

THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY IN DENMARK

by Esther Dinsen

In this article on the language laboratory situation in Denmark I shall confine myself to the university level, which includes, besides universities, teachers' training colleges and commercial colleges. To describe this level, however, a brief survey of the students' linguistic background and qualifications will be useful.

Qualifications

When a Danish student begins studying at university level, he has been learning English for seven or eight years, German for five or six, and probably French for three years. A small number of students take Russian instead of French. The majority of language students take one or two of the three main foreign languages taught in Danish schools. It is, of course, possible to study other languages *ab initio*. However, since the number of students doing so is comparatively restricted, there has not been much effort invested in software for these languages until just recently.

The Conditions of Foreign Language Teaching

It is vital to a small country like Denmark that a large part of the population should have proficiency in foreign languages. Since many textbooks are published in a foreign language, and since much medical, scientific, and technical information is accessible only in foreign language journals, foreign language proficiency is an absolute necessity not only for teachers and commercial correspondents, but also for doctors, engineers, scientists and for those in many non-academic professions. Besides this "professional" motivation, Danes come into daily contact with foreign languages through popular music, television and movies, where the original versions are not dubbed but provided with subtitles in Danish. Thus, the general motivation for learning foreign languages is very high indeed. The student taking English or German at the university level has quite a good command of the foreign language; however, for those taking French, it is still necessary to revise and practice elementary parts of the syllabus.

Characteristics of Foreign Language Teaching

To characterize Danish foreign language teaching it is important to stress the fact that it builds on a long tradition based on experience and common-sense ideas, rather than on psycholinguistic models, so

Labs in Denmark

that it tends to be of a pragmatic nature. The tradition is strongly influenced by the thoughts of Otto Jespersen. A great many of the teaching devices recommended in *How to Teach a Foreign Language*¹ are still currently used, combined with elements from newer language teaching methods. Jespersen's ideas of starting from the text, of varying the teaching to make it lively and of introducing a foreign culture through the language taught are still the main lodestars to Danish language teachers. Newer methods have been judged on this basis, and the elements which seemed useful have been incorporated into the already existing traditions. The audio-visual method, in particular, has attracted the attention of many teachers. Audio-lingual drilling is also used, but the audio-lingual method in its pure form has never gained ground.

The Language Laboratory

It was not until the latter half of the sixties that language laboratories began to be developed extensively at the university level in Denmark. (It may be added that there are next to none at the primary school level, and that only about one fifth of the secondary schools have laboratory facilities.) This late introduction of the language laboratory was partly due to the lack of funds, but also to the fact that the laboratory was, and to some extent still is, looked upon by the profession with some scepticism. When demonstrating a language laboratory to interested staff members, the sales representatives would explain not only the technical functioning of the laboratory, but at the same time try to give a pedagogical demonstration, using examples from the audio-lingual method, imitation exercises and pattern drills. They presented these as *the* way to use a language laboratory. The well-known arguments in favor of the language laboratory: more speaking practice, individual work, etc. were found convincing, but many teachers were frightened by the pedagogical use that was being made of the lab. However, it seemed to some teachers that it offered a whole range of other possibilities.

Language laboratories were thus installed, and we were faced with the usual problem: How are we to use these machines, what possibilities do they offer, how can they help the student to learn a foreign language? There was very little suitable software commercially available, because no publishers ever seem to bother with advanced levels. Most phonetic software was useless because it was not made for Danes, so that it did not offer remedial work for our students.

¹Otto Jespersen, *How to Teach a Foreign Language* (London, 1904; 13th printing, 1967).

Some of the grammatical pattern drills available could be used as revision material in the very beginning of the first year. However, the students quickly came to the stage where they had to learn more advanced structures, and pattern drills for this purpose had to be made.

The Pattern Drill

The question still remains whether drilling really brings about oral proficiency. Since it is now generally agreed that adults learn a foreign language best in the cognitive way², it must follow that grammatical rules should be known by students before they begin drilling. These may be either introduced in previous classes, or explained on the tape. It would seem reasonable to consider drilling in the language laboratory good practice—for the students must somehow be brought to apply their theoretical knowledge by performing in the foreign language—but are they really using a language when they go through a drill? There is so little connection between the meanings of the sentences that the student has to say when going through a drill that his mind must jump from one concept to another. The following example clearly illustrates this:

Les messieurs sont contents. Et les dames?

Les livres sont verts. Et les plumes?

etc., jumping from green pens to a small loaf and a small patisserie, and again on to a red hat and tie³.

Some grammatical problems, such as the syntax of the article and preposition before French geographical nouns, may plausibly be turned into an interrogation on geographical knowledge:

Où est Londres? En Angleterre.

Où est Tokyo? Au Japon.,

etc.

For most grammatical problems it will, however, be hard to make a drill into a meaningful unit. One way of combining drilling and meaningfulness might be the following, with which we have experienced a little at the University of Odense. The student takes the part of a husband whose wife is late for dinner. He is instructed to be somewhat angry and the exercise practices the use of the auxiliary verbs:

La femme: Oh, excuse-moi—je suis en retard. Tu manges?

