LLTI Highlights

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Introduction

Welcome to "LLTI Highlights"! The column this month is being guest written by Michael Berger and Barbara Need, two of the managers of the Language Laboratories and Archives of the University of Chicago. As usual the column features summaries of selected discussions which have taken place in the LLTI—the Language Learning and Technology International listserve. This electronic forum is used by language lab professionals and others to discuss issues relevant to their everyday work. For information on how to subscribe to the LLTI, see the end of this column.

The discussions summarized here have been either paraphrased or quoted; any omissions, errors or misinterpretations are ours. For each topic, the number in parentheses which follows was assigned by Otmar Foelsche, LLTI's moderator. This number can be used to facilitate a search of that topic in the LLTI archive, which can be a valuable research tool. For information on searching, see the section "The LLTI Archive" below.

Placement exams (#4478) September 1998

Questions about foreign language placement exams and reading proficiency exams occur rather frequently, especially in the fall, at all schools. Some departments and institutions try to approach the issue internally and develop their own tests, while others look for tests outside their own school that might meet a more universal standard. Recently, a question related to this issue was posted to the LLTI list and responses were posted over a period of two weeks, from September 15, 1998 to September 30.

James Severance started the discussion by posting: "I'm looking for information regarding proficiency exams for the following languages (where to buy etc.): Tagalog, Italian, Mandarin, Russian, Hebrew. We are particularly in need of Tagalog.

Though no help was forthcoming about Tagalog, respondents had other suggestions. Several writers referred to the old S-Cape (Spanish), F-Cape (French), and G-Cape (German) place-

ment tests that are now available for the Mac OS, DOS, and Windows. Unfortunately, these suggestions do not help François Crompton-Roberts who wrote: "...I too would be interested in recommendations for placement tests for Italian and Russian, ..."

Regarding the availability of S-Cape, F-Cape, and G-Cape for newer computers Jerry Larson announced that, "[e]xamination copies can be obtained from the Creative Works Office, A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602. Tel. (801) 378-6266."

But, Susan Breeyear experienced some problems with the Windows 95 versions of F-Cape and S-Cape, writing: "Apparently this program is not easily networkable, although our Computer Technology people were able to get it running after a few false starts."

Tracy Dingess had a different experience, however, relating: "Our program arrived on 3.5" disks. We have recently installed the programs on our server system and testing is quite civilized these days."

And Pat Miller "...tried copying the 5 1/4 disks to 3 1/2 without success ...", so those who want to use the S-Cape, etc. tests should consider purchasing the programs on 3 1/2" diskettes.

Mike Ledgerwood reports that he was "told that the DOS versions and Windows versions (of S-Cape, etc.) score differently so that you would have to choose one OR the other for consistency."

David Pankratz added that while testing the Mac versions of the F-Cape, etc. programs he got "...errors in the placement scores. Perhaps we installed them incorrectly, but I would advise watching out for this problem before deciding to use them."

Others were seeking different solutions, like Maria Alvarez who wrote: "...we are considering the Univ. of Ohio's new model, which a colleague heard about in New York's northeast conference last spring. It is supposed to be ready. Does anyone have any experience with this test? We are DESPARATELY searching for placement exams in Spanish, French and German that assess accurately...What are some of you folks out there using in your labs?"

To this desperate plea, Bob Peckham responded: "I think the Ohio exam, a computer adaptive one, is ready. I saw a model over a year ago." And then Bob added this enticing comment: "This summer at Middlebury, I saw some very interesting work on another." In a later posting, Bob noted that "Stanford is

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using a locally adapted SOPI along with an online conventional placement exam. The whole operation looks very professional."

Irene Thompson suggested that one "[t]ry the Center for Applied Linguistics. They have a number of reading/listening and SOPI tests for a variety of languages."

And Dorry Kenyon recommended "(t)he National Capital Language Resource Center ... web-based database of foreign language tests ... may be of some use." The address is: http://www.cal.org/cal/db/flt/flt-dir.htm. She added: "We are in the process of updating the information in the database and making it truly searchable and interactive."

Cassettes, overdubs and audio management (#4531) October 1998

From time to time, everyone working in a language lab has had a student come up to them and say "I can hear another voice on the tape." This issue came up recently on LLTI when Andrew Ross of the University of Richmond, a new subscriber, wrote to the list with the following problem: "We have been having an increasing number of issues with our cassette collection (+/- 1300 cassettes for 7+ languages). We are finding cassettes that have been overdubbed (two or more voices on the master track, even after fast-erasing them on the Tandberg and re-recording), tapes that have very poor sound quality or bits missing, etc." Of course, various solutions have been tried including asking the student assistants not to put a defective tape back where it can be handed out to another student, but he is considering other options including, re-copying the used tapes and then making them unrecordable, or, in anticipation of going digital, copying the tape masters to CD and asking the students to bring a tape to record their own voice to. He ended with a request for suggestions.

