

MORE ABOUT ABUSE

by Jacques Dumont

Last June, in Winnipeg, during the annual meeting of the "Association des professeurs de français des Universités canadiennes", I made a few observations to my colleagues about the role of the language laboratory in modern language teaching, with specific reference to the teaching of French. These were prepared for publication and appeared in last October's issue of the NALLD Journal. Unfortunately the postal strike which plagued Canada last summer made communication between the Editor and myself difficult, and my article was not published quite in the form I intended it to have. Everyone, I expect, understood that the title should have read "utilisation" and not "Utilisa", and will, I hope, forgive the numerous mistakes which liberally punctured the text: I did not see the proofs.

I feel that, for the sake of clarity, the following points should be made:

Any session in the language laboratory should consist of three sequences: the "establishing active contact", during which the programme is duplicated from the console, the students responding to the stimuli, the "critical listening", during which they may listen carefully to their work, and the "repeat performance", during which they re-work some, or all the drills. There are of course other valid ways of using the language laboratory. For example, the three sequences may be made into one by pre-duplicating the students' tapes. This method seems just as good to me from a pedagogical point of view,

but the obvious practical difficulty is that it means quite a lot of work for the laboratory technician and quite a lot of storage room to keep hundreds, if not thousands of tapes at the students' disposal (maybe the cassette language laboratory will be the solution in the future, as cassettes, being much smaller, require less storage room than conventional tapes). It also represents a fairly large amount of money to be invested. Still, many universities work that way, and several other possibilities exist. But whatever method is used, there should be a common denominator: the students should be given the opportunity, indeed should be urged, to compare their responses with the model and then attempt to correct whatever mistakes they may notice. And they should be helped to do it by their instructor. In my opinion, it is a secondary point whether they do this sentence after sentence all through the drills, or during separate sequences, *pro-*

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vided they do it. Similarly, whether they repeat a difficult drill immediately after doing it for the first time or during the third sequence, is immaterial. What is important is to keep the balance of these three sequences, and not to exaggerate the importance of the first, to the detriment of the others.

As far as self-correction is concerned, which the student acquires while learning a foreign language, and which is so necessary to any progress in learning, I would like to point out that sending a student to the library-type of language laboratory, in order to work there alone, *before* he has reached a certain stage of knowledge in the language, that is a sufficient level of self-correction, is disastrous, as he is going to learn more mistakes than anything else. No responsible driving instructor would send a student alone on the road to learn how to drive — and this is very much easier than to learn a foreign language! And yet, we do it every day, because it is of course the easiest solution to a problem; and when the laboratory fails to solve it, well, once again, we can blame it for our own shortcomings.

I have criticized some of Mr. Stack's views expressed in his book *The Language Laboratory and Modern Language Teaching* (1960), but I also added that Mr. Stack is less optimistic, and does less wishful thinking in his second edition, published in 1966. My object in quoting the first edition was that so many people are still using it, refer to it constantly and apply its principles, and for that reason its influence cannot be underestimated.

When language laboratories were introduced on a large scale in secondary schools and universities, several years ago, there was an overreaction: we had found, it appeared, the universal remedy to all our ills. And now, we are witnessing the contrary overreaction: the language laboratory, having not fulfilled these extravagant hopes, has become the universal villain, responsible for all our ills. The truth probably lies between these two extremes. We should not forget that the language laboratory and the pattern drill technique show a definite advantage over the old teaching methods. Above all, we should realize that the difficulties we still encounter are not so much due to the language laboratory itself as to the people who use it.

The language laboratory is not "a relic of the past", as Pierre Capretz puts it, but some instructors may well be!