

LLTI Highlights

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Welcome again to "LLTI Highlights," a column featuring summaries of selected discussions which have taken place on the LLTI-the Language Learning and Technology International listserver. This electronic forum is being used by an increasing number of language lab professionals to discuss issues relevant to their everyday work. For information on how to subscribe to the LLTI, see the end of this column.

NOTE: The listserv address and the LLTI address have changed. The new listserv address is `listserv@listserv.dartmouth.edu`. The new LLTI address is `llti@dartmouth.edu`. See the subscription section for information on using these addresses.

The discussions summarized here have been paraphrased; any omissions, errors or misinterpretations are mine. For each topic, the number in parentheses which follows it was assigned by Otmar Foelsche, LLTI moderator. This number can be used to facilitate a search of that topic in the LLTI archive. (At the time this column was going to press, changes were being made to the procedures for searching the archives. Look for instructions on searching the archives in LLTI postings and the next issue of this column.)

Length of Publishers' Audio Tapes (#1257), October 1994

I'm sure that this topic was record-breaking in that there were 50 (!) postings made. I don't recall any previous topic receiving so much attention on the LLTI. It must have struck a nerve! Not only were 50 messages sent in, but this topic spawned a second, related discussion with the heading "Not length, not content, but medium," generating an additional 11 postings. These discussions were deemed by more than one reader to be some of the most valuable ever taking place on the LLTI.

The tape got rolling, so to speak, with LeeAnn Stone's request: "Would like to get your feedback on an issue that has long been discussed (actually, complained about) among lab

directors—that the audiotapes provided by publishers often are ‘just a little too long’ on one or both sides....” She explained the problem in detail: “Most (?) schools use 60-minute cassettes for high-speed duplication purposes. Anything longer is not reliable because the thinner tape doesn’t hold up well.... When a publisher’s tape comes in with either or both sides over 30 minutes, we have to re-master that cassette to fit....” Further, LeeAnn mentioned that although this has been the situation for years, lab directors have never made a formal statement asking publishing companies to alleviate the problem.

Judging from the resounding response from dozens of readers, the problem raised is indeed a pesky one. Responses addressed at least one of these sub-issues: tape re-mastering, ideal tape length, efforts to submit a formal statement to publishers, and the larger question of ideal length of language lessons from a pedagogical standpoint.

Re-mastering

Almost everyone agreed that re-mastering of lessons provided by the publishers is one of the things they do on a regular basis. If this is not done, and original publishers’ tapes are duplicated in double-sided recordings, the result is an annoying “blank” section at the beginning of side B. Re-mastering also allows for the original tape to be archived and used only in emergencies. The slight loss in audio quality due to this dubbing was mentioned but not felt to be a significant problem. One reader suggested that the publishers be asked not to cut tapes to length, but rather to publish everything on the shortest possible standard-length tapes: 30s, 60s or 90s—this would, at least in theory, make re-mastering unnecessary.

Tape Length

Several readers reported that although re-mastering is something they must do, it presents no problems when lessons are longer than 30 minutes because they use 90-minute cassettes on a regular basis. These readers stated that they had had no trouble with 90-minute tapes breaking in high-speed duplication machines. Very rarely would any lesson ever be longer than 45 minutes, so re-mastering on 90s seemed to be a solution. One reader reported that at their school, all originals, regardless of length, are re-mastered onto 90s. This way students know that they must bring 90s for duplication.

Statements to Publishers

Read Gilgen reported that although he didn’t recall any formal letters sent to publishers, he did indeed recall being present at several conference meetings attended by publishers in which it was made very clear that lab directors needed

tapes to fit a C-60 tape format. He gave his impression that publishers really don't care much about the tapes, giving priority to selling textbooks. He went on to encourage IALL to write an official letter to publishers stating the concerns. He suggested preparing a letter and having IALL '95 attendees sign it, "sort of like a petition."

As an interesting aspect of this conversation, Jerry Ervin reported that he is currently authoring a textbook, and that "[m]y coauthors and I would love to have the kind of guidance you are considering providing to publishers." He suggested that it is not always true that publishers don't care about a good set of lab tapes. He sees good tapes as an incentive for teachers to adopt a textbook.

Bringing in a historical perspective, Warren Roby informed readers that in 1966, at the second annual business meeting of the National Association of Language Laboratory Directors (NALLD) in San Diego, "a resolution was passed urging all textbook publishers who have tapes to accompany textbooks to provide a complete correlated tape script and guide for the set of tapes which will allow the tapes to be an integrated part of the course. Such guides would contain the complete script of the tape, correlations between tape reels and text chapters/pages, and accurate timing of the drills." Warren reported that since publishers' response did not seem adequate at the time, the lab staff at the University of Wisconsin took things in hand and began to produce guides called Tape Index Correlation Code Guides. By 1969 there were such guides in 12 languages. Read Gilgen and others reported that the guides are still in use, although modified.

