various ways, lead to discussions (much depending on the enthusiasm of the instructor) and finally to a quiz which will measure how much each student benefited from the tape.

How do the students react to this? I asked my class how they felt about *Les Ecoutes* this year. The response was very favourable. There was general agreement on the fact that they had learnt something important there.

## **A form of tutorial**

At the elementary level, after 1 or 2 years' French, needs are more basic. Comprehension is poor, fundamentals have been taught, but they need reinforcement. More complex structures have to be acquired. What has the language lab to do with it?

Some years ago, the three instructors in charge of this course decided to roll up their sleeves in order to answer that question. The commercial tapes existing on the market seemed both irrelevant as far our curriculum was concerned and rather boring in their mechanical approach, so we divided the various chapters of grammar to be revised into 8 sections, 4 for each term. After a lot of teamwork, script-writing and home-made recording, 8 tapes were produced, each including a) 7 to 9 structural exercises, b) a dialogue integrating the elements that had just been drilled, and c) a short dictation that illustrated these notions. Over a period of three weeks, students are required to spend sufficient time in the lab to enable them to assimilate the material taught in class and demonstrated in the tape.

Why is it important? Because in classes with an enrolment of 25, there is no way of making each student answer many questions and drill all grammatical structures; each student moreover has to face the challenge of understanding and assimilating a live dialogue geared to his level individually. As Professor L. Chatagnier, of the University of Montreal, put it in a paper presented at the Canadian Conference on Language Laboratories, Montreal, 1970: "Le temps d'étude passé au laboratoire correspond à une *individualisation poussée* de l'enseignement."<sup>3</sup> This "individualization," comparable to a tutorial, is irreplaceable.

Although the experiment I have just described is imperfect and needs to be improved, can one regard it as successful? Unquestionably yes. Why? I think because it was made with enthusiasm which has infused the dialogues and some exercises with humour and life.

### **"The problem with beginners . . ."**

With the Beginners' Intensive Course, I am coming to the very heart of my subject. At the other levels already described, the language lab, however important and necessary, could be regarded as an auxiliary. At this level, I consider that the lab can be fully and effectively integrated with the learning process as one of its indispensable components.

What are the needs to be met? Every year, approximately 120 students want to learn French with us, starting from scratch; a number of them come from English Canada or the United States, but about two thirds originate from all over the world: Latin America, the West Indies, all parts of Europe, Arab

countries, China, India, and so on. They are interested in learning as much French as possible within a year, at 6 hours a week including 2 hours in the lab, so as to be able to communicate in standard French (in Quebec but also elsewhere), to read it, and possibly to have access to the French culture.

How can a lab help us do that? Beginners as such — and all the more so as they come from such a variety of different backgrounds — particularly need a) a means of training their ears to the sound system of the new language, and b) intensive oral practice of those new sounds; to be effective, this training has to be individual. The acquisition of the basic structures of grammar and vocabulary also requires a lot of individual practice and self-correction up to the point of automatic linguistic responses. The language lab, properly used, is an excellent tool to achieve these goals.

The tool being there, the question remains: what software are we going to put in it? Commercial tapes of all kinds are offered as part of many methods, all with good qualities and many defects. We chose one which proved convenient and well designed, *L'Echelle*, by a team from University of Michigan and published by Xerox, with the provision that its material be selected and complemented to adapt to our students' needs. Prof. Barbara Sheppard, then director of this programme, wrote a number of dialogues and review exercises to that effect. The dialogues and review exercises were recorded by members of our staff and incorporated into the lab's tapes. This proved a key to the success of that method, as it offered the beginners a corpus of words and idioms taken from daily life in the context of real situations, as in *Les joies du climat canadien* — *Chambre à louer* (a foreign student trying to find a room in the McGill ghetto) — *Le budget familial* and so on.

As a result, the combination of a well-structured and rigorous method with gradual exposure to a real language related to the students' own experience turned out to be quite valuable. In a way, it brought together, both in class and subsequently in the lab, the audio-lingual method and the intuitive communication-oriented approach. It is completed, in the second term, by exposure to reading and group conversation.

