IMPROVING ELECTRONIC LABORATORY STUDY IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE PROGRAMS: A CASE IN POINT

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ABSTRACT

With or without electronic language laboratories, Americans seem convinced that they cannot learn foreign languages. Foreigners do not seem to share this peculiarly American phobia. They not only think they can learn English, but they also are responsible for the growing number of university-sponsored English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Since many ESL programs have a required lab component, a case-study approach to one such lab requirement could give valuable insight into the effectiveness of mandatory ESL laboratory study and ways to improve it.

Seventy-five ESL students in five levels were observed during required lab study under three conditions: (1) working independently with commercial ESL audio tape programs; (2) working independently with lab-specific audio tape programs, namely exercises with instructions tailored to the electronic labs being used; and (3) lab-specific tape programs in a controlled lab environment, that is, an instructor at the console monitoring and correcting students.

The results clearly suggest that maximum improvement in lab study effectiveness occurs in a controlled lab environment, namely with an instructor at the console--an instructor who works actively with the students, monitors their progress, and corrects their mistakes.

Key Words: Language laboratory, foreign languages, English as a Second Language, instructional technology, audio tape.

Case studies (1) by any other name would still have weaknesses: the sample size is inevitably small; consistencies and contrasts have to be found in the observed data; case records of any two programs will rarely cover the same aspects, making strict comparisons difficult; analysis of the data depends on the judgement of the researcher who must show that his or her interpretations are warranted. Yet, in spite of these weaknesses, case studies are one of the best sources of hypotheses--hypotheses which may later be verified by rigorous experimentation. Their overriding strength is that they permit the totality of a phenomenon to be observed--in this case, electronic laboratory study by foreign students in a university-sponsored English as a Second Language (ESL) program(2).

The electronic lab portion of the ESL program under consideration was observed from two aspects: foreign students at all levels using commercial(3) ESL audio tape programs in an independent(4) Level III(5) electronic laboratory, and foreign

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students at all levels using lab-specific(6) audio tape programs in a controlled(7) Level III electronic laboratory.

Today, the warning signals for foreign language study are everywhere: in many American colleges and universities enrollments are declining, programs are being reduced, and the language requirement is being abolished. ESL programs, however, do not seem to be suffering from a similar malaise; instead, they seem to be on the threshold of the kind of popularity enjoyed by foreign language programs in the 1960s. Within recent years, numerous colleges and universities have begun offering intensive programs in English. The ESL Language Centers, with required lab study and lab facilities in 23 U.S. cities and foreign countries, claim to have taught more than 100,000 students English since 1961(8). If Americans seem convinced that they cannot learn foreign languages, foreigners do not seem to share this peculiarly American phobia(9); they are convinced they can learn English and are motivated to do so.

Armed with conviction and a high degree of motivation, young people and adults of all ages from many countries seek out ESL programs in order to prepare themselves for careers or university study in the United States. Because many universities in the U.S actively recruit qualified students from other countries--and because it is often necessary to know English well in order to enter a good school--foreigners are looking for ESL programs that work.

Because many ESL programs offering intensive study in English require a certain amount of study in the electronic laboratory, it is easy to assume that electronic laboratory study is a necessary ingredient in learning English as a second language. Furthermore, it is easier still to think that the reason lab work is required is because it is effective; it allows the student to work on his or her language weaknesses or practice the current lesson as much and as long as desired.

By theoretical orientation, I am predisposed to the necessity of the electronic laboratory in foreign language education of all kinds, especially at the university level with the short academic quarter and ever-increasing class size. What this particular orientation does not incline me toward--but which my case studies seem to indicate--is how miserably ineffective independent study in the electronic laboratory can be for foreigners learning English.

Admittedly, directing language laboratories at a university with a foreign language requirement can be a perceptually jading experience: what the majority of American students do during their so-called "required" independent study in the language laboratory dashes any hope for a multi-lingual tommorrow by the year 2000. Hope, however, springs eternal, and never more so than when the

university-sponsored American Language Program (ALP) made arrangements to use two of our laboratories for ESL required laboratory study.

When the five levels of American Language Program students arrived for a general lab orientation at the beginning of the academic quarter(10), their eagerness, their intense motivation to learn English were impressive to say the least. There were 75 students in all: 25 in the basic levels, 39 in the intermediate levels, and 11 in the advanced level.

