THE STUDENT'S ATTITUDE: REVISITED[1]

W. Flint Smith and Elton Hocking

Attitude or aptitude? Or both? Recent research results agree that a youngster's I. Q. score, if revealed to his teacher, is likely to become a self-fulfilling prophesy (Rosenthal, 1968) . . . the pupil performs up to, or down to, his teacher's expectancy and attitude.

But what of the student's attitude? What does he expect of our subject, and in particular, what is his attitude toward the language lab. This question is rarely raised in the many articles, pro and con, about the value of the language lab. Student opinion has seldom been sought, but recently a start has been made.

Motivation to learn has been shown to be one of the greatest factors, along with intelligence, contributing to success in foreign-language learning (Pimsleur, 1962). Politzer (1960) concluded that assiduity in voluntary laboratory practice or some related activity is positively correlated with achievement. According to Rivers (1964) and Bauer (1964). supervision or monitoring in the language lab is also a motivating factor. Lorge (1964) reported that students who used a lab were likely to continue their language study longer than non-lab students. In general these findings indicate a reciprocal relationship between lab practices and the attitude brought to it, whether by student or teacher.

More specifically, Neidt and Hedlund (1965) reported that high school students felt best able to concentrate and presumably to profit from machine-guided practice when it was conducted in short sessions—twenty minutes or less. Beginners and second-year students ranked listening and responding as their preferred activity, followed in order by listening and comprehending, group conversation, and testing. Similar preferences were noted by Smith and Littlefield (1967), who found that students most enjoyed working with tape-recorded dialog practice; the least popular activity was practice with drills.

The most recent findings in this connection are the by-product of a two-year investigation designed primarily to assess the relative

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[1]This article originally appeared under the title "The Student's Attitude" in the May 1969 issue of the **Northern California Foreign Language Newsletter (FLANC)** pp. 8-9, 3; it is reprinted here with minor changes. Smith and Hocking

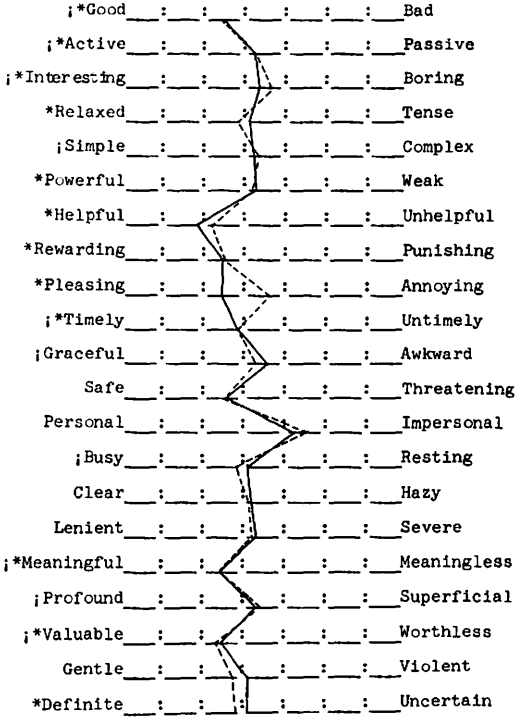
advantages of three kinds of equipment; 1) the "chandelier-type" electronic classroom; 2) the audio-active language laboratory; 3) the record-playback laboratory. The primary conclusions of the investigation have been reported elsewhere (W. F. Smith, 1969). The attitude of the students was investigated also, and is reported here for the first time.

The Investigation

Involved in the project were the beginning FL classes in a large comprehensive high school. One teacher each of French, German, and Spanish taught at least three classes, one of them meeting in a conventional classroom (but with migrations for two or three half-periods per week to either a "broadcast" or a record-playback laboratory); another of his classes met always in an electronic classroom. In addition, there was a "control" group in each language, that is, a class that used no tapes or equipment. In the class that used the laboratory, the machine-guided practice was necessarily concentrated in half-period sessions; in the class that met in the electronic classroom an equal amount of such practice was to be distributed as the teacher saw fit. In each language the instructional materials were identical. The variable factor therefore consisted of the three distinctive installations of equipment versus the "control" group.

At the beginning and again at the end of the school year the students filled out a rating sheet designed to elicit their attitude toward machine-guided language practice. For this purpose the investigator used the "semantic differential" technique (Osgood, 1957), which resembles the game of "Twenty Questions," except that the responses are not entirely free. The rating sheet presented many pairs of sharply contrasting adjectives of an evaluative or affective nature. Each pair was separated by a scaled continuum numbered from 7 (most favorable) to 1 (least favorable); the student checked his response accordingly. In this way the concept "language practice tapes" was rated by all students (n=289) on each of the scales; the ratings were then averaged and plotted (see Figure).

