

## **THE USE OF CLOSED-CIRCUIT TELEVISION FOR ORAL TESTS IN THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY**

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Student acquisition of speaking skills in a second language may be evaluated by a testing program in the language laboratory. Appropriate techniques for the assessment of oral production have been described by Stack (1960), Delattre (1961), Lado (1961), Valette (1967), Taggart (1971) and others.

The types of examinations in the laboratory which these authors describe have the advantage of being relatively objective and easily administered to large numbers of students.

Objectivity is obtained by adhering to the same principle used in the construction of structural exercises: Each question should lead to only one possible correct answer. This is achieved by supplying vocabulary content and imposing morphological or syntactic changes according to examples given at the beginning of each set of test questions in the oral examination.

Not infrequently, however, such test exercises bear little resemblance to real-life communication situations, and may be interpreted by the student as artificial and irrelevant. The traditional interview-type oral examination, on the other hand, constitutes a valid communication situation, but lacks the possibilities of objectivity and convenience offered by the laboratory examination.

A technique involving the use of closed-circuit television in the language laboratory has been developed and used at Sir George Williams University (Montreal, Canada) combining the advantageous features of both types of oral examination.

Test materials consist of half-hour videotape presentations designed by the French Department and produced by the University's Center for Instructional Technology. The test exercises have been carefully contrived to simulate real situations. These include job interviews, a visit to an art gallery, a family slide-show, office conversations and students discussing a test.

Each situation is however highly controlled from the linguistic point of view. A pattern of response, consistent with the situation, is established enabling students to reply in an analogous manner to all questions in the exercise. For example, negative constructions are tested in the job interview sequence in which the student responds negatively to all questions.

**Interviewer:** Vous levez-vous tard le matin?

**Student:** Non, je ne me lève pas tard le matin.

**Interviewer:** Avez-vous jamais été malade?

**Student:** Non, je n'ai jamais été malade.

## **Closed Circuit Television**

**Interviewer:** Partez-vous quelquefois avant l'heure?

**Student:** Non, je ne pars jamais avant l'heure!

Questions are framed in such a manner as to make negative answers plausible in the situation.

Interrogative phrases are tested in the museum sequence. The student asks a question based on the museum guide's statements:

**Guide:** Ce tableau vaut dix mille dollars . . .

**Student:** Combien vaut-il?

**Guide:** L'artiste l'a peint en mil neuf cent . . .

**Student:** Quand l'a-t-il peint? (etc. . . .)

In these test exercises, the visual adjunct provides a life-related setting for the linguistic interplay: the student sees the person with whom he is supposedly speaking, together with the required props and background.

In certain exercises, visual information received by the student is necessary in formulating the correct response. In these exercises, ambiguities as to gender, number, person, tense, etc. are built into the audio stimuli, the information required to remove these ambiguities being supplied by the visual channel. (See Taggart, 1970).

For example, in an exercise testing formation of the imperfect tense, students make transformations of the following types:

**Stimulus:** Leurs frères n'habitent plus Montréal.

**Response:** Autrefois, ils habitaient Montréal.

The plural marker in the response sentence (*il* *z*abit) is determined by a visual cue (a picture of the two brothers in a photo album) which removes the ambiguity of number in *leurs frères* (loer frër).

The integration of visual and aural stimuli involved in framing the appropriate oral response corresponds to similar operations in natural communication.

### **Test Format**

Each 30-minute test is composed of three situations, each of which contains 15 to 20 questions for a total of 50 in the entire test. Questions are separated by a "spacing" of approximately 24 syllables of verbal material, consistent with the situation but not essential to the formulation of a student response. The spacing serves to provide rest between questions and insure that the pace remains regular. The upcoming test question is announced by a signal word such as "Attention!", "Écoutez", "Dites-moi", etc. The question itself is limited in length to approximately twelve syllables. This is followed by a pause sufficient to allow a student response of twice the syllable count in the question.

## Closed Circuit Television

Wilga Rivers (1968) has recently stressed the importance of grading the difficulty of test items within an exercise of this nature, reducing the danger that a weaker student might become ruffled by a difficult initial question and then miss subsequent questions he would normally be able to answer. Therefore, test questions are ordered in an ascending scale of difficulty (determined according to sentence length and number and type of transformations required) giving cutoff points for weaker students during the tests. Students with stronger language proficiency are able to complete all the questions.

Vocabulary in test questions is limited to those words in the *Français Fondamental, 1er degré*. Structures used are those practiced in the regular language laboratory sessions.

### *Administration Procedure*

In the administration of these tests a videotape playback unit is assigned to the laboratory and operated by the teaching assistant. Each student position is equipped with a virgin cassette identified with the student's name and registration number. These cassettes are collected following the test for grading. All student controls are gathered at the instructor's console enabling central control of the record mechanisms throughout the administration of the test.



## Closed Circuit Television

The test is administered by playing the videotape program through large monitors easily viewed by all students. The audio track is received by students through their own headsets. The student machines remain at rest during the greater part of the test. The test administrator activates the student machines just prior to the student response. Following each response the machines are stopped and the procedure is repeated for the next sequence.

Although the test material on the videotape is of 30 minutes duration, the student's cassette, containing only his responses, is of approximately five minutes duration. Since the student cassettes must be listened to individually by a marker, the contraction of time is substantial when large numbers of students are involved. These tests are administered to over 1000 students of intermediate level French each semester at Sir George Williams University.

It should be noted that this type of examination is most suitable for grammatical manipulation, but does not assess individual creative speech or vocabulary growth. It does, however, permit the use of standardized objective questions and substantial time savings in marking when compared with individual orals of a traditional nature. In addition, initial indications suggest a possible reduction of student anxiety usually associated with oral examinations.

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