THE ROLE OF THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY IN THE TEACHING OF SPOKEN ENGLISH

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1. Introduction

We find language laboratories installed in many schools, colleges and universities. The facilities have become more and more sophisticated alongside the development of the programs used for them.

As Bruce Pattison says, however, it sometimes happens that "gadgets are taken as a sign of up-to-dateness," and "they are used when more could be learned in other ways."[1] We should bear in mind that a machine is only an aid, not an end itself. It should be controlled by a human being, not vice versa. From this viewpoint, I would like to reconsider what this machine can and cannot do in the teaching of English—particularly of spoken English.

This paper is based on my experience in teaching at a technical college, the type of college with a senior high school course included. I intend, therefore, that it shall deal with the problems both at college and senior high school level.

2. From Manipulation to Communication

It is often said that we should improve four skills harmoniously in learning a foreign language—English, in our case. That is exactly the case when we teach students at elementary level, but at intermediate and advanced level the teaching of spoken English is obliged to be gradually separated from that of written English. For spoken English we can use different teaching materials from those for reading, though, of course, they have much in common. Needless to say, the ultimate aim of teaching spoken English should be to let students communicate freely in English.

Various drills have been devised and practiced, such as pattern practice and other kinds of structure and vocabulary drills. It was vaguely assumed that through these drills students would acquire automatic language habits and thus be able to conmmunicate. Recently, however, it has been recognized that, though these drills are useful, they cannot of themselves equip students to express themselves in the language outside the classroom. The need for well-planned

communication practice has been keenly felt. This trend is clearly reflected in the newly-enforced courses of study for junior and senior high schools issued by the Education Ministry of Japan.

These two kinds of activities, which Clifford H. Prator calls "manipulative" and "communicative" activities[2], should be effectively coordinated in the teaching program of spoken English. And I would like to consider here how the language laboratory should be used in connection with this program.

We sometimes meet with "a cold look at the language laboratory." For example, B. Richards remarks:

> "I am sure that teachers who use the LL are unaware of the vicious effects that this teaching machine cannot fail to produce ; and I am sure that those who produce the LL material with such ingenuity are unaware of them also. At the same time, both would probably, almost certainly, subscribe to the concept of language as a means of communication; but it is simply not true, nor by any stretch of the imagination could it be made to appear true, that the LL sees language as a means of even rudimentary communication. Because how can any teaching method which actively hinders and inhibits communication be said to work in the interests of communication?"[3]

This remark does sound plausible, but, as a matter of fact, there seems to be some confusion between two phases of language learning—namely, manipulation and communication.

Richard C. Bedford, after referring to some of the disadvantages of the laboratory, maintains:

> "I remain convinced that the LL has a function. That function, however, is far more modest than many have assumed. The LL is useful for teaching pronunciation, and intonation, what is sometimes labeled prosody, is less use in teaching conversation (or the active use of phrasal/clausal discourse), and, finally, the LL certainly does not teach communication."[4]

We notice that this limitation of the function of the laboratory is concerned with the distinction between manipulation and communication phases. Wilga M. Rivers is quite well aware of this correlation when she states:

> "The laboratory may be useful during the memorization and formal stages with audio-visual courses, particularly at senior high school and undergraduate level. It is not suitable for the initial presentation of material and for the group practice, nor for extension of what has been learned to attempts at real communication. The students are hampered by the unnatural environment and are unable to develop a feeling for group relationships which facilitates such communication."[5]

We can conclude, therefore, that the initial presentation of material should be performed as pre-lab work, manipulative activities as lab work, and communicative activities as post-lab work. Here I would like to call your special attention to

her suggestion that "teachers must resist pressures from colleagues or the administration which would force them into occupying the laboratory for lessons for which it is inappropriate."[6]

3. How to Conduct Communication Practice

I would like to present here some problems in conducting communication practice as post-lab work.

(1) In Japanese colleges and universities one teacher usually teaches one class two hours a week. In this situation it is rather difficult to secure sufficient time for this kind of practice.

(2) One class is usually composed of 40 or 50 students, or more in some cases. It is difficult for a teacher to control so many students, and it is also difficult for each student to have enough chances to practice.