In his reply, Charles Wolff pointed out that cassettes simply wear out and that tapes which are often rerecorded wear out more quickly because the fading of "reflex fluxivity" prevents the previous recording from being removed entirely. "Fast erase" may not do a complete job because of insufficient exposure to randomizing magnetic fields. A bulk eraser (which may end up as fast as or faster than "fast erase") may be a solution. However, constant use will also cause particles to shed and what remains doesn't "like to be moved (or removed ...)" and may continue to cause problems. Another source of noise on a tape may mean you need to check the bias signal on the recorder. This is a "high frequency tone that 'excites' the sluggish particles embedded in the tape surface and gets them dancing around so they can (hopefully) be realigned in the pattern of the analog information from the record head." "Too

little bias and old information remains on the tape (those particles don't like to overcome their own inertia); too much bias and you get a distorted recording because they keep on dancing too long and become partially randomized again. It's a question of timing." Another issue he raises is the cleanliness of the decks making and playing the recordings. The best thing to use on the capstans, pinch rollers and tape guides of your equipment is denatured alcohol. Since it is water-free, it does not leave a residue which would create distance and degrade signal strength. It's surprising how little distance can have such a great effect. He also recommends regular demagnetization of the equipment. Cassette demagnetizers only affect the heads, not the guides and rollers. A wand demagnetizer can do the entire tape path. (Be careful, however, that it is used correctly: it is possible to place a magnetic charge in the wrong place.) A magnetic charge builds up as the tape is played and that may erase the tape or shifts the particles. Finally, he points out that the cassette shell can wear out (if everything else is properly maintained) which can cause tracking problems.

Bruce Parkhurst also suggests that the problem may lie in either "fast erase" or in dirty erase heads. She recommends weekly cleaning during heavy use times. She adds the observation that tapes should not be metal, as these are difficult to erase. While she also recommends a basket (or box) for defective tapes, she suggests that the job of fixing the tapes should be rotated among the staff. She specifically suggests that the fixing and cleaning of broken tapes should be assigned to student workers so that they will "have a better sense of what a pain it is to deal with such problems if they have to take the remedial steps."

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Judy Shoaf pointed out that there are differences between Sony and Tandberg machines on how they use the tracks. She also reports a different problem: the erroneous use of a Master tape by a student. This can happen if a student first misshelves the master with the use tapes, and the tape is subsequently handed out. If it is then restored to the master shelf, future copies will be made with the model voice and student voice mixed on the same tracks. If a new master cannot be made from an original tape, she has made a third generation tape using a Sony lab to transfer the master track from the defective master. One way to prevent this is to make the masters and use copies as visually distinct as possible with colored labels or "Master" written on the tape in bright letters. If a facility is large enough, the masters should be stored as far away from the use copies as possible. On the subject of high-bias tapes, she agrees that they make bad recordings and adds that they are not good for the

duplicator. Students are told that the duplicator will scratch their tape, which is effective, if not scientifically accurate.

In reply, Charles Wolff suggests that the way to protect masters is to knock out the record tab on the top of the cassette; however, Karl Fisher points out that some Sony decks do not have the sensor for the record protection tabs and that many high speed duplicators simply ignore this feature. He recommends locking up your originals after you have made a lab master (which also protects the originals from "the high-speed tape eating (I mean copying) machines."

How to Subscribe to the LLTI

First, you must have access to the 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, send an electronic message to the listserv address. Use your name in the subscribe message:

To: listserv@dartmouth.edu

Subject:

Message: SUB LLTI John A. Doe

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.

Postings to the LLTI must not be sent to the listserv address, but must be sent to: LLTI@dartmouth.edu To start a new topic, send your message to this address.

You can respond to a discussion in progress by sending a reply to a posting on that topic.

If you want to unsubscribe or simply stop mail while you are away from the office, use the SIGNOFF command. (You do not need to give your name.)

To: listserv@listserv.dartmouth.edu

Subject:

Message: SIGNOFF LLTI

To learn more about the LLTI, send a message REVIEW LLTI. (Important! Please do not set up a so called automatic re-distribution list for LLTI on your own campus. These lists cause a lot of problems with returned mail going back to the LLTI editor rather than to the originator of the re-distribution list.) If you have problems using LLTI, you may send mail directly to Otmar Foelsche, list moderator, at otmar.foelsche @dartmouth.edu or contact a fellow LLTIer!. ◆

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