Le mari (the student): J'ai déjà mangé.

²The latest experience in Scandinavia is the GUME project, carried out by Tibor von Elek, the English Department, Gothenberg University.

³T. J. Barling in John D. Turner, *Programming for the Language Laboratory* (London, 1968), p. 119.

Labs in Denmark

La femme: Où est Robert? Il allait rentrer à neuf heures.

Le mari: Il est déjà rentré.

La femme: Très bien. Ah, j'oubliais, ce soir monsieur Duval va venir.

Le mari: Il est déjà venu.

La femme: Il m'avait dit qu'il allait partir de bonne heure.

Le mari: Il est déjà parti.

La femme: Tiens, je vois dans le journal que ce soir le général de Gaulle parle à la nation.

Le mari: Il a déjà parlé.

La femme: Tant pis! Tu as eu des nouvelles de la tante Marie. Elle est si malade, je crois qu'elle va mourir.

Le mari: Elle est déjà morte.

La femme: Pauvre tante! Tu dois écrire à l'oncle Jules.

Le mari: J'ai déjà écrit.

La femme: Je vois que tu n'as pas besoin de moi. Je vais me coucher, bonsoir.

Obviously, the student does not get the opportunity to say as many sentences as in the usual drill, but he is at least in a communication situation, which is more than can be said for the drill. Most students enjoy this kind of exercise, but the less brilliant ones seem so preoccupied with the grammatical problem that they do not seize the meaning of the dialogue.

Other Types of Exercises

With the Danish language teaching tradition in mind, a few people began working along new lines to develop software that would satisfy the requirements of the Danish situation. It should perhaps be mentioned that these software authors are still experimenting with their ideas, revising them (and consequently the software), and that they themselves do not think that they have achieved perfection yet.

The general points of view are that useful software should be based on a genuine text, the contents of which is likely to stimulate motivation. Topics should either show important and characteristic features of the foreign culture or be chosen among more general ones likely to interest the students (love, war, social competition, human relations, etc.). Vocabulary and idiom are very important, and the more advanced the students are, the more important they become. But command of vocabulary is not only knowing the meaning of single words, it is also knowing the semantic structures usually employed in everyday language by native speakers in certain situations and in connection with certain topics. Such idioms are another kind of automatism which the students must acquire. It stands to reason that such semantic automatisms are best learned in a meaningful context.

Students may listen to a text and imitate it, but this will not suffice to make them assimilate the new words and idioms, nor will they seize the sentence structure. A type of exercise which has gained ground is the *building-up* exercise. This was invented by Jean David, Universite de Nancy. The goals of the building-up exercise are: exact listening comprehension, improvement of pronunciation and intonation, increase in the command of vocabulary and idioms, and acquisition of sentence structure. The sentence is divided into separate units each of which must be repeated before the full sentence is made. Some examples⁴:

The whole sentence runs like this: (from a text on the mini-skirt)
Das war, wie man jetzt erst langsam zu begreifen beginnt, nicht nur eine reine Modeangelegenheit, sondern auch eine notwendige Konsequenz der Abhängigkeit der Frau.

Building up:

- a) Das war nicht nur eine reine Modeangelegenheit.
- b) Es war auch eine notwendige Konsequenz der Abhängigkeit der Frau.
- c) Das war nicht nur eine reine Modeangelegenheit, sondern auch eine notwendige Konsequenz der Abhängigkeit der Frau.
- d) Das begriff man jetzt erst langsam.
- e) Synthesis of the full sentence (see above).

(New sentence)

- a) Der Rock hatte unter anderem die Funktion einer Fessel.
- b) Während der jahrtausendelangen Männerherrschaft hatte der Rock nämlich unter anderem die Funktion einer Fessel.

(New sentence)

- a) In ihm kann man nicht gut laufen—vor allem nicht weglaufen.
- b) Man kann dem "Besitzer" nicht weglaufen.
- c) Man kann dem Besitzer nicht weglaufen, und das war in diesem Fall der Ehemann oder Vater.

Now follows an example in French; it will be noticed that the principle of building-up exercise is not quite the same as in the German example; the student must compose the correct expression from the elements given to him:

⁴The examples are from programs made by Svend-Olaf Poulsen, Department of German Philology, University of Aarhus, and Jean Kress et al., Department of Romance Philology, University of Copenhagen.

Labs in Denmark

The whole sentence runs like this: La publicité a considérablement fait évoluer le mode d'existence des Français au cours des vingt dernières années.

Stimulus: le mode d'existence . . .

Student: le mode d'existence . . .

Stimulus: Français . . .

Student: le mode d'existence des Français . . . (this is the correct answer, because it is the expression used in the text.)

Stimulus: évoluer . . .

Student: évoluer le mode d'existence des Français . . .

Stimulus: la publicité a fait . . .