(3) Can a teacher who is not fluent himself in the foreign language teach the speaking skill?

I myself tried to solve the first and second problems by adopting the following plan, on which I made a report[7] before.

At our technical college I teach spoken English to the first year students, who are the same age as those in the first year of senior high school. One class is composed of 40 students. In pre-lab sessions I teach the whole class together in the classroom. After that the students move to the lab, where they are divided into two groups. Half of them do lab work in their booths, while the other half do communication practice under my supervision at the back space where there are no booths. In the middle of the class hour they change their places. Thus in face-to-face communication situations they can have more chances of practice than in the classroom.

Incidentally, I found similar ideas proposed in two of the above-mentioned articles. One of them is by B. Richards, who says:

> "If I have a large class—say 50—I split it into two and teach half in turn. The other half I am not teaching sometimes use, the LL tape of "Living English Speech" by Stannard Allen; one student works the tape-recorder and the class listens to the intonation patterns and/or practises them together."[8]

Meanwhile, Wilga M. Rivers suggests:

> "At more advanced levels where monitoring is less vital, the teacher may leave one section of the students to work with the tapes, while he gathers a small group around him for practice in the real give-and-take of conversation."[9]

As you see from these proposals, this plan is as suited, or maybe more suited, to advanced levels than to less advanced levels. At less advanced levels, a

teacher who is not a fluent speaker of English may be able to teach the speaking skill, as Rivers answers[10] the third question that I mentioned above. But it may become more difficult for him to teach it as stages go up. It would be very well, of course, to ask help from a native speaker of English, but even a Japanese teacher can and must have a command of English by trying to improve his own oral skills. The installment of the lab does not give him an excuse for neglecting to improve them.

The types of communication practice are different, depending on the stages of learning. Instead of going too far into the matter, I will just cite one example of practice that I gave to my students, who are ranked at less advanced, or maybe elementary, level.

Teaching Material: William L. Clark, *Spoken American English—Introductory Course*—[Third Edition], Kenkyusha
Lesson 2, pp. 26—27

Manipulation Practice:
9. Change the items in No. 5 to questions. Use *he*.
Eg. You swim every summer. ╱ Does he swim every summer? ╱ Yes. He swims every summer.

10. Change the items in No. 5 to questions. Use *she*. Give negative replies.
Eg. You swim every summer. ╱ Does she swim every summer? ╱ No. She does't swim every summer.

Communication Practice:
Student A : I (skate)   every (winter).
         (don't skate)
Student B : Does (Mr.) A (skate) every (winter)?
         (Miss)
Student C : Yes. (He) (skates) every (winter).
         (She)
  (or) No. (He) doesn't (skate) every (winter).
         (She)

4. Which Type of Lab to Use

In the system mentioned so far, a student does not have to record material on tape while he is in his booth, since he has no time to play back during the session. An audio-active type of lab is enough for this purpose. As the lab installed in our college is an audio-active-comparative type, it is possible to give him time to do so, but I have some doubts about using it this way.

In the first place, we can hardly expect self-correction during the lab work from students at intermediate level, to say nothing of those at elementary level. When a teacher monitors, he cannot correct all his class in one class hour. He would be able to correct them more effectively if he adopted the above-mentioned system by teaching half in turn.

In the second place, if a student is given time to play back, it is not always easy for him to practice "at his own pace," since the alloted time and material are the same to all the class members.

If we are to make the most effective use of an A-A-C type of lab, we should adopt the library system, which "allows students to come and go on a very flexible individual schedule, enabling them to select and use one of a large number of programs."[11] This system is most suitable for college and university levels. As a matter of fact, it has recently been adopted in some universities, as is seen in a paper entitled "The Language Laboratory Run on the Library System."[12]

We notice in this paper that not only teachers but also some assistants are engaged in the operation of this system. It is very difficult to make an overall adoption of this system in our college, where we have no assistants for the laboratory. It is open after school just twice a week, when the first year students are allowed to practice by using the tapes on which they have recorded material during regular lab sessions. Other students are also free to come here at this period if they want to. It is strongly desired that the number of lab staffs be increased so that this system may be operated on a more ample scale.

