

ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE LABORATORIES

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In recent months the findings, reports and discussions of the Pennsylvania Project directed by Dr. Philip D. Smith have occupied much time and space in foreign-language teaching dialogue and publications (P. Smith 1969). One particularly perceptive paper was delivered by Professor Elton Hocking of Purdue University on April 29, 1969 at the DAVI Meeting in Portland, Oregon. The ideas and conclusions advanced by Professor Hocking are important enough to be reprinted here. My thanks go to Miss Elizabeth Grone, of the Lincoln (Nebraska) Public Schools for first publishing these remarks in the Nebraska Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language Annals. I personally urge editors of every foreign-language teaching newsletter in the United States to consider including them in their next publication.

Professor Hocking first commented on the current trends in language laboratories:

“There are shortcomings. Although two half sessions of twenty-five minutes each are the recommended minimum for efficient laboratory experience, the average use falls short of that goal. Other weaknesses are the reliance upon the tape to provide instruction rather than practice, and the inadequate preparation of teachers in language laboratory techniques.”

“Some of these problems are now being overcome or avoided by the development and use of the ‘electronic classroom’. No special room is required; there are no booths. Usually the recorded material is transmitted by wire to audio-active headsets which may be stored in the students’ desks, in mobile carts, or in retractable ‘chandeliers’. A variation is wireless transmission using an antenna encircling the classroom, a transmitter, and multi-channel, low-frequency receivers, one per student. Until recently the wireless system lacked individual monitor-intercom from the console, but now these features have also become available. Whether wired or wireless, the electronic classroom provides convenient, almost instantaneous use of the equipment; conversely, it sacrifices the visual and acoustical semi-isolation furnished by the individual booth, and of course it does not enable the student to record and play back. Its greatest attraction

is its low cost—about one-fourth that of a complete lab. Whatever the installation, all too often it remains unused through most of the day. Rare is the school that provides for individual study during or after school hours; rarer still is the 'library' type of laboratory monitored by teachers, para-professionals or student aides. The great improvements in equipment have not been matched by improved use."

Professor Hocking surveyed the other research in this field:

"Early attempts to evaluate the language laboratory were inconclusive; recent research, however, has confirmed its value. At the school level, research studies have validated superior achievement especially in listening comprehension, reading and speaking ability. Allen (1960) concluded that more than *one* fifty-minute period of weekly practice was necessary. The findings of the 'Keating Report' (1963), valid for the first year of language study only, showed the lab to be instrumental in improving mimicry and speech production; conversely, it pointed out the consequences of faculty correlation and laboratory activities. Lorge (1964) performed two successive and very scholarly experiments. The first study confirmed the superiority of laboratory over no-laboratory groups in listening and speaking achievement, with no loss in the traditional skills of reading and writing. The second investigation compared audio-active with record-playback equipment in two modes of use, once per week and thirty minutes daily. Significant differences favored those students who recorded and played back *daily*; moreover, the groups practicing daily via audio-activated headsets gained almost as much. Conversely, those groups in either mode, which used the equipment only once a week gained little. The 'Lorge Report' led to the conclusion that *two* thirty-minute periods of lab practice each week should be the minimum."

"In 1968 the Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction reported on its state-wide investigation, concluding that the language lab is not helpful in any way. However, several authorities have decided that this investigation is unreliable for various reasons, and that the conclusions are not valid. Their critique will be published later this year.* Meanwhile a more recent study (W. Flint Smith, 1969) has confirmed the findings of Lorge concerning the value of regularly scheduled practice sessions. Smith's comparison among groups indicated that systematic practice requiring the student to record, play back and compare his responses with those of a master tape brought about achievement superior to that attained by practice using audio-activated headsets only."

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"Investigating the value of individual monitor-intercom facilities, Bauer (1964) found that the amount of monitoring by the teacher was a definite factor contributing to overall achievement. Apparently the monitoring increases motivation. Stack (1966) has outlined a simple but highly effective method for assigning grades while monitoring."

In conclusion Professor Hocking stated:

"Research tells us that the language lab and its variations can indeed be effective instruments for learning; that the student's activities are in part determined by the nature of the equipment; and that the amount and distribution of time devoted to recorded materials is positively correlated with achievement. Nevertheless, the teacher's skill in the use of equipment, his general attitude toward recorded materials and the related media, and also the excellence of the materials themselves will continue to be more important than the media themselves, no matter how elaborate they may become."

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