

A NEW FACE ON THE OLD "LANGUAGE LAB": THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE RESOURCES CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

by Carl R. Shirley

A system which can only be termed an "audio-visual library" is presently in its second year of operation at the University of South Carolina in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures Resources Center. What began as merely a language laboratory to support the department's self-paced programs in Spanish, French, German and Italian¹ has mushroomed into an audio cassette library housing approximately 3000 programs. The cassette laboratory has practically replaced the more cumbersome, more expensive and less efficient dial-access system as a means of supplementing classroom instruction in foreign languages.

The laboratory is in operation for twelve and one-half hours Mondays through Thursdays and nine hours on Fridays. From September, 1973 through April, 1975, more than 24,500 students used audio cassettes and tape machines, listening to more than 18,000 hours of material. Since language laboratory attendance at the University of South Carolina is on a voluntary basis, these figures indicate the success of a program of this type and the interest on the part of the students.

The laboratory functions in much the same manner as a conventional library: a student enters a checkout room where cassette tapes are housed and requests a specific program. A laboratory assistant retrieves the desired tape, records the student's name, social security number (which functions as the student ID number at USC), the program title and number, and then assigns a listening booth. In addition, the assistant records the time that the tape is checked out. When the student has finished his work, he returns the tape to the assistant who again records the time. This provides an accurate account of language and program use, machine wear, and precise information to support requests for additional soft- and hardware purchases. Moreover, theft of tapes and damage to machinery is kept to a minimum because of the recording of ID numbers and the assigning of listening booths.

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The booths are set up so that the student can practice, listen and compare. Each position is equipped with a Wollensak 2526 AV audio active tape recorder and a headset-microphone. With this equipment a student enrolled in one of the foreign language courses has the possibility of recording his responses on the tapes without danger of erasing the master program. When he has finished recording, he rewinds the tape and listens, comparing his own pronunciation and grammar with those of the taped instructor. This "comparison" system is often a real eye-opener for a foreign language student. No matter how much group or individual practice is carried out in the class, there is nothing quite like the hearing of one's own voice and the capability of instant comparison with a native speaker's pronunciation.

In addition to this more or less traditional language laboratory function, the University of South Carolina's Foreign Language Resources Center audio library is being used in several new and unique ways. Take, for example, a French phonetics class. Each student has a tape on file with his or her name and the course number written on it. The instructor assigns the students to attend the laboratory in order to record selected passages. When he wishes to check the progress of the students, he comes to the laboratory and listens to the tapes, perhaps recording corrections and suggestions on the tape or writing a critique to be presented to the student at a later time. The flexibility of this system enables everyone, teacher and student alike, to work according to his own schedule; thus valuable class time can be spent in other ways. In addition, there is an accurate record of the student's progress during the semester.

Foreign language instructors also use the Resources Center laboratories to provide their students with supplementary exercises designed to cover difficult material in a more detailed manner. By making a recording and placing duplicates on file in the audio library, the instructor makes information available for approximately 60 hours per week. Needless to say, even the most dedicated teacher cannot possibly be available in his office for such a lengthy period of time to review difficult material for students on an individual basis. Clearly there is a point beyond which a student may not proceed without the physical presence of an expert, but the use of "help tapes" in the language laboratory provides needed access to competent instruction and desirable practice.

Another way in which our foreign language professors stretch contact time with students is by means of recorded exercises accompanied by work sheets. Several teachers currently record weekly tapes (either in the soundproof recording booth at the Resources

Center or at home) and duplicates are housed in the tape library. The work sheets are also made available there and students must complete the exercises within a given period of time. The completed exercises are placed in envelopes in the laboratory and the instructor picks them up for later correction.

As the very creative faculty in the Foreign Languages Department at the University of South Carolina work more and more with audio cassettes, we are discovering countless new uses for them to augment traditional classroom instruction. Moreover, in addition to foreign languages, the audio library also provides services to other departments and programs. For example there is a complete set of lectures for a philosophy course, "Introduction to Logic—II," taught by Dr. David A. Hunter. Since, according to Dr. Hunter, an adequate textbook is currently not available, he has recorded his own material which supplements his classroom lectures and discussions. He finds the following advantages in using a laboratory: 1) the tapes seem to appeal to the students more than a traditional textbook; 2) the student has ample opportunity to listen to and review the material; and 3) more class time is free for detailed discussion. Perhaps because of the conditioning of television, radio, movies, and records, students prefer mechanical means in transferral of knowledge.