Ideal Lesson Length from a Pedagogical Perspective

In the course of these discussions it became clear that two matters were really at issue: the one, purely mechanical: tape length, re-mastering, dubbing, etc.; the other, more conceptual, pedagogical: tape content. Several readers expressed their opinions that 20 minutes was an ideal time for students to spend listening to an audiotape in the lab, so why couldn't publishers simply be asked to limit lessons to that time? Derek Roff referred to a saying by Mark Twain that "few sinners are saved after the first twenty minutes of the sermon." He, too, suggested dividing material up into digestible segments, which may mean that students would have to come to the lab more than once to complete a chapter.

Trisha Dvorak expressed concern that it is very important to differentiate between the types of material on a language tape before making any judgments about ideal length. Pattern drill is not the same as listening to an interview, for ex-

ample. She asks, "What I'd really like to know is what is happening to the **content** of language tapes?" She wanted to know what students are being asked to listen to, and what they are being asked to do with that material.

On the topic of content, Mary Beth Barth suggested, "If language instructors had been listening—even just a little—to the tapes they require...we surely would have better content quality today.... [D]oes anyone know of an instructor who decided not to adopt a textbook because the audio materials did not meet his/her expectations?!!" Most readers agreed that instructors do not usually take tape quality into consideration when choosing a text, although there were at least two cases reported of poor tape quality resulting in a decision not to adopt a textbook.

Read Gilgen examined the issue of content from a pedagogical perspective. He asked the question, "What is the purpose of our LL materials?" He gave his view that the direction today is to include more material based on listening comprehension, as opposed to material devoted to actual language practice. In the development of audio materials, he feels it is important to ask whether "...[we are] teaching students to speak, or [we are] teaching them to understand. In my view, there's a place for both and we should use the tools that best help us accomplish each objective."

In the course of the discussion on tape length, several interesting side issues were brought up. For example, the lack of standardization in audiotape counters was bemoaned, making it virtually impossible to provide any kind of guidelines on where to find the material on a tape that corresponds to a particular activity—the only meaningful references are to real time in minutes and seconds. Also, the question was raised—but not answered—as to the copyright implications of reproducing the so-called "student tapes," the tapes that publishers are now packaging with textbooks and not necessarily providing to language labs for duplication. In summary, this discussion was stimulating, many-faceted, and very informative.

**Not Length, not
Content, but
Medium (#1287),
October 1994**

This topic ensued from the one above, and was in fact started from within it. Several readers predicted that eventually publishers would give up distributing audio material on tape and begin doing so on CD. CD offers many advantages, one being that segments of chapters are more easily located, alleviating the problem of frustrating searches for material

using counter numbers.

Several readers agreed that CDs would have advantages, but until the day when language labs are equipped with numerous stations for CD listening, audio lessons on CD simply won't be practical. Also, of course, is the issue of recording, which is currently much more problematic on CD than on audiotape. LeeAnn Stone stressed that "we have a responsibility to the students...to continue to exert our creative energies in the development of 'traditional' resources such as audiotapes as we move toward the technologies of the future."

One reader reported that "several publishers...said that until Sony and Tandberg start installing CD based Language Labs, they wouldn't distribute on CD." However, several responses came in from readers who were surprised that "lack of equipment" presented many problems, pointing out that most new computers will play CDs, and computers are becoming more and more commonplace. We'll just have to wait and see how long it takes to witness the demise of cassette tape...

How to Subscribe to the LLTI

First, you must have access to Internet so that you can use electronic mail. Your email ID and hostname, which become your email address, must be obtained from your institution's computing services department.

To subscribe to the LLTI, address an electronic message to: listserv@listserv.dartmouth.edu and type the following message on a single line: SUB LLTI yourfirstname yourlastname

When your message is received, the listserver will respond with a message describing various basic procedures. You can now begin receiving messages posted by the other users.

To quit receiving postings from the LLTI, either temporarily while on vacation or permanently, substitute the command SIGNOFF for the SUB in the above procedure. You can start up again by sending another SUB command.

Postings to the LLTI may not be sent to the listserv address, but must be sent to: LLTI@dartmouth.edu

To start a new topic, send your message to above address. You can respond to a discussion in progress by sending a reply to a posting on that topic. To learn more about the LLTI, send a message REVIEW LLTI. If you have problems, you may send mail directly to Otmar at otmar.foelsche@dartmouth.edu or, contact a fellow LLTIer!

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