FIGURE
AVERAGES OF STUDENT RATINGS OF THE CONCEPT: "LANGUAGE PRACTICE TAPES"



	Pretest Mean (n=289)	Posttest Mean (n=218)	Difference@
¡*Good ... Bad	4.94	5.01	.07
¡*Active ... Passive	4.27	4.25	-.02
¡*Interesting ... Boring	4.14	3.83	-.31
*Relaxed ... Tense	4.42	4.57	.15
¡Simple ... Complex	4.34	4.26	-.08
*Powerful ... Weak	4.25	4.32	.07
*Helpful ... Unhelpful	5.58	5.31	-.27
*Rewarding ... Punishing	5.00	4.94	-.06
*Pleasing ... Annoying	5.05	3.86	-1.19
¡*Timely ... Untimely	4.56	4.53	-.03
¡Graceful ... Awkward	3.96	4.21	.25
Safe ... Threatening	4.91	4.97	.06
Personal ... Impersonal	3.23	2.94	-.29
¡Busy ... Resting	4.48	4.59	.08
Clear ... Hazy	4.33	4.64	.31
Lenient ... Severe	4.26	4.39	.13
¡*Meaningful ... Meaningless	5.06	5.06	.00
¡Profound ... Superficial	4.23	4.13	-.10
¡*Valuable ... Worthless	5.02	5.18	.16
Gentle ... Violent	4.45	4.65	.20
*Definite ... Uncertain	4.45	4.54	.09

————Pretest .....Posttest

@Posttest minus pretest

Indicates a scale which was presented to the students in reverse order, e.g., Bad.....Good.

Students Attitude

It is noteworthy that, regardless of language or type of equipment, the students immediately expected practice tapes to be generally good, helpful, rewarding, meaningful, and valuable; at the end of the year this favorable attitude had scarcely changed. Nine months of drills had not produced the satiety and disillusionment which are increasingly reported in our journals. The initial "halo effect," if any, had persisted.

Prior to comparing attitudes by groups (i.e., electronic classroom group, etc.) and by language, factor analysis was used in order to identify those scales (starred items in the Figure) which were the most evaluative; then an attitude-towards-media" score for each student was obtained by summing across the twelve scales thus identified. (The Table lists the before-and-after averages by language and by group.) Over the year, students in Spanish and German raised slightly their evaluation of tape-guided practice. In Spanish the gain was probably a result of the "visual-audio-lingual" materials (films and filmstrips in addition to tapes), rather than any specific use of

TABLE

Changes in Attitudes toward "Language Practice Tapes"

	Number	*Pretest Average*	*Posttest Average*	*Difference++*
All Languages	244	64.80	64.49	— .31
French				
All Groups	101	64.80	62.54	—2.26
Electronic Classroom	26	69.88	60.04	—9.84*
Broadcast Laboratory	18	61.67	58.44	—3.23
Record-playback Laboratory	20	62.70	61.40	—1.30
Control Group	12	66.00	72.08	5.92
German				
All Groups	81	63.20	63.89	.69
Electronic Classroom I	18	63.22	58.72	—4.50
Broadcast Laboratory	19	66.16	69.37	3.21
Broadcast Laboratory	19	66.16	69.37	3.21
Record-Playback Laboratory	10	68.40	68.40	.00
Control Group	17	57.47	64.59	7.12
Spanish				
All Groups	62	66.66	68.45	1.79
Electronic Classroom	18	65.89	65.56	— .33
Record-Playback Laboratory	10	65.80	73.89	8.09
Control Group	19	63.53	67.53	4.05

++Postest minus pretest

*Statistically significant differences (.05) (t-test)

the equipment. The language lab groups showed a somewhat more positive end-of-year attitude than the electronic classroom group, although no strong trend was evident. Let it be repeated that even these modest gains were gratifying in contrast to the usual decline of interest which is reflected by the notoriously heavy attrition at the end of most first-year courses. As for the control groups, their strongly positive end-of-year attitude probably reflects the characteristic yearning of the "underprivileged"; they were rarely allowed to use tapes and equipment, and then only for tests. Apparently those occasional tastes of wealth served to whet their appetite for more.

In conclusion, it appears that generally greater gains in attitude would have been recorded if the equipment had been more wisely used. The daily, detailed time-reports by the teachers revealed that the use of the laboratories was sometimes unsystematic. As for the electronic classroom, the equipment, although always at hand, was used appreciably *less,* and in excessively short sessions (Smith and Hocking, 1969). Apparently the very accessibility of the equipment led to improvisation and fragmented use. This lack of planning seems to be reflected in the end-of-year attitudes of the students who used the electronic classroom.

For the benefit of teacher and for the improvement of instruction, the rating sheet should have been used more frequently. Moreover, only the *starred* items in the Figure should have been included since they more genuinely reflected the students' attitude. Since all teachers are inevitably being rated silently by their students, those ratings should be communicated. The semantic differential, therefore, is a useful and easily constructed device for the teacher who, periodically, wants some objective feedback about his techniques, the materials he uses, and/or the media he applies.

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