According to computerized evaluation questionnaires filled out by all sections of beginners over the last two years, the course has been rated "good" or "excellent" by 93.6% of the students. The lab practice has been considered "useful" or "indispensable" by 89.85% of them.

## Human versus machine

However, the benefit derived from the lab varies greatly according to the individual personality. Not everybody likes to work with a machine. That is where the role of the instructor becomes crucial. Before dealing with this aspect, let me mention a personal observation. Year after year, I have seen numbers of

students coming from distant countries, from Asia in particular, encountering tremendous problems in trying to cope with French; I have observed them struggling in the lab, calling for assistance, going back to the tape, pushing the “recapitulation” button back and forth, constantly reinforcing what they have been acquiring, spending extra hours each week with this infinitely patient “tutor” — the lab. When they finally make it, much of the credit should be attributed to the manner in which they have maximized the use of the language lab.

A lab is a machine. However sophisticated, it will never be a teacher. As Professor Edward Stack wrote in the *NALLD Journal* recently: the machines will “not do the teaching . . . they merely provide practice on what the teacher has done.” He concludes that the lab means “more effort on the part of the teacher, not less effort.”<sup>4</sup> My colleague Professor J. M. Vary from the Spanish Department said the same thing to me other day: the instructor who accompanies his class in the lab has to be well trained and conscientious; when he returns from an hour’s lab session, he is bound to be exhausted. If he is not, it shows he has not done a very good job.

That means that the part played by the instructor in the lab is essential. By selecting or producing the right type of tapes, by his presence and the quality of his voice, he adds this human, emotional element which the machine lacks.

### **A matter of joint responsibility**

Although at higher levels students may benefit from the lab by themselves, at the beginning an instructor’s presence is irreplaceable. First of all, beginners have to acquire the proper learning habits from the very first session. It does not take long to be taught the right use of this machine. The main idea is that to take any advantage of the lab, the learner has to be actively engaged and personally responsible for what he is doing. The instructor’s role is to see to it that the student does not mumble vague answers, that he stops or plays back his tape as often as is necessary, that he starts again when his answer is not correct, or not spontaneous enough, and that he does a whole exercise again if the answer is not given fluently enough. If the instructor at the console is demanding, warm, and convincing, the students in the booths cannot be sleepy, passive, or bored. The teacher has to be available for help if called by a signal; his attention and presence should be perceived discreetly in every booth as he gives a word of encouragement here, corrects a mistake in pronunciation there, or suggests that a point should be repeated. He does not need to interfere incessantly.

It soon becomes a habit for the students themselves. They know that the lab is an essential part of the language learning process, that much depends on their attention and concentration and that it requires a lot of effort on their part and on the part of the instructor who shares it with them. Indeed, it is a joint enterprise.

All commentators seem to agree on the fact that motivation is the key to the effective use of the lab. That is where the teacher almost has to play the part of a therapist. As Professor Pierre Léon, from Toronto University, remarked in his presentation to the Canadian Conference on Language Labs in 1970: “peut-être l'essentiel consiste à être avec l'étudiant, à l'aimer si j'ose dire, à s'intéresser à ce qu'il fait dans le laboratoire. Si un professeur s'intéresse à ses étudiants, le laboratoire fonctionne bien.”<sup>5</sup> In short, if the teacher cares for his students, the lab will work all right.

## NOTES

This paper is adapted from the text of an oral presentation given to the *Symposium on New Ideas for Effective Language Teaching*, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, on April 7th, 1979.

1. *Journal of the National Association of Learning Laboratory Directors*, Vol. XIII, No. 1 (Fall 1978), p. 17.
2. Cf. *McGill Journal of Education*, Vol. V, No. 2 (Fall 1970).
3. *Laboratoires de langues: Orientations Nouvelles*, collection of papers edited by Gilbert Taggart and Louis Chatagnier (Ed. Aquila, Montréal, 1970), p. 94.
4. *NALLD Journal*, Vol. XI, No. 2 (Winter 1977), p.p. 10-11.
5. *Laboratoires de Langues: Orientations Nouvelles*, p. 62.

