

## VISUALS IN THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY

By Max S. Kirch

There are at least four important aspects of language over which the foreign language learner must have some control if he is to use the foreign tongue successfully: the sound system, the grammatical system, the semantic system and the culture of the foreign people. Visuals projected in the Language Laboratory can help with all of these objectives. *Perception* of the foreign sounds is accomplished largely through the auditory machinery of the laboratory, but by showing the student what the native speaker does with his tongue, lips, teeth, etc., the visuals can help with *oral production*. Actually the audio and visual equipment complement each other in aiding the learner acquire control of the foreign sound system.

Visuals help above all to acquire control of the semantic system. Short of living in the foreign country, nothing contributes as much in establishing direct relationships between foreign words and larger utterances and the things, concepts, or situations which they symbolize. Visuals provide the bridge between sound and meaning. Besides content meaning they are also concerned with grammatical meaning. (Content meaning is supplied, in most of the languages we deal with, by the roots or stems of nouns, verbs and adjectives; grammatical meaning by "function words", such as pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, and also by inflectional endings.) Although visuals are more usually used to establish content meaning, ingenious attempts have been made to utilize them to help learners acquire understanding of grammatical meaning. Noteworthy examples are the *Through Pictures* series<sup>1</sup> and William Bull's *Visual Grammar of Spanish*.<sup>2</sup> The former materials use very ingenious visual devices for illustrating time/tense differences, the latter helps to clear up confusions such as the equivalence of *ser* and *estar* to English 'to be.'

Visuals make an unparalleled contribution to acquainting the learner with the foreign culture. A course which is concerned with language alone may mislead the student into believing that the dictionary equivalents really mean that the foreign word and the

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<sup>1</sup>*French through Pictures, German through Pictures, Spanish through Pictures*, Cardinal editions, Pocket editions Inc., New York, 1950.

<sup>2</sup>University of California, Los Angeles, 1961.

native word mean the same thing. For instance, the fact that a French-English dictionary says that *pain* means 'bread' may make an American think that *pain* looks like American 'bread.' Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. The visual version of a beginning dialogue about meeting people is enough to show the learner that the actions involved in this situation are different in France from what they are in the United States. Since it is so natural for any beginner to unconsciously assume that members of other cultures think, act, feel and believe the same way we do, it is most important to set the learner straight at the very outset.

With these thoughts in mind, the University of Delaware has been experimenting with all kinds of visuals in the Laboratory: slides, filmstrips, films, etc., since the establishment of our first facility in 1955.<sup>3</sup> The visuals have been reproduced on a screen facing the students and the synchronized sound has been piped through the students' headsets.

Among the first visuals we used were filmstrips developed in connection with the *Through Pictures* series produced by Richards, Mackey and Gibson. The filmstrips project the same frames of stick-figures as the books, with or without printed foreign-language texts, as desired. These materials were ideal for developing control of basic grammar and vocabulary without the intermediation of English. Two experimental groups, one in the summer of 1956 and one in the summer of 1957, were found to have learned not much less basic grammar and vocabulary than entering freshmen who had taken traditional courses and had had ten times as much instruction in terms of hours as the Laboratory students. The comparison is based on the scores in objective standardized tests.<sup>4</sup>

Slides produced in connection with O'Connor and Haden's *Oral Drill in Spanish*<sup>5</sup> were used as cues for pattern drills instead of having the students simply hear the Spanish words as cues. In this way we could be sure that the student knew what the Spanish word meant, as well as what grammatical form class it shared privileges of occurrence with. Filmed sequences were used to help memorization of situational dialogues. Here again the purpose of the visuals was to

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<sup>3</sup>The lion's share of the credit for this should go to Dr. E. Daymond Turner, Jr., erstwhile Professor of Spanish at the University of Delaware, now chairman of the Department of Foreign Languages in the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

<sup>4</sup>Daymond Turner, "Deus ex Machina," *Modern Language Journal*, XLII, 8, Dec. 1958, p. 396 ff.

<sup>5</sup>Houghton, Mifflin, Boston, 1957. Second edition, 1963.

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establish direct relationships between utterance and meaning, bypassing the use of the native language.<sup>6</sup>

Quite a few visuals have been used for cultural enrichment. In addition to the usual travelogues, films such as *La Famille Martin* and *La familia Sanchez*<sup>7</sup> are helpful in giving students an idea of everyday life in a foreign country, while developing their auditory comprehension, too. The visual images aid in guessing meanings of essential words or phrases. Today we are fortunate in having a wider variety and more up-to-date materials at hand, such as the films distributed by the Department of Cinema of the University of Southern California in connection with *Modern Spanish* and the McGraw-Hill *Beginning German with Films* series.

One of the most unusual experiments using visual materials in the Laboratory involved the University of Delaware second-semester Intermediate German course. In the late fifties I devoted approximately six weeks of the semester to viewing and discussing a German film, *Unsere Stadt*, which was made in West Germany and designed to be used in Social Studies classes to teach adolescents something about politics at the municipal level. We viewed the whole film, listening simultaneously to the soundtrack through headsets in the Laboratory, and then discussed it in German in class. Then we would see and hear one scene at a time again in three to five minute segments, followed by detailed discussion, questions and answers, etc. After the first few viewings, the students were provided with scripts. By the end of the six-week period they were able to use *all* of the vocabulary in the script actively, as well as the grammatical structures involved. There was no comparison between the amount of German these students could use, both actively and passively, and that of the students in a control class of the intermediate level which I taught in the same semester with more traditional materials.

For the past three years we have been trying a "package" of two hours of classroom instruction, one hour of TV presentation and one hour of laboratory instruction in Elementary French and German classes. In this program only auditory signals are used in the Language Laboratory. All the visuals are presented on television in the classroom. Most of the visuals have been especially prepared for this program by our on-camera teachers with the assistance of our Teaching Resource Center. At the present time the TV materials are used in *all* Elementary German classes and in two or three sections of Elementary French classes each semester. We are constantly re-evaluating these programs with a view to making them even more

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<sup>6</sup>Visuals can also be used in *testing* such relationships.

<sup>7</sup>International Film Bureau, 57 East Jackson Boulevard, Chicago.

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effective. What we might look forward to eventually would be a receiver in every student position in the Language Laboratory, providing individual programs for each student. There would have to be provision for dial access for both audio and visual signals. This would make it possible for each student to proceed at his own pace. Some students might finish an Elementary French or German program in three weeks, whereas others might take two, three or four semesters.<sup>8</sup>

Hopefully, what has been stated above will help to show what an indispensable contribution visuals in the Language Laboratory can make to the development of control of a foreign language and the culture with which it is associated.

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<sup>8</sup>In our next laboratory installation we are planning to have television receivers in the language laboratory, too.