SOME MODEST PROPOSALS[1]

by Jesse O. Sawyer

When Swift made his Modest Proposal in 1729 the Irish economy was stagnant. The British government had failed to achieve any deterrents in what Swift saw as an ever worsening situation, and Swift, on the surface, threw up his hands. His modest proposal was the least modest one he could think of. I don't intend to argue that my comments could compete with Swift's nor that they parellel his. I don't want to throw up my hands, but to suggest a variety of things we should be doing, a variety of programs we should be supporting in order to make language laboratories both more useful and more successful.

Our particular crises depend on our campuses and their unique qualities, but there is a pattern of problems we all have; these include reduced budgets, a growing national rejection of languages and language study — a rejection which has been encouraged by the positions taken by some linguists and language teachers — and the fact that most of the California language laboratories were built from five to ten years ago and should be replaced within the next year or two with new installations. In part, our dilemma arises from the fact that we expected too much. But in part, I think we have failed to take advantage of the variety of functions language laboratories can have in the school situation. We may have put too much of our effort into one or two functions. When these fail, then we fail. Sometimes we have been uncertain of what functions we should develop and exploit.

Taking laboratory function first, it is clear that we all do things differently. Each laboratory works in its own particular way and not infrequently on rather different approaches to presenting language. The commonest approach makes the laboratory a drillroom with a teacher in charge. If anything, I believe we have insisted too much on the language laboratory as a drill room. Those of you who have interested yourselves in random access equipment and in programmed learning have certainly suggested to the rest of us that there is the possibility in almost all language laboratories of exploiting the interest of the students who want to work alone. In our laboratory we were forced at a fairly early time to provide a room or two to serve simply

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not as library reading rooms but as their equivalent, listening rooms into which the student could go to work by himself with a minimum of supervision. When one of our laboratory classrooms was recently refitted we eliminated the teacher-monitor desk and replaced it with two additional student desks, thus ratifying the usage it had long had as an unmonitored listening room. The saving of a thousand dollars or more helped solve our money problem, but it is annoying that we didn't recognize ten years ago that our ultimate goals would lean heavily toward including a library for students. Together with my failure to see the library function clearly went almost complete indifference to bibliography. We started out with a simple catalog system consisting of the three first letters of the language plus a course number. Naturally the course number was abandoned for an accession number the first time we added a new text for a course for which we already had a set of tape recordings or the number of the course was changed. Finally and belatedly, we began to try to get professional library-type assistance. Today we employ one part time specialist to maintain our catalog, to keep us bibliographically organized. Not all laboratories have the problem as acutely (we must stock a large number of series in many languages) but I now feel that no laboratory regardless of its size can afford to ignore its card file.

Once we had discovered these parallels between our function and that of libraries generally, it wasn't too long before we began a tape lending program. Having agreed to let our student work by himself, and having gotten our catalog in order, it was possible to allow a student to check out a tape for a three or four day period. This program required that we have lending copies in addition to our classroom copies. Little else was necessary except to use standard library procedures in keeping track of our charges. We went into the tape lending program for a simple selfish reason. Once our tape recorders began to collapse, it looked more and more stupid to require that our student come in and work on campus if he had a perfectly good tape recorder at home. Why overburden our half worn-out machines if some of our students really wanted to work at home with their own tape recorders. I'm happy to tell you that our tape lending program has functioned well, that each quarter finds us adding a new series or two of recordings to the lending collection.

While these library functions are obvious to many of you, perhaps all of you, I still had to learn over a long period of time that these were facts of my existence which I could not ignore. The central facts that one can consider to lie behind the library development are two. One is the fact that language teaching is expensive because of the large amount of time that must be spent in drill. Language

courses have traditionally presented a poor picture of student-teacher ratios to the school administrator. I believe that the language laboratory must wherever possible, allow a few extra hours of language work that do not cost quite as much as the cost of either the teacher or the drillmaster. The second fact may be a small surprise. Our experience has been that there is an overwhelming preference on the part of the majority of language students to work by themselves, uninterrupted, unmonitored, and preferably with a tape recorder and a reel of tape in front of them. It is exactly this desire which is best served by the rather old-fashioned tape library plan. The argument we have made against this has always been "but the student is practicing his errors." I think we were wrong in our choice of argument. However, I won't try to prove my belief today. I'm not sure I could.