## The language laboratory: why not?

### *The Language Lab and Communicative Competence*

Current second-language teaching methodology places increasing importance on the acquisition of *communicative competence* as a prime goal for language learners. The realization that knowing a language means knowing how to use it in real situations and not simply an ability to manipulate linguistic forms represents a necessary reorientation of priorities. In this context, the language laboratory as a learning device has often been criticized because conditions in the laboratory are unlike those prevailing in real communication situations: learners are physically isolated from one another, learner speech activity does not influence the dynamic unfolding of the situation, lab programs stress elimination of linguistic errors rather than positive activity directed toward content communication, and so on.

Yes, the language lab is an artificial learning milieu — as is the classroom, for that matter. Yet, as Professor Aubert points out in his article, everyday lab users at McGill University and many other institutions across the country, both teachers and students, generally recognize the laboratory's very practical value and applications. In my opinion, this is so because a) the acquisition of *linguistic skills* as a first step to communicative competence remains an essential element in language training, and b) such skills need not always be practised in communication-oriented situations.

### *The Lab and Linguistic Skill Exercise*

The language lab is for the spoken language what an exercise book is for the written language. No one would pretend that writing exercises is an authentic example of written communication in the same sense as in letters, memos, essays or articles. Yet practice in transforming passive to active, affirmative to negative, present to past, first person to second, indicative to conditional and so on undoubtedly facilitates subsequent written expression. Spoken language being a matter of sounds rather than letters, mastery of its phonology and mor-

phology requires aural-oral practice. Few would object to written exercises constructed on a formal rather than an entirely communicative basis. Why then should spoken practice always be communication-oriented?

### *The Lab and Cognitive Learning*

Precisely because the language laboratory disengages linguistic utterances from their communicative matrix, cognitive learning, recently restored to a place of honour, is fostered. Professor Aubert speaks of the lab programs used at McGill to expose students to different varieties of accent, voice, level of language, etcetera. What relatively inexperienced learner in a real-life communication situation has time to stop and think about such matters? He is frequently so busy with the process of communication, fighting it out to get his own message across, that he has precious little time to take note of his opponent's speech characteristics, which nonetheless might serve as models — to be imitated or avoided as the case may be — in his own subsequent linguistic behavior. The language lab allows the learner to observe and study such features in a setting from which the tension of communicative requirements has been withdrawn.

### *The Lab and Individual Learning Styles*

Much has been made of the account to be taken of the individual learner's characteristics and strategies in second-language acquisition. Certainly, the adult does not approach learning in the same way as the child does, extrovert and introvert personalities perform differently in communicative situations, attitudes affect learning strategies and so on. While such considerations have often been invoked to demonstrate the shortcomings of the language laboratory as a learning terrain for youngsters or for outgoing adults anxious to get on with real communication, it is equally true many learners welcome the possibilities afforded by the lab for calm, private, stress-free practice.

### *The Lab as Practice in Non-communicative Language Activity*

Language is not always highly saturated in communication value. A great many of our everyday utterances are automatic formulas, spoken with little variance from occurrence to occurrence. Greetings, weather chat, inquiries as to health, business or work are typical examples. Consider the following exchange:

- Salut, Jacques, ça va?
- Ça va. Toi, ça marche?
- Ben, on ne peut pas se plaindre.
- Mais non, faut pas.
- Bon, ben, salut, hein. À tantôt.
- Oui, à tantôt. Salut.

Communication: Zero. Performance: A plus. The language lab can provide a means to repeat and acquire these ritualistic formulas, which are relatively unrelated to speaker interaction.

Language is often just pure fun. So is language learning. Constant preoccupation with needs-oriented communication has made some learning theorists a dour lot. So what if “Posez vos gros pots d’eau chaude” isn’t a terribly useful sentence to throw into the average conversation? It’s still fun to hear and imitate it in a language lab phonetics exercise. And who knows, the ease of articulation thus acquired might just prove to be an asset in real communication!

