LANGUAGE LABORATORIES: - THE NEW ZEALAND EXPERIENCE

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Language laboratories came to New Zealand much later than to the United States of America and to the United Kingdom. The first laboratory was installed at Auckland University in 1964. By 1965, there were four laboratories consisting of 74 booths. In 1967, eleven laboratories with 206 full recording booths and some audio-active or listening positions were installed. These were in four universities, two teachers' colleges and four secondary schools. Subsequently they were installed in other training coleges, polytechnics, a limited number of schools and all six universities in the country. It is particularly to developments in the university laboratories in Auckland, Christchurch (Canterbury), Dunedin (Otago), Hamilton (Waikato), Palmerston North (Massey), and Wellington (Victoria), that this article refers.

It was a late start, and a cautious one, and at no time was the proliferation of laboratories, as seen overseas, ever even a likelihood in New Zealand. Already reports on the effectiveness of language laboratories were highlighting the problems of those who had so enthusiastically invested in the hardware. Warnings were loud and clear that a realistic estimate of the amount of time needed by staff to prepare programmes, would have to be met, the many taped courses available, evaluated, and provision for adequate technical help made, if laboratories were to flourish.

In a country as far from industrialised centres as New Zealand, the decision to import expensive equipment is not lightly undertaken and, for the most part, teachers in secondary schools have preferred to work towards the equipping of an electronic classroom rather than a language laboratory. Those who did acquire a laboratory, however, forewarned by the experience of colleagues overseas, took their own precautions. Consequently the sad tales of silent, unmanned laboratories are not told in this country. Those who have laboratories exploit them, and staff who are trained to use them effectively have remained convinced of their efficacity and their potential.

In the early stages, a great deal of advice and help came from colleagues in Australia where the first language laboratory workshop was held in 1965 at Monash University. A cooperative effort to evaluate the many taped courses then flooding the market was instigated by Professor Wilga Rivers. The late Professor Keith Horwood of the Melbourne Language Centre, also gave invaluable help in the area of documentation. As the Editor of Babel, the Journal of the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers' Association, he received many publications relating to language learning. Copies of these were made available to us, and coming late, as we did, to the language laboratory scene, reports from colleagues

working in this area were, on the one hand, encouraging and on the other, saved us from many a pitfall.

The staffing of each university's laboratories in New Zealand began modestly with the appointment of an academic in charge. Overseas, directors have been appointed on the basis of their technical expertise, their administrative experience, or their academic qualifications. In this country, all are lecturers with teaching responsibilities. Their parity of status and identification of interest with other academic staff has contributed considerably to a strengthened contact with the laboratories' monitors who are teaching staff drawn from the different language departments.

The appointment of a full-time technician has had to be fought for by each laboratory in turn. Some, in fact, are still running with a service contract back-up only. This has meant that teaching staff have had to learn how to make their own master lesson tapes. In one university only, are there enough technicians to allow for continuous supervision and help during editing and live recording. There are obvious disadvantages in terms of the professional quality of masters produced without technical help, and levels no doubt sometimes fluctuate more than is desirable. But the best guarantee that a monitor will be able to cope efficiently when correcting students, all at different points on the tape during playback, lies in his having been involved in the actual compiling and recording of the tape.

Working in a small community, as we do, it's natural that we should seek where possible, to share materials. A yearly tape made up of sample material is prepared at each centre and circulated to the others with relevant texts, work-sheets of tests which accompany it. Foreign embassies in Wellington are generous in supplying authentic background material in the form of documentary films, slides, tapes and records. Short wave radios have been bought or built in most laboratories and Auckland University has begun recently to distribute to other centres, news and commentary tapes, recorded when reception is especially clear, for incorporation into laboratory programmes.