Somewhat parallel with our discovery of the absolute necessity of a good tape catalogue was another discovery which I am ashamed to say we have not yet done anything about. Most of us record teaching materials for use in the laboratory. In some cases these are used for many years with scarcely any attention paid to them by the teacher who simply assigns them over and over again. We discovered that even after relatively careful editing there are too many errors in such series. In future we hope to be able to give a second listening to locally produced materials in an effort to reduce the errors that escape the recording technician's razor.

There are several other programs which I recommend to you. One of these is testing in the language laboratory. I believe that our testing programs have not always been as extensive as they should have been. The test should really take the place of any kind of role-taking or attendance-taking in the laboratory. A student should prove he has worked in the laboratory not by a record of the time he spends there but by demonstrating that he has learned something there. In the past many teachers have abandoned laboratory testing because they have attempted to judge pronunciation as well as ability to read or talk in a language by listening to hours of individual recordings. The results do not justify the time spent. The language laboratory should arrange to assist teachers in creating short tests that can be scored in the laboratory. Ideally the teacher wouldn't need to do anything beyond approving the script of the test and receiving the final scores.

I know that this is not possible for many of us, but I would still insist that whatever laboratory administration you have in your school should take as one of its jobs, encouraging and helping the creation of workable laboratory tests.

Some Modest Proposals

Another program which in many schools can best be handled through the Laboratory is a foreign language film program. The cancellation of the undergraduate foreign language breadth requirement on my campus has resulted in the development of a variety of programs combining the use of films as language teaching devices together with tapes and classroom drills and discussion. Since in most cases the students are required to study some part of the sound track in isolation, it is convenient if not essential that the laboratory handle a large part of the film and sound track presentations. At least one department of ours is planning to use television programs borrowed from the originating country as an integral part of the language course. Again the processing and presentation of the TV film and its soundtrack will be handled in part at least through the language laboratory.

The last program which I feel we should be working on is our reaction to the new technology. Television cartridges will be available with equipment within our financial reach in a few months. This opens up a vast selection of foreign language materials of real authenticity to offer to our students.

More important, however, is the fact that we should now be moving our collections of recordings from 7½ ips to 3¾ ips. For the first time it now seems technically possible to produce tape recordings with a real frequency response from 100 to 12000 cycles at a speed of 3¾ ips.

If you are already using 3¾ ips I believe you have not been supplying the frequency response your students need for language learning unless you have made unusual arrangements for procuring your tape copies. The standard Ampex tape duplicator which has been most widely used in the last ten years was built to cut off at 6000 cycles in high speed duplication of 3¾ ips materials. No one has ever suggested that 6000 cycles is adequate for foreign language learning. We accepted 8000 cycles for a long time but more recently have insisted on 10000 cycles wherever possible.

Finally we've been doing some thinking about tape cassette players. Although we've always shunned cartridges because of their higher cost and their engineering problems, the new cassettes have already reached the sound specifications needed for language study and reliable high speed tape duplication of 3¾ ips tape material. The only thing that seems to deter us here is the reported fact that cassettes seem to vary rather widely in quality, even within the products of a single manufacturer. The quality attained fairly regularly may not be maintained consistently all the time.

These then are my modest proposals. We ought to know where we're going with respect to the newest technology. We ought to be supplying some purely do-it-yourself by yourself possibilities for our students. Our tape library ought to be in order. We ought to be able to lend tapes to our students to take home to work on. We should have a testing program functioning.

If you are doing all of these things and more, you can well settle back with a sigh of sheer self-satisfaction. The rest of us should beat a path to your door to find out how you did it.

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