

Comments on The Pennsylvania Project: Challenge for the Secondary School Laboratory.

by E. Marxheimer

Dr. Smith is to be congratulated for an outstanding piece of research which is thorough, sophisticated and rigorous. I agree with his recommendations at the end of the *Final Report*, but I have several questions concerning the findings of the research and the premises on which his statistical data is based.

1. The *Report* states:

"These tests (MLA tests) reflect current concepts and instructional objectives of modern foreign language instruction."

Question: Can the MLA test be used as a meaningful instrument to measure achievement in a functional skills method? Since no relationship was established in terms of actual input and expected output, in terms of what the student had actually learned and was tested on, the statistical data on achievement becomes the numerical relationship between two unknowns. The validity of such an equation is questioned. In further research, a direct relationship should be established between the actual input and the expected output.

2. The *Report* did not specify the nature or type of homework required in the three different methods.

Question: If one method requires more homework, specifically in reading, writing and translating, does it not stand to statistical reason that the student who has undergone this additional training will perform better in areas concerned with the extra activity, as well as in related activities, such as oral production? It is safe to say that 50% of language learning under artificial conditions occurs as a result of self study. In further research, a correlation should be established between the quality and quantity of homework and the final results obtained. (Those who work usually succeed.)

*Paper read at the meeting of the NALLD, New York, December 28, 1968.

3. The *Report* states:

"Student expectations and orientation were still overwhelmingly traditional (90%).

Question: What is the relationship between the fact that students are traditionally oriented and score higher on traditional methods? In further research, evidence should be gathered on how functional skills oriented students perform with functional skills methods.

4. The *Report* states:

"Many teachers were totally unfamiliar with the text materials that they were to use with experimental classes. The pre-experimental training thus proved of great benefit . . ."

Question: Is this a case of the blind leading the blind? Anyone who "taught" a language knows that absolute familiarity with the material to be taught, as well as absolute familiarity with the method to be used are essential in terms of results to be obtained. How does this relative "unfamiliarity" with both texts and methods affect the interpretation of the statistical data?

5. What reasons prompted the counseling panel of educators to choose for the functional skills aspect the *Ecouter-Lire-Parler* series and the *Verstehen-Sprechen-Lesen*? I have no quarrel with Messrs. Lado, Sapon, Starr, Twaddell, Valdman, or Walsh, but we must know on what their judgment was based. Has the effectiveness of these functional skills texts been proven over a period of years? by means of what tests? by how many students? and how do the results obtained correlate with other standardized tests? Unless statistical data is provided on these questions, the entire study must be interpreted in terms of the effectiveness of the texts chosen, rather than in terms of a functional skills method — or language laboratory efficiency.

6. No statistics are available on *actual* language laboratory use. The *Report* indicated that no effort was made to alter existing conditions. But in order to interpret the statistical data meaningfully, the following pertinent information is required:

- a. how many times was the laboratory actually used, for how long and by how many students (student hours per year).
- b. did the instructor do anything besides play the tape? If so, what and to what extent, quantitatively and qualitatively? In other

words, step by step, how did the surgeon perform the operation? Or did he simply put the patient under anaesthetics and forget about him?

- c. was the laboratory available for homework practice?
 - d. did the school have a laboratory director whose main function was to work with materials, students and instructors? If not, how does the school account for imposing a headless horse on its students and staff?
 - e. what were the students' and teachers' attitudes toward the language laboratory? Was it a dead bore, an extra chore, or a reward?
7. Finally a word of caution.

The findings of the *Report* show that the traditional method enables students to score higher on a series of achievement tests, than students exposed to a functional skills method. This is a fact. In any way or another, we have all had the same experience. But what does it prove? that these higher scoring students can communicate in French or German? The *Report* does not indicate that any attempt was made to corroborate the test results with actual student interviews, where the student could demonstrate not his ability to do well on a test, but his ability to actually communicate in French and German.

In other words, by saying that caution should be used in interpreting the findings of this report, I mean that generation after generation of students has shown that learning grammar, reading, writing and translating does not enable a person to speak or understand a language. This is the reason why audio-visual and audio-lingual methods were developed. In my opinion, it would be an interpretational error to decide that since traditional students score higher on a given test than functional skills students, the traditional method is more efficient. The problem — and it is not an easy one to solve — is rather to adapt our school curriculum, at all levels, to take advantage of the functional skills methods available, of language labs, audio-visual adjuncts, exchange programs, immersion programs, Summer camps, and to form teachers who can function efficiently within such programs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mr. Edward Marxheimer is Director of Language Laboratories University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.