

LANGUAGE LABORATORY ADMINISTRATION: A CHECKLIST OF SELECTED GUIDELINES

A. J. Ciceran and R. G. Dahms
Brock University

It is the intent of this article to provide a framework of selected administrative guidelines for new or newly appointed Language Laboratory Directors and Supervisors, as well as those with considerable experience, who may be advertising new positions, upgrading their departments, or formulating future plans and projects. While the latter may find certain of these guidelines rather elementary, the authors hope that many of the others will suggest new possibilities and philosophies of administration and operation. <A major aim is to instill a sense of purpose and direction in daily Language Laboratory endeavours>

The reader will soon note that the guidelines (most of which are posed as questions) do not begin with "nuts and bolts" basics such as acquisition and maintenance of equipment, space requirements, hiring procedures and so on, but concentrate rather on the attitudes, philosophies, duties and responsibilities of both the Lab Director and his personnel. The bias underlying the guidelines is that the Lab works best when it is properly and fully utilised as a copartner with language departments which view its facilities and personnel as an integral part of their programmes, and which design their programmes with that in mind. Consequently, the article gives the Language Lab Director an opportunity to appraise his own situation, to ascertain where he fits into the general framework, and to assess his own responsibilities and attitudes, as well as those of his personnel. The focus then shifts from strictly internal Lab administration and operation to relations with the faculty and, finally, to externally oriented activities.

IDENTIFYING YOUR GENERAL SITUATION

1. To which of the four general "types" of Language Laboratory Director or Supervisor do you belong?
 - a) the graduate technician
 - b) the "tinkerer" with some knowledge of foreign languages
 - c) the language graduate with an interest in technology
 - d) a faculty member of a language department.
2.
 - a) Do you have a cross-appointment?
 - b) Does it rotate periodically?
3. Who is your immediate supervisor?
 - a) a Dean of the university
 - b) a Language Department Head or Administrator
 - c) a committee formed by the foreign language departments
 - d) the Head of an Audio-Visual Department or Media Centre.

The combination of your answers to the questions above will indicate your present situation. Your own background and the type of position assigned to you influence your activities to the same degree as the expectations of your superiors. If you are unable to recognise and define your specific position and responsibilities in clear and precise terms, it may be wise to ask your superiors for a proper job description, or to evolve one yourself and submit it to them for approval. If, on the other hand, you have been given a job description and you find yourself limited or hindered by it, you may wish to consider creating one more in tune with your actual plans and activities.

INTERNAL LAB ORGANISATION AND ACTIVITIES

In order to function optimally, the Language Lab as a department composed of individuals with varying degrees and areas of expertise should attempt to mold its personnel into a unit proceeding toward specific departmental goals. The basic philosophy of operation will, of course, be determined largely by the facilities, the expertise of Lab members, and the requirements of those they serve. The following questions are designed to aid the reader in his/her assessment of the prevailing general Lab organisation and philosophy of operation.

1. What goals do you have as a department?
2. Do you have in your department the collective expertise necessary to accomplish those goals?
3. Are the assigned functions and individual tasks of all Lab personnel properly matched with both their personal and professional abilities?
4. Have you evaluated fully the Lab's general areas of expertise as governed by its facilities and defined by the competence of your assistants?
5. Do you act in accordance with that evaluation and do you convey that information to those who use your services?
6. Do you hold regular departmental meetings in order to discuss problems and disseminate new information?
7. To which journals does your department subscribe? Which are available in the Library? Do they include technical, academic and paedagogical areas? Do you and your staff read them regularly?
8. Do you keep relevant statistics in all technical and non-technical areas in order to formulate projections for future requirements and replacements?

In spite of the constraints imposed by finances, facilities and external requirements, the regular meetings, discussions and interchange of information suggested by questions 6, 7, and 8 above could well overcome these difficulties by leading to new modes of operation, or by stimulating innovative ideas for economical expansion of services.

THE LAB DIRECTOR

In assessing his methods and philosophy of operation, it is essential for the current Lab Supervisor or Director to examine his own background, attitudes and activities as closely as he examines those of his subordinates. He may wish to consider his own training, interests and qualifications and decide whether they need upgrading. If he is satisfied with his answers in those areas, he might contemplate expanding his interests and endeavours beyond his present academic or technical background. The latter is a path which usually leads to the desire to do one's own research and to apply for appropriate grants. An inhibiting factor here is frequently a lack of time for such projects, but it is one which often may be overcome by sufficiently persistent requests for additional assistance necessary to secure release time.

THE LAB PERSONNEL

◁Language Laboratory administration and operation depend decisively upon the Language Lab personnel, for it is they who actually carry out the goals formulated by the Director.▷ In so doing, they will inevitably reflect his own attitudes and philosophy of operation, and they will convey them to all those using the Lab and its facilities. They are central links in the chain not only of Lab command, but also of Language Laboratory liaison with the faculty and the community. For these reasons it is suggested that you assess your answers to the questions in this section with particular care.