In regular lab sessions on the above-mentioned plan, as well, the help of an assistant is urgently needed if we are to monitor our students as a means of evaluation. Because of his (or her) absence in our college, I am forced to evaluate their abilities chiefly by means of a review test for each lesson, in which they listen to each stimulus on tape and write down a response for it. The increase of lab staffs will surely help evaluate their speaking abilities more correctly without giving up my plan. It is most desirable that an assistant be in charge of the students in the booths while a teacher supervises the other half in the room adjoining the laboratory.

After the first year students of our college finish the spoken English lessons that I give them twice a week, they are taught English conversation by American instructors once a week in their socond and third years. Mrs. Elizabeth B. Kitch, an instructor teaching the second year students, sometimes remarks that the students she teaches now respond far better than those she taught who had had lab sessions under a different system only once a week in their first year.

I have noticed, however, that not a few students who have had training on this plan more than two years still have some difficulty in their aural comprehension. At an advanced stage it would be better to lay more emphasis on hearing practice than on speaking practice, whether conducted as regular sessions or on the library system.

5. Conclusion

I have made some suggestions on the forms of laboratory operation at each stage in connnection with the teaching program of spoken English. They may

be summarized as shown in the table below.

Stage / Form	Elementary (Junior High School)	Intermediate (Senior High School)	Advanced (College & University)
Material for Regular Lab Sessions	Material based on textbooks used in class sessions	Material for spoken English, separated from textbooks used in class sessions, though based on learned material	Material mainly for aural comprehension
Lab Operation System and the Type of Lab	Most lab work should be done as regular sessions. An A-A type will do if not used for other purposes.	Though it is advisable to use an A-A-C type, material should just be recorded on the tape at regular sessions. It can be brought back to the lab again after school. The students are encouraged to use other pre-recorded tapes as well on the library system.	An A-A-C type should be installed so as to be extensively used on the library system as well as for regular sessions. Students who practice on the library system can be given evaluation and credit if they want to.
Pre-lab Work	Both should be performed in the classroom as regular class sessions, with authorized textbooks as teaching material.	Performed in the classroom.	Both should be performed in the adjoining room as occasion demands. Post-lab work may as well be supervised by instructors whose native language is English.
Post-lab Work		Peformed in the room adjoining the lab, coordinated with lab work.	

Finally, I would like to assert here again that we should make use of the language laboratory in its most effective way, realizing its limitation and recognizing that language teaching should eventually be designed to help our students communicate in the language.

Notes:

1) Bruce Pattison, "Backward or Forward in Language Teaching," *Journal of English Teaching*, Vol. II, No. 2 (Oxford University Press, July 1969), p. 83

2) Clifford H. Prator, "Development of a Manipulation-Communication Scale," *English Teaching Forum*, Vol. II, No. 4 (The Information Center Service of the United States Information Agency, July—August 1970), p. 4

3) B. Richards, "A Cold Look at the Language Laboratory," *Journal of English Teaching*, Vol. IV, No. 4 (Oxford University Press, November 1970), pp. 247—248

4) Richard C. Bedford, "Among the Tapeworms, or Bugs in the Languish Lab," *The English Teacher's Magazine*, Vol. XXI, No. 10 (Taishukan, December 1972), p. 33

5) Wilga M. Rivers, *Teaching Foreign-Language Skills*, Toppan International Edition, (The University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 182—183

6) Ibid., p. 183

7) Minoru Kono, "Koto Eigo Jugyo to LL" (Spoken English Lessons and the Language Laboratory), *Akita Eigo Eibungaku* (Akita English Language and Literature), No. 14 (The English Language and Literature Society of Akita, December 1971)

8) B. Richards, op. cit., p. 247

9) Wilga M. Rivers, op. cit., p. 340

10) Ibid., pp. 210—212

11) Edward M. Stack, *The Language Laboratory and Modern Language Teaching*, Revised Edition, (Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 9

12) Michiko Nagano and Chiiko Tanaka, "LL no Toshokan Riyo Hoshiki ni Yoru Riyo" (The Language Laboratory Run on the Library System), *Language Laboratory*, No. 11 (The Language Laboratory Association of Japan, March 1973)