

SOME CONCLUSIONS TO BE DRAWN FROM THE PENNSYLVANIA STUDY*

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The publication of the Pennsylvania Project raises a variety of questions. That the results of the first part of this project point to conclusions other than those which many teachers had expected means that the project will be carefully scrutinized to uncover flaws in the design and weaknesses in the execution of the project. But despite possible imperfections in the research, we cannot ignore the findings of the study. We must admit that the teachers of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are probably no better and no worse equipped to teach foreign languages according to a method assigned them than teachers in other states. The language laboratories in Pennsylvania are used much in the same way that they are used in other states. Students throughout the country are given the MLA Coop Tests. What then are some of the questions we must look into?

1. *Is the "traditional" method superior to the "audio-lingual" method?* The question as it is worded here is much too broad. The conclusion of the report is that first-year students of French and German taught by a traditional method (as defined by the consultants) performed better than first-year students taught by audio-lingual methods on a specific set of tests: namely the old Coop tests, the new MLA Coop reading test and the Critical Sounds section of the MLA Coop speaking test. It was to be expected that the "traditional" students would do better on the "traditional" Coop tests of grammar, vocabulary and reading. But how should we interpret their performance on the new MLA Coop tests? The key to the reading test is vocabulary load. If we look at three of the texts used in the French classes involved in the study (i.e., the A-LM materials, the Holt materials and the Dale and Dale text) we find that each unit contains roughly an average of 50 new lexical items. The Project Report states that A-LM classes finished about 10.5 units; Holt classes finished 13 units and the traditional classes finished 28-30 units. Consequently, A-LM students on the average were exposed to 525 new words, Holt classes to 650 new words, and Dale and Dale classes to 1400 (or 1500) new words. Now, if it is true that performance on the LA Form of the MLA Coop Reading Test is a function of vocabulary size, then we might predict that Dale and Dale students

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would do better than Holt and A-LM students. And this is precisely what happened. To confirm the importance of the vocabulary factor in this test, I analyzed each of the 50 items and found that the A-LM student who had mastered Units One through Eleven would be able to answer 12 items correctly and perhaps get another two because of cognates. He would have to guess on the remaining 38 items. The good Dale and Dale student, on the other hand, would be able to answer about 27 items correctly and would be forced to guess on the other 23. But the spread between the means of the audio-lingual classes and the traditional classes is only about one and a half to four items: this might indicate that although the audio-lingual student is exposed to less vocabulary, he learns it better, and that the traditional student cannot retain all that he is exposed to. This factor of vocabulary retention might well be the subject of further investigation.

The traditional students also performed significantly better on the "critical sounds" section of the speaking test: here the student reads a passage aloud and is graded on his pronunciation of certain sounds. The traditional students have had much practice in reading unfamiliar texts aloud whereas the AL-M students only have read aloud material which they had already learned orally. Perhaps superior performance on this section is a function of the amount of practice.

Conclusion: In comparison to students using audio-lingual texts, first-year students using modified traditional texts perform better on reading tests where size of vocabulary is a factor. They also perform better on tests reading aloud.

2. *How may the listening skill be taught?* The Pennsylvania Project found no significant differences among teaching strategies or laboratory systems with respect to performance on the LA Listening Test of the MLA Coop Battery. All students, however, had the same number of weekly contact hours in foreign languages: five hours of classtime or four hours of classtime plus two half-hour lab periods. Traditional teachers were allowed to use the target language as much as they wished (except for grammar explanations), and it is quite possible that even the traditional students heard the foreign language a good portion of the time. (This was not to my knowledge, controlled by the project.) But, a significant difference on listening test scores was discovered when the students were grouped according to the text they used: in both German and French classes, the Holt students outperformed both the A-LM students and the traditional students. The Project Report merely states that the two audio-lingual texts appear to be superficially similar. However, I have noted differences which would explain the superior performance of the Holt students. The Holt text is the only one among

those utilized in the Project which offers numerous recombined dialogs for each unit. The students are exposed to the structures and vocabulary of the lesson in a variety of situations. It is to be noted that all the recombined dialogs are printed in the student text. An area for further research would investigate relative effectiveness of such a printed presentation versus a listening comprehension program available only on tape.

Conclusion: It would appear that if we wish to develop the skill of listening comprehension in our students, we must create materials which stress recombined dialogs and conversations.

3. *What may we say about the future of the language laboratory at the secondary school level?* We must admit that the laboratory as it has been generally utilized over the past several years has not contributed significantly to improving the students' audio-lingual skills. Does this mean we should scrap our laboratories and go back to the classroom tape-recorder? Definitely not. But it does mean that we must find more effective ways to incorporate the laboratory into the foreign language classes. Perhaps drillwork is better conducted in the classroom, by the teacher or by tape. The new frontier of the language laboratory seems to open in two directions: the improvement of listening comprehension and the implementation of individual instruction.

Listening Comprehension: As we noted earlier, frequent re-combinations of known structures and vocabulary increase listening comprehension (as measured by the MLA Coop Listening Test). Students need more listening practice. A variety of listening comprehension exercises (following maps, working out puzzles, playing Bingo) would probably also increase student motivation: winning a game is more fun than doing drills.

Individualized Instruction: In the language programs of the future, emphasis will fall on mastery. Students will master the basic core material of each lesson before advancing to the next lesson. For each lesson the teacher will have tapes on which speech is carefully enunciated. As language instruction moves toward more individualized programs, so will the laboratory play a more creative and more effective role in helping the student develop his language proficiency.

Conclusion: The "hardware" of the laboratory has undergone continual refinement over the past ten years, but the "software" has hardly changed. The challenge of the next decade will be the development of imaginative and more effective tape programs.

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