### *A Word of Caution*

The relation of form and content is so intimate in language that ways of associating sound and meaning must always be sought. Mindless parroting and mechanical substitution are probably next to nil in value as language training. The inherent danger in lab work of having students make sounds without knowing the meaning of either what they hear or what they say must be avoided. The use of context-related exercises incorporating iconic visual and oral cues is an avenue to be explored. Close integration of classroom and laboratory activity and the availability of a live “resource person” during lab sessions would appear to be highly desirable, if not indispensable.

### *In Conclusion*

The language laboratory should certainly not be the only learning environment made available to future language communicators. Let us accept the fact that training in the lab is not practice in communication as such and does not alone insure communicative competence. Nevertheless, true communicative competence cannot exist in the absence of linguistic competence, and in this respect the language laboratory, intelligently, creatively, imaginatively conceived, can fulfil very useful functions in the total process of language acquisition.

## Le laboratoire de langues: pour quoi faire?

Que faire aujourd'hui du laboratoire de langues dans une classe de français langue seconde au Québec?

Après en avoir rappelé la définition, on s'efforcera d'abord de voir si cet outil a encore la faveur des enseignants, ensuite d'analyser le rôle du laboratoire dans l'établissement des compétences en langue seconde, enfin d'examiner si le laboratoire peut favoriser l'acquisition d'une langue.

Parler ici du laboratoire, c'est se référer au tableau présenté par Jean-Philippe Aubert: une salle aménagée de cabines individuelles, utilisant soit des bandes magnétiques soit des cassettes, et dotée d'une console centrale où l'enseignant peut s'adresser à l'apprenant. Il convient également de replacer la description de l'utilisation du laboratoire dans le contexte québécois, où quatre-vingts pour cent de la population est de langue française.

Contrairement à ce qui semble se passer à l'université, ce type de laboratoire paraît en voie de disparition dans les écoles secondaires du Québec pour des raisons de coût et d'entretien et, surtout, pour des motifs pédagogiques.

### *Une fonction remise en cause*

Tout récemment, Glyn Holmes<sup>1</sup> rappelait que la baisse de popularité du laboratoire parmi les enseignants est liée à la perte de vitesse de la méthodologie d'inspiration audio-linguale. Selon lui, quatre facteurs expliquent, en outre, l'insatisfaction ressentie par les apprenants et par les enseignants: des enregistrements commerciaux de pauvre qualité, des exercices structuraux sans grand intérêt ou bien des dialogues peu motivants, l'absence de programmes pour étudiants avancés, enfin la réticence du corps enseignant à l'égard du laboratoire. Françoise Redard,<sup>2</sup> de son côté, soulignant la remise en question de l'audio-visuel à l'heure actuelle, précise qu'il ne faut pas incriminer le moyen mais "la fonction qui lui est attribuée en didactique." Jean-Philippe Aubert, lui-même, signale les limites de l'utilité du laboratoire pour les apprenants avancés.

### *Laboratoire et compétence grammaticale*

Quel est le fond du débat? En 1972, D. A. Wilkins,<sup>3</sup> après avoir analysé les divers éléments d'un cours d'espagnol pour débutants de F. Rand Morton (1961), cours où l'utilisation du laboratoire est intensive, constate que l'enseignement du sens en est absent des trois premières étapes et que, dans les deux dernières, cela est fait "sans précision." Il laisse donc prudemment à l'auteur du cours le constat d'un succès dans l'apprentissage et conclut ainsi son analyse: "The soundest view would seem to be that (. . .) language teaching should be based on a full understanding of both the formal and the semantic nature of language."<sup>4</sup> Or, à cause de sa nature, le laboratoire ne peut pas, de plus souvent, présenter les conditions de production des énoncés linguistiques extérieures aux énoncés eux-mêmes, conditions désignées par le terme de *situation*.<sup>5</sup>

En outre, puisque le laboratoire tend à favoriser l'apprentissage d'une compétence grammaticale au détriment d'une compétence de communication, il n'aide pas l'apprenant à se servir de la langue apprise à l'école dans de vraies situations de communication et en face de vrais interlocuteurs.<sup>6</sup> De leur côté, les grammairiens, s'inspirant de Chomsky, ainsi que les psycholinguistes, refusant de voir dans la langue un système d'habitudes mécaniques, mettent plutôt l'accent sur l'aspect créateur du langage,<sup>7</sup> ce que le laboratoire ne peut guère favoriser. Enfin, l'utilisation du laboratoire pour acquérir le code linguistique paraît être difficile à justifier dans une société majoritairement francophone où la vie quotidienne expose sans cesse l'apprenant de français à une utilisation fonctionnelle de la langue.