1. How many individuals, including student assistants and teaching fellows, actually fall within the sphere of the Language Laboratory?
2. Have you clearly defined and communicated to each staff member his/her responsibilities?
3. Have you fully ascertained the formal and informal back-ground of your personnel, their academic qualifications and practical or personal experience, and integrated those aspects into your departmental goals?
4. If you have given your personnel guidelines, do you restrict them to that narrow framework, or do you encourage expansion of their activities?
5. Are your assistants totally familiar not only with the Lab equipment but also with all its possibilities, and with current and previous programmes, methods and materials?

6. Do you constantly remind your assistants of their ancillary function as liaison persons both inside and outside the institution?
7. Do you and your assistants pay attention to student comments concerning the instructors, programmes, equipment, methods and materials, and attempt to utilise that information positively?
8. Are your personnel encouraged to make suggestions and take initiatives of their own?
9. Do you encourage your assistants to upgrade their qualifications?
10. If your employees have not studied a foreign language formally, do you urge them to do so in order that they may become more familiar with instructors' and learners' problems?
11. Have you established incentives to encourage your "academic" personnel to take technical courses and your "technical" personnel to take academic courses?

While it is important to furnish your assistants with proper job descriptions and guidelines, it is equally important, as the majority of the questions above imply, that they be understood solely as a list of **minimum** requirements. The guidelines should in no manner inhibit individual initiative and creativity.

LAB-FACULTY RELATIONS

One of the most crucial areas of effective functioning (and survival) of the Language Laboratory as an equal partner with the language departments is an active programme of liaison and mutual interchange of information with those departments. As part of that process, the Lab may play a very important role in consultation, integration of technology and teaching, initiating research, and stimulating joint projects and programmes. Your answers to the following questions should give you an overview of your department's performance in this vital area.

1. Does your department keep itself well informed of innovations and projects carried out by **all** the language departments utilising its services?
2. Do you carry out your own evaluations of courses, programmes, methods and materials connected with the Lab? Have your assessments led to suggestions for improvements?
3. Do you have an active programme of liaison with the language departments?
4. Do you encourage faculty to consult with you?
5. Do you instruct faculty in the use and capabilities of all Lab equipment, and make them aware of unexploited possibilities?
6. Is there an active interchange and discussion of useful information among Lab members, and between Lab staff and instructors?

7. In the course of that process, does the Lab generate interest in areas concerning the faculty by pointing out new methods and new equipment?
8. Are active efforts made to **integrate** technology and paedagogy, the Lab facilities and teaching, more closely and more effectively?
9. Does the Lab **initiate** research?
10. Have you considered joint projects in areas such as instructional development with your colleagues in the languages?

EXTERNALLY ORIENTED ACTIVITIES AND RELATIONS

Internal Lab organisation and activities, particularly those connected with the faculty, are at the heart of Lab interests and goals, but the Lab also has a role to play beyond the walls of its own institution. Many of the processes carried on within the Lab and the institution may be extended successfully into the community and into relations with other institutions. Hence, this last section of question-guidelines is intended to stimulate initiatives and interaction in those broader spheres of endeavour.

1. Do you encourage visits from schools, universities, and community institutions?
2. Do you actively consult with other Lab Directors and institutions, and familiarise yourself with their equipment, plans and programmes?
3. Are your subordinates also keeping pace with current information from other institutions concerning new developments, methodologies and technical advances?
4. Have you offered, or been encouraged to offer, your services as an advisor or consultant to other university or school departments, or to outside institutions, schools, businesses or libraries planning to install or expand Language Laboratory or other audio-visual facilities?
5. Do you regularly attend conferences in both technical and academic areas and share the resulting information and insights with your co-workers and your colleagues in the language departments?
6. Have you considered giving papers, or publishing the results of your research, innovations and projects? Have you contemplated doing so in conjunction with members of the language departments?

INTEGRATING THE GUIDELINES

Obviously the foregoing "question-guidelines" merely touch upon a few selected aspects of Language Laboratory administration and tend to posit an ideal situation based on the authors' bias as outlined in the introduction to this article. While the authors do not expect each and

every suggestion to apply to every institution or Language Laboratory Director, they do hope that at least some of these guidelines will encourage renewed assessments of the Lab and its role, and perhaps stimulate action in new directions. Readers may well wish to use the questions and suggestions as a starting point for devising their own set of guidelines tailored to their own specific situation and needs.

From your replies to the above questions you should now be able to ascertain whether your department is a "service" (subordinate) department, or a "support" (coequal) department. If you consider yourself a service department and prefer to remain as such, it is wise to question whether you have made every attempt to fulfill that role to the best of your ability and facilities. If, on the other hand, you wish to become a support department, or to be a more effective one than you judge yourself to be now, you might ask yourself what steps you have taken toward achieving that end. Have you, for example, ever inadvertently or deliberately assumed additional responsibilities beyond the expected? If the results were positive, have you attempted to capitalise upon them by using them as "ammunition" to change or improve your situation?

Similarly, if these questions and their implied guidelines are to be of value to you, it is suggested that you also query yourself as to whether or not they have in any way affected or changed your view of your own role, and that of your assistants and your department. If the suggestions nestled among the questions here have indeed offered any new insights or possibilities, have you made a note of them? You might also consider what you would add if you were making a list of your own. Finally, you may find it worthwhile to distribute copies of these (or your own) suggested guidelines for comment, reaction and discussion among your co-workers and your colleagues in the language departments. In so doing, you will have taken a first and major step toward implementing them.