Similarly information is regularly passed on between laboratories. Recently four of the six lecturers in charge of laboratories profited from their leave to the United States of America and Europe, to bring back vital documentation which is invaluable to us all. They were impressed by the immense range of equipment held in the spacious workshops and studios they saw. The facilities in the learning, listening and resources centres, with their sophisticated strip/slide projectors, video-cassette recorders, copying and transparency-making machines, dial access systems, computers and research equipment, provided an overall view of technological help available. Information from laboratory directors overseas, engaged in exciting programmes and projects with teams of inventive and willing technicians, has been correlated and shared. The scale of such projects

would be completely out of the range of laboratories in this country and where a choice has to be made, usually for financial reasons, information circulated in this way can ensure the best distribution of funds for the greatest returns.

Close contact is maintained between us at yearly seminars of university teachers. These conferences used to be mainly concerned with literary topics, and language laboratory staff would take the opportunity to meet quietly together to discuss language problems. However in 1973, at Christchurch, discussion with non-laboratory specialists took place and one of the major points to emerge from this seminar was the importance of the contributions which language tutors working outside the laboratories brought to those engaged in composing laboratory programmes. Since then, part of each succeeding conference has been set aside when development in language teaching were discussed and suggstions were put forward for trial.

Experimental work is done in the different centres: diagnostic tests in pronunciation have been done in Auckland University while in Wellington an audio-lingual/visual experiment was undertaken with three controlled groups at first year level and follow-on courses have been tried and tested through to M.A. level. A programme in intensive listening-comprehension was recently carried out at Otago University, testing programmes have been run at Massey Universtiy and at Wellington, while the lecturer in charge of the laboratory at Waikato has been closely involved in a project on the teaching of French at primary and intermediate level.

These experiments are described and commented on in the Language Laboratory Newsletter, begun in 1965 at Auckland, and recently expanded into an informal bulletin contributed to by the six universities. It is inevitable that research in New Zealand is restricted to practical areas of teaching with small groups of students; one advantage of this lies in the reduction of the variables which bedevil so much experimental work. Only one university (Auckland) has access to sophisticated equipment for phonetic research, and academic teams of laboratory staff simply do not exist to undertake evaluation of large samples or instrumental measurement as is done in the United States and in Europe.

Restriction of funds, however, has forced some interesting developments in the language laboratories. They have had to extend, on a shoestring, areas which overseas have been set up as completely new installations. There, what might properly be considered as a natural growth in the language laboratories has been diverted away from them. The more exciting issues in language learning using films, strips, slides and videotapes are to be found within overseas universities, in their audio-visual centres, their ersource centres or their main libraries. In New Zealand, however, these activities are being built up within the existing labora-

tories. In Wellington an economical system was contrived in 1971 to show visual programmes, by rear-mirror projection, onto a screen fitted into the window between the console room and the laboratory. This allows the monitor to manipulate both the console controls and the projectors simultaneously and provides quite different teaching possibilities in the laboratory situation from those encountered when showing visuals in tutorials.

This system has been backed up by the equipping of student booths with small, inexpensive strip/slide projectors, mounted on a small platform on the booth partition and projecting onto a card slotted into the glass front of the booth. Staff are encouraged to provide visual materials and worksheet packaged with the tape, for 'library' usage by the students. These small units either recap of extend work presently visually from the console during monitored periods. This modest system is a far cry from the synchronised slide/tape programmes using the Caramate, but it works just as well and may be more effective. For it demands activity on the part of the student in operating the tape and the visual, to suit his own pace and with the possibility of recording, provides an oral exercise as well as one of listening comprehension.

Audio-visual materials are incorporated into many monitored laboratory programmes. Television films with accompanying exercises on tape, sets of colour slides with recorded commentaries for repetition and reconstruction, and slides with short texts dealing with some aspects of life in the foreign country being studied, are all used in the laboratories whenever staff are able to assemble work units of this kind. Video and closed circuit television are not, as yet, part of language laboratories' programmes, though provision is being made for them in some universities. The problems, again, are costs and the availability of software. A recent research project for information, undertaken by one lecturer in charge on leave overseas, has provided pointers both on sources of material and on traps to be avoided. When production costs and even rental rates are prohibitive, and when the time involved in producing even a short, pruned programme is considerable, there is a case to be made for caution on our part. By far the most common method overseas of building up a stock of video materials seems to be by pirating live television broadcasts, but in the New Zealand context there would be the problem, not only of possibly infringing copyright but, alas, of having few opportunities to do so.