Another service provided in the Resources Center is that of an audio library for several English courses. Many students find it difficult to read and comprehend such material as Shakespeare's plays or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Tapes of these are housed in the library and students make regular use of them. Obviously it is possible to listen and follow the textbook simultaneously. Since he has complete control over his individual machine and tape, the student may stop at any point to receive a difficult passage, write his thoughts and reflections, or make notes for future questions in the classroom. The next best thing to seeing a dramatic performance is listening to one; the use of audio tapes brings theatre directly to the student.

A course called "English for Internationals" is also a very popular addition to the taped resources available in the audio library. This program is administered by the University's Communication Skills Development Center and taught by Prof. Lea Pittinger. Part of the course is conducted by means of the laboratory where approximately 150 tapes in nine different series are available. Because of the wide variation in speaking skills and in the backgrounds of the students, it is necessary to maintain different kinds of tapes at several levels. Each student, therefore, has the capability of working at his own pace and competence level with very little outside assistance.

The above account illustrates the flexibility and strong points of a cassette system, but this does not necessarily mean that it can com-

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pletely replace the dial-access system or similar older ones. In the USC Foreign Language Resources Center we still maintain a 60-position laboratory of this type which is used on a regular basis. Large group tests, such as the AATSP, AATG, MLA or the university's advance placement exams are administered routinely. The greatest use, however, is during the summer when the MIBS (Master's in International Business Studies) program is in operation for nine weeks of intensive language training. The dial-access system is used to support the eight hours daily, five days per week schedule (in French, Spanish, German, Portuguese and English) as a foreign language curricula. During this period students attend monitored laboratories at scheduled times, but they can follow up on their work in the audio library using cassettes.

An exciting new phase of laboratory activities has recently been implemented. This consists of the addition of a separate room equipped with booths with synchronized slide projectors and cassette tape players where students may hear *and* see what may be termed "culture capsules," such as illustrated discussions of the Spanish bullfight or the Corpus Christi procession. Currently several members of the department are developing courses around this system which should prove to be a boon to decreasing foreign language enrollments. In culture and civilization courses, the synchronized laboratory has a tremendous advantage over traditional classroom pro-capsules in their courses and student reaction has been very favorable. hours a day. Presently our language professors include several culture capsules in their courses and student reaction has been very favorable. Before we incorporated this system, instructors carried slide projector, screen, and tape recorder to class to present cultural items, and if there were six or seven classes involved that instructor had to present a program six or seven times. The alternative was to meet classes en masse where no one could see or hear and one hundred or more students had no opportunity to ask questions or discuss the material. Now, the professor spends the same amount of time preparing a detailed lecture for taping, accompanied by professional quality 35mm slides prepared in our Instructional Services Center. The cost of the tapes and slides, not to mention the instructor's time, is justified in that the lecture is now available for years, and every time it is used the cost per student goes down. This method eliminates the need for the physical presence of the instructor and the senseless, time-consuming drudgery of presenting the same lecture time after time. Revisions can be made periodically with very little or no additional cost outlay.

Despite the variety of programs and equipment available, the entire Foreign Language Resources Center is not as expensive to ad-

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minister as it would appear. Here at USC, the whole operation consists of two full-time professionals, a director and a technical director, and five students employed under the federal work-study program. The students work a maximum of twenty hours per week each, for a total of 100 hours. This work consists of 61 hours manning the check-out desk in the audio library, with the remaining time devoted to recording and duplicating tapes, checking out equipment for faculty, and maintaining the Resources Center's collection of over 6000 color slides.

In conclusion, it must be observed that the success of the audio-visual library and the Foreign Language Resources Center at the University of South Carolina is due in great part to the faculty's and administration's willingness to experiment with new machinery and techniques. In the past, language laboratories have functioned as more or less separate units from the departments they served; it is only through cooperation such as we have enjoyed at USC that we have succeeded in altering the face of the old "language lab" and transformed it into a Resources Center.

Peggy J. Hartley and Francis J. Dannerbeck, "An Experiment in Self-Pacing in Basic College Spanish and Subsequent Program Implementation," *Hispania* 57, No. 4 (December 1974), 913-16.