Student: la publicité a fait évoluer le mode d'existence des Français . . .

Stimulus: considérablement . . .

Student: la publicité a considérablement fait évoluer le mode d'existence des Français . . .

Stimulus: au cours des vingt dernières années . . .

Student: la publicité a considérablement fait évoluer le mode d'existence des Français au cours des vingt dernières années.

(New sentence)

Stimulus: des notions . . .

Student: des notions . . .

Stimulus: innombrables . . .

Student: d'innombrables notions . . .

Stimulus: pénétrer partout . . .

Student: pénétrer partout d'innombrables notions . . .

Stimulus: la radio a fait . . .

Student: la radio a fait pénétrer partout d'innombrables notions . . .

Stimulus: la presse . . .

Student: la presse et la radio ont fait pénétrer partout d'innombrables notions . . .

When the text has been listened to and the building-up process performed, the students can answer questions in relation to the text, reproducing the sentences exactly.

Other ways of making the student listen to the text and activating him are questions with very short answers:

Question: La publicité a-t-elle fait évoluer le mode de vie des Français?

Student: Oui.

Question: Qu'est-ce qui a fait pénétrer partout les notions d'hygiène, de confort et d'élégance?

Student: La presse et la radio.

or by giving statements related to the text and then asking the student to decide whether they are true or false:

Question: La presse et la radio ont fait pénétrer partout les nouvelles techniques. Vrai ou faux?

Student: Vrai

Question: La publicité apprend aux Français à consommer, ils jettent au lieu de conserver. Vrai ou faux?

Student: Vrai.

Question: La publicité augmente le prix de produit. Vrai ou faux?

Student: Faux.

Another way of increasing the students' command of vocabulary and idioms is with synonym exercises:

a) *Anderung*.

b) *Der vergangene Winter brachte für die Damenmode eine entscheidende Änderung.*

c) *Der Vergangene Winter brachte für die Damenmode einen entscheidenden Wandel/eine entscheidende Änderung.*

Word-class transformation exercises provide another kind of fruitful practice. The target language often uses different word classes from those of the mother tongue to express the same idea or permit variations not known to the mother tongue: Nouns for verbs, noun + genitive instead of an adjective, etc. (e.g. *see manieres froides . . . la froideur de ses manieres . . . sa mise elegante . . . l'elegance de sa mise*). It is, of course, important for an advanced student to be able to make these changes.

As for translation, the points of view differ. Some experts maintain that translation inhibits the acquisition of the foreign language, while others say that it is a good way for the student to determine whether he has internalized the new structures, words and idioms, and that it helps him to define the differences between the mother tongue and the foreign language. The German programs make use of translation, simultaneous and consecutive to control acquisition, and the laboratory text is used a week later as a written translation exercise. The French programs avoid any kind of translation.

The length of time the students spend in the laboratory varies from 45 minutes to 2 hours, shorter periods are not possible with text-programs. The students work intensively and do not show signs of excessive fatigue or strain afterwards.

It will be noticed that our main problem in the language laboratory field is one of software, reflecting the fundamental problem: what happens when we learn foreign languages? Another problem is the integration of laboratory sessions into the traditional syllabus of language study. Could the laboratory be used for other purposes than

Labs in Denmark

oral proficiency? The German programs combine translation and laboratory work, and the laboratory is also obviously useful in connection with theoretical phonetics and grammar. It is possible that some areas of literature, e.g. metrics and stylistics, may also be taught with success in the language laboratory. Anyhow, we consider it important to approach the lab without any preconceived opinions.

On Creativity

Finally, I would like to suggest a basic problem raised by psychologists in connection with audio-visual aids in general, a problem which also has bearing on the language laboratory, viz. the fact that it might inhibit creativity. Patently language performance necessitates some kind of creativity, but it seems to be one of the restrictions of the language laboratory that problem solutions are necessarily convergent, there being as a rule one and only one correct answer to a given question or stimulus. Control of faculties are certainly necessary for the student to give the correct answer, such as listening comprehension, application and knowledge of grammatical rules or automatisms, command of vocabulary, memory, but not linguistic creativity. Convergent problem solving is useful for many purposes, but it is divergent problem solving that stimulates creativity in the learning process: thus the question may be asked whether the language laboratory does not inhibit creative use of language. At any rate, it is of the utmost importance that the student have frequent opportunity to perform freely in the foreign language, creating sentences that express his own thoughts. It should be added that Klaus Bung has described how free oral production can be practiced in the language laboratory, with the aid of an extra tape-recorder⁵.

This article has tried to report the situation in Denmark—the problems that are being discussed and the solutions to some of them. I would like to stress, however, that the lab is still very young, so that teachers making use of it still feel somewhat like pioneers, searching for new solutions, continually revising their ideas on language learning and thus on the software to be used in the lab. But there is, I think, general agreement that the possibilities offered by the language laboratory have not yet been exhausted.

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⁵Klaus Bung, *Programmed Learning and the Language Laboratory* (London, 1967), pp. 98-105.