Another area in which the language laboratories have enlarged their scope is in the training of teachers. Auckland University piloted this development several years ago with the introduction of a Language Laboratory Diploma. Wellington then offered an option for post graduate students in Language Laboratory Teaching of French, which has been extended to intending teachers of French or German in their final undergraduate

year. More recently Massey University instituted an extra-mural course for teachers run by the Lecturer in Charge of the Language Laboratories. These courses consist of combinations of seminars on teaching aims, methods, testing, course evaluation and programming at various levels. Theoretical areas of linguistics, psychology and education are taught either by specialists in the language departments of by invited lecturers from the relevant departments. The practical aspects of the courses include instruction in the use of language laboratory and related equipment for both recording and teaching.

Finally the 'library system', which, as in most places, developed almost simultaneously with monitored use of the laboratories, has been extended in several universities to offer library and tape copying facilities to the community in general. This has meant that access by the student to material only through recommendations from his tutor has been supplemented by complete card-catalogues available to the students and the general public alike. Again, lack of a librarian or secretarial assistance has meant that catalogue cards may lack information on technical details of tape speeds, length of running time, source information, recording date, etc. They may be hand-written and even originally kept in shoe-boxes, but the system works and is increasingly in use.

This sharing of facilities with non-university members of the community has been further widened by linkage with both primary and secondary schools. School teachers wtih an interest in language laboratories are invited to take part in training sessions for university staff at the beginning of the year. Evening sessions for teachers on tape-making are run, and course materials currently in use in schools in New Zealand or on the overseas market are on loan from publishers for evaluation by teachers wishing to work through samples of new courses held in the laboratories. Training for the National Film Library's Projectionist's Certificate is offered to intending or practising teachers and Saturday morning previewing of language-teaching films are periodically organised. In Wellington, children from a local primary school come to the laboratory for one hour per week from March to December and are observed in the learning situation by students enrolled in the Language laboratory Teaching Option*. An experimental course in Hebrew for primary school children was taught during one vacation by an M.A. student taking that option. Demonstration classes throughout the year are run for visitors and for groups of school children whose teachers are interested in seeing the laboratory system in operation. The language laboratories have been used for courses for diplomats and even by a group of children who travelled 100 miles to make tapes for their speech therapy clinic!

*Babel, April 1971 "Teaching Techniques and Primary School French in the Language Laboratories"

Not all the activities described above are carried out in all university laboratories. But our contact is close, and experience has shown that any enterprise reported as being successful by one university is taken up by others as soon as a suitable opportunity to do so presents itself. We have profited from the advice of the pioneers, heeded warnings and tried to establish a network for the exchange of information with other teaching institutions both at home and abroad. We were able, for instance, to take part in linkage programmes, arranged by the Wellington Polytechnic, to discuss, by satellite with other PEACEAT members, common problems related to language laboratories, and their possible solution.

In conclusion it would be fair to say that, in New Zealand, language laboratories have been, and in all likehood will continue to be, restricted in any expensive outlay for related equipment. The initial installations, however, were well chosen, for by the time decisions were being made in this country, on the selection of basic equipment, much had already been written on the importance of providing facilities for the student to work at his own pace. Therefore all booths were equipped to give the student maximum flexibility, with recording and playback facilities under his personal control. In this way, the 'library' system was able to develop fully in a way which is prohibited in laboratories overseas equipped with only a headset and microphone in the student booth. Since this first outlay of funds however, we have all had to economise. One university does so to the extend of recycling throw-out material from computer banks, and video-tape from the National Broadcasting Corporation. Its university workshop co-operated to design and build machines to split computer tape into two and video into eight sections for use as practice tape in the language laboratories. It would not be true to say that we have avoided all the traps into which laboratory users fell in the early days. But to have come late to the game certainly saved us from some of the rigidity of both form and content in the first language laboratories and pre-disposed us to that flexibility which is essential if language laboratories are to keep up with the change in teaching method corresponding to new research in language learning.