### *Laboratoire et acquisition d'une langue*

Par sa rigidité et par sa lourdeur, le laboratoire, du moins tel que Jean-Philippe Aubert le présente, n'aide pas l'apprenant à prendre conscience de la différence entre l'apprentissage d'une langue à l'école et l'apprentissage en dehors du cadre scolaire. Le laboratoire est un des moyens dont dispose l'enseignant pour guider l'apprentissage. Certes, cette pédagogie — au sens grec du terme *acte de conduire* — a son importance quand on apprend une langue. Cependant elle donne souvent la fausse impression que c'est la seule façon de s'y prendre. Or, opposée à l'apprentissage, l'acquisition, selon la distinction de S. Krashen,<sup>8</sup> menée sur le terrain, est très différente.<sup>9</sup> Alors que les modèles linguistiques du laboratoire ont été soigneusement sélectionnés la plupart du temps, ceux entendus en dehors de l'école diffèrent en quantité, en variété et, peut-être en qualité. C'est à l'apprenant d'assumer seul, sur le terrain, ses acquisitions selon ses dispositions et ses besoins. A cet égard, la programmation et l'uniformisation de l'apprentissage au laboratoire ne paraissent pas constituer de préparation efficace. Enfin, le laboratoire servant à prévenir ou à corriger les erreurs, ne peut pas non plus aider l'apprenant à prendre conscience que celles-ci sont partie intégrante de l'apprentissage. Or, en face d'un interlocuteur, comprendre ou se faire comprendre sont plus importants que produire des énoncés grammaticalement impeccables.

Il serait, cependant, hasardeux de tirer une conclusion rapide et de dire que le laboratoire n'a plus du tout de place dans l'enseignement du français langue seconde, en particulier au Québec. Comme le rappelle justement Pierre Calvé,<sup>10</sup> il y a une part d'habitude dans l'apprentissage d'une langue que le laboratoire peut favoriser: comment, par exemple, retenir les flexions verbales sans entraîner mécaniquement sa mémoire? Mais l'usage du laboratoire, dont on attendait tant, est, semble-t-il, aujourd'hui limité parce qu'il est souvent utilisé pour développer la compétence grammaticale. Pourtant, le débat n'est pas encore définitivement tranché. A l'enseignant de juger et de se servir, s'il le désire, du laboratoire selon des objectifs précis et pour des besoins d'apprentissage bien analysés.

#### NOTES

1. Glyn Holmes, "The Humorist in the Language Laboratory," *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Summer 1980), p. 197.
2. Françoise Redard, "Livres choisis de pédagogie," *Le Français dans le Monde*, No. 140 (octobre 1978), p. 59.
3. D. A. Wilkins, *Linguistics in Language Teaching* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1972), pp. 20-24.
4. D. A. Wilkins, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
5. R. Galisson et D. Coste, dir., *Dictionnaire de didactique des langues* (Paris: Hachette, 1976), p. 504.
6. H. G. Widdowson, *Teaching Language as Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 18.
7. Pierre Calvé, "Le Laboratoire de langues a-t-il toujours sa place dans l'enseignement des langues secondes?", *La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (mars 1977), p. 508.
8. S. Krashen, "Formal and Informal Linguistics Environments in Language Acquisition and Language Learning," *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 10 (1976), pp. 157-168.
9. H. H. Stern, "Language Learning on the Spot: Some Thoughts on the Language Aspects of Student Exchange Programs," *La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (mai 1980), pp. 659-669.
10. Pierre Calvé, *op. cit.*, p. 513.