The largest group of students was Hispanic--from South America, Cuba, and Central America; the next largest group was from the countries of the Middle East, followed next by the students from the Far East, Asia and Europe. The required ALP audio tapes were available in the labs and checked out to the students upon request. Records were kept on a Weekly Lab Report Sheet which indicated who had checked out what, when, and for how long. Although most students were coming and checking out the required tapes, it became increasingly obvious by the second week that most of them at all levels were not using their audio tape programs effectively. The ALP labs were not exactly the proverbial bee hives of buzzing activity. It seemed to be a fortuitous time to find out just exactly what ALP students *were* doing during their required lab study time,

The first step was to select all the cases which exemplified what was being done (the problem area). To this end, during the third, fourth, and fifth weeks of the quarter, all ALP students--who came to the lab--were recorded for ten minutes during the time they were in their carrels supposedly working with their assigned audio tape programs. Students did not know that they were being recorded. The results were somewhat surprising. At all five levels--Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced--what students were doing could be roughly grouped into four kinds of activity: (1) BREATHING (the student said nothing, even though he was instructed to imitate the speaker, respond to questions, etc. Only his audible breathing indicated that he or she was there); (2) SOMETHING ELSE (activities in this category ranged from talking to one's neighbor in the next carrel to playing prerecorded music tapes); (3) RESPONDING INCORRECTLY (the student's response clearly indicated that he or she did not understand the nature of the exercise. For example, if the tape instructed the student to make subject and verb agree, the student's response did not indicate even an attempt at subject/verb agreement); and (4) RESPONDING CORRECTLY (by responding correctly is meant an understanding of the instructions and doing what the exercise demands--not necessarily and only correctness of pronunciation and expression).

The second step--collection and analysis of the data--was done under the guidance of the following, tentative hypothesis: if intensely motivated ESL students are not using the electronic lab and tape programs effectively, then, perhaps, the fault lies not so much in the students as in the learning environment, namely the lab and the audio tape programs. In the preliminary analysis of the data there seemed to be a basis to suppose that this hypothesis was at least partly true.

The analysis of the data revealed the following: (1) no one was using the audio tape programs correctly in the basic levels; (2) the percentage of those responding and working correctly with their tapes in the intermediate levels was less than 20 percent; (3) those responding correctly in the advanced level was just barely 20 percent; (4) the greatest number of students in all levels was engaged in Activity I--BREATHING; (5) the second largest group at all levels was engaged in Activity 3--RESPONDING INCORRECTLY; (6) the third largest group at all levels was engaged in Activity 2--SOMETHING ELSE. Clearly, the data cried out for step three: speculation about the antecedents for this discouraging state of affairs.

The antecedents for ineffective use of the electronic lab by ESL students are many and found everywhere: in the overall organization of the program, in the methodology of classroom instruction, in the integration of classroom and laboratory activities, in the administration of the program, in the goals of the course of study, in the language itself, in the laboratory, in the audio tape programs, in the students, and perhaps, even the weather.

Since the lab environment and the tape programs concerned the UGA Language Laboratories directly, we decided that the following changes would be made and the improvement--or lack of it--observed: the electronic laboratory environment would go from independent study to controlled, and the instructions to selected commercial tape programs would be made lab-specific, namely tailored to the laboratories being used.

Step four commenced with tailoring the instructions on selected exercises to make them specific to our laboratories(11). As students at all levels requested a particular tape on a specific day, instead of the commercial tape, a tape with lab-specific instructions was substituted. The material content of the exercises was unchanged and new to the students. Instead of hearing, for example, the following: "You are going to hear two or more examples at the beginning of each practice exercise. The examples show you the pattern you're going to practice but do not leave you time to speak. You should listen to these examples. After you hear "Continue and Practice," you will have time to speak before the correct answer is given. Here's an example: TALL--dong--THE MAN IS TALL, OLD--dong--THE MAN IS

OLD. HUNGRY--dong--THE MAN IS HUNGRY. Continue the practice...INTELLIGENT, NOW YOU SHOULD SAY, THE MAN IS INTELLIGENT--dong (PAUSE)--THE MAN IS INTELLIGENT. HAPPY--dong (PAUSE)--THE MAN IS HAPPY...STRUCTURE LESSON 7. CLOSE THE BOOK. Exercise 2, Listen to the examples: George speaks rapidly--dong--Please, don't speak rapidly. George is usually late--dong--Please, don't be late. CONTINUE THE PRACTICE..." students hear the following lab-specific instructions: "This is Lesson 7 of the laboratory tape program to be used with ENGLISH SENTENCE STRUCTURE by Robert Krohn. Before we begin working with the exercise on this tape, make sure the microphone is in front of your mouth. Please, do not chew gum. When the voice on the tape tells you to speak, speak in a normal tone of voice. Do not shout and do not whisper. Listen carefully to all instructions and do exactly as you are told to do. Now, let us begin...Lesson 7, Exercise 2. This exercise is on page 67 of ENGLISH SENTENCE STRUCTURE. Turn to page 67 and find Exercise 2. (PAUSE) Now, close your book and listen carefully to two examples of what you are to do in this exercise. Example one: You hear (George speaks rapidly). Then, after you hear this sound--DONG--you should say (Please, don't speak rapidly.) You will then hear the correct response (Please, don't speak rapidly.) Example two: You hear (George is usually late). After the D-O-N-G, you should say, (Please, don't be late). Then, you will hear the correct answer--(Please, don't be late). Now, press down the white record button and the green play button. If the white record button does not stay down, raise your hand immediately, and someone will come to help you. Now, begin... (AT THE END OF THE EXERCISE...) This is the end of Exercise 2. Press the red stop button. Push the rewind lever to the left and rewind the tape all the way to the beginning of Exercise 2. (PAUSE) Click the Balance Knob out of MONO and turn it to the right beyond midpoint. Push the green play button and listen to the whole exercise again. Compare your pronunciation and answers with those on the tape. If you are making many mistakes and your pronunciation is poor, do the exercise again as many times as you have to in order to do it correctly. To do the exercise again, press the red stop button. Push the rewind lever to the left and rewind the tape to the beginning of Exercise 2. Press the green play button and the white record button and repeat the exercise..."

The prognosis for this treatment in terms of students' likely response was confirmed by the sample students recorded (at all levels) as they worked with the lab-specific instruction exercise tapes. There was slight overall improvement at all levels: students responding correctly improved by about the same percentage as

incorrect responses decreased, namely five percent. Students just sitting in their carrels doing nothing or something else remained unchanged. The lab-specific instructions seem to improve overall correct use of the tape programs, but students responding incorrectly, doing something else, or just sitting in their carrels were not getting maximum benefit from the audio tape programs.

For step five, the lab-specific instruction exercises were combined with a controlled lab environment, that is an instructor--at the console--monitoring and correcting student responses. Again, students requested an assigned tape for a specific day, and in addition to substituting a tape with lab-specific instructions, the instructor at the console listened in and corrected and guided the student whenever and however necessary.

From the sample of ESL students recorded in the controlled lab with lab-specific instructions, it seems clear that this solution contributes toward the most improvement in effective use of the electronic language laboratory. An encouraging 80 percent of the students in the sample worked correctly and effectively with the audio tapes, and less than 20 percent worked incorrectly with the tapes. There was not a single student at any level who was doing something else or just sitting in the carrel. Above all, on the basis of spontaneous and unsolicited verbal response, ESL students much prefer a controlled lab environment and lab-specific instructions to an independent laboratory.

To make sense out of moutains of data, it is necessary to superimpose on them some kind of theoretical orientation. Unfortunately, such orientation has much in common with rose-colored glasses: both can blind the wearer to significant aspects of the situation under investigation. Undoubtedly, my own bias has also blinded me. Nevertheless, I am encouraged by the patterns that seem to be emerging from these case studies, and I welcome the challenge of rigorous experimentation which permits the isolation of crucial factors and leads to valid and reliable generalizations.

If it is true that Americans have a phobia when it comes to learning foreign languages, and if we are, therefore, going to wait until the rest of the world learns English, let us do ourselves and the world a favor: let *us* teach *them* English, and let us improve our ESL programs and make them effective, productive, and one hundred percent on target.

NOTES

(1) This paper was presented at the Eighth International Conference on Improving University Teaching, 14-17 July, 1982, in West Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany, under the auspices of Univ. of Maryland University College and Fachhochschule fur Sozialarbeit und Sozialpadagogik Berlin.

(2) The subjects were observed in the University of Georgia Language Laboratories--laboratories 301 and 305--on the third floor of Moore College. All subjects were enrolled in the university-sponsored American Language Program (ALP) which requires ESL students to use the laboratory as part of the overall program.

(3) Pre-recorded audio tape language programs designed for foreigners learning English and produced by universities and commercial vendors.

(4) The user checks out audio tape programs and works alone, trying to practice and correct his language weaknesses without help from an instructor.

(5) The level of programmed learning that permits the user to listen, respond, record, monitor, intercom, and conference. The UGA Language Laboratories use Wollensak Lab 10s and 2526AV audio-active tape decks.

(6) Exercises with instructions in simple English, instructing the user to perform lab equipment-related tasks, i.e., "Now press the play button and the white record button..." Lab-specific instructions are tailored to the lab facilities being used.

(7) Programmed learning in which the user has access to a lab so equipped as to allow the instructor to monitor the user's progress, and whenever the learner uses the lab, an instructor is at the console monitoring him or her and correcting mistakes.

(8) ESL Language Centers' publication "ESL USA Teaches English to the World." Available from ESL, Santa Monica, California.

(9) James J. Asher, "Fear of Foreign Languages," **Psychology Today,** August 1981, p. 52.

(10) The UGA Language Laboratories conduct general lab orientation sessions for first-time users of the facilities. The orientations familiarize prospective users with the layout of the facilities, the media, and the rules and guidelines for effective, efficient, and safe use of the electronic labs and the equipment. Particularly for ESL students, we make a special effort to encourage them to come to the lab on an individual basis for special tutoring in the use of the facilities--since both English and media terminology are, at this time, tremendous barriers.

(11) Exercises from commercial tape programs were selected, lab-specific instructions added, re-recorded, and from the new master, cassette copies made and labelled identically to match the commercial tapes.

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