

# *A Language Laboratory at Work*

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THE use of electro-acoustics for the teaching of languages is something new in S.A. and in pioneering this technique, I have found that there is practically no information available to guide one. So I am relating on my observations and experiences gained after conducting only one course and I do not speak as a past master on this method of teaching. I find the method most challenging and inspiring as one is able to expand and evolve ideas continuously as one goes along. The first Shell Company to use this method was Shell de Venezuela in 1959. In May 1960 the training division of Shell International in London introduced the method when personnel were urgently needed in Indonesia. Now Shell S.A. have imported the Tutadicta equipment and in my discussions I confine my remarks to the Tutadicta machine which is basically similar to the equipment on demonstration here which has been supplied by Messrs. S.A. Philips.

Firstly we will discuss the mechanics of the language machine, as this aspect is important in applying a teaching technique and in providing exercises. The Tutadicta machine which I have used at the Shell Training Centre in Muizenberg is a combination of a tape recorder and an inter-communication system. I am sorry the photographic reduction we have here is a little faint. Unfortunately we didn't have the negative to produce this from—it was produced from a gloss print, but I think it can serve its purpose as an illustration. The control panel which you see here consists of three sections—the amplifiers, the volume control and the monitoring section forming the central part, and this consists of a series of eight indicator lights and the key for tuning in to any given cubicle. There is also the all-in button which is not discernible here, by means of which the tutor can talk to any or to all of the students simultaneously. The third section of the control panel comprises the recording function. This section is connected to the tutor's tape-recorder and one can record the lesson on the master recorder and can then transmit it simultaneously to all the cubicle machines.

There are eight student booths which are semi-soundproof; these booths are lined with acoustic tiles and they have a clear perspex front. Each of the booths has a recording machine which has a tape with two tracks. The master track cannot be erased or recorded on by the students in error. The student's responses are recorded on the lower track and can be erased and re-recorded on the lower track as often as desired. The student can control the volume of the master recording. The student is also supplied with a set of headphones. These are fitted with rubber sound-mufflers. These mufflers also relieve the pressure on the ears caused by the earphones. There is a light plastic arm extending from the earphones and this holds a minute microphone. The microphone is situated to the front and slightly to the side of the student's mouth. To the left of the recording machine is a small control box which is fitted with several buttons. There is the recording button and a red indicator light which is illuminated while the student is recording. There is also a key for forward drive and a key for rewind. To stop the machine the student has only to depress the forward drive key a second time. The fourth button on the student's control box is the call button and this eliminates the green warning light above it and it also illuminates the light on the tutor's control panel. This is an indication to the tutor that the student wishes to speak to him.

The instructor can monitor at any time by keying in to any group without the student being aware that the instructor is listening to him. It is also possible to allow all the students to listen to a recording made by any other student. This is useful as a variation exercise when brief talks are prepared by the various students.

What are the objectives of language teaching in industry? It is not our intention to create language authorities or masters of literature. The aim we have set ourselves is to assist staff members to be able to speak sound colloquial Afrikaans in order that they can conduct ordinary conversations in good Afrikaans. Perfection in written Afrikaans is



not essential at this stage. It is sufficient if they can read and understand business letters, magazine articles and newspapers, and that they can speak to their colleagues and conduct business in simple and correct Afrikaans. The method or technique employed to achieve this aim has basically been determined by two factors. Firstly there is the factor of time. At present resident courses of four weeks are conducted, giving approximately 127 hours in the language laboratory of which 30 hours are used for revision, consolidating work previously done for study, leaving 97 hours for tuition and exercises. The second factor is that the students are adult and senior men who are interested in progress. Any superfluous trimmings are not tolerated by them; they want only the meat and they want to see results. Instruction is based on colloquial speech and not primarily on syntax and grammatical rules. Emphasis is placed on pronunciation, vocabulary, idiom and correct grammar by example. Now the wisdom and desirability of this method has often been queried but if one considers the child who is learning to speak his mother tongue from the age of 18 months to two years, it becomes apparent that he hears words, phrases and sentences and he learns to express his own thoughts without the knowledge of rules. As he matures and his vocabulary increases he automatically uses the correct tenses and inflexions. In the learning of any language, there are four channels, namely, reading, writing, hearing and speaking. The language laboratory utilises all of these channels, but writing is reduced to a minimum and speaking is increased to a maximum. The courses are divided into three categories—Grade 1 for those with no knowledge of Afrikaans, Grade 2 for those with a limited basic knowledge and Grade 3 for those who have a reasonable background, for example those who have taken Afrikaans as a second language at school but who have not spoken it since they left school. In the elementary course, the student commences with short simple sentences containing as far as possible words of Latin and Greek origin rather than those derived from the Teutonic sources. The initial vocabulary consists of words which have the same spelling and meaning as their English equivalent although the pronunciation differs, for example, the English word "pen", Afrikaans "pen", English "hand", Afrikaans "hand", "water", "dam", "telegram", "blind", "lamp", "ink", "bring". There are numerous words which we can quote. The vocabulary is then extended by a few basic words such as "in", "op", "het", "dit", "van" and "en" and the sentences are extended to incorporate these words. Learning is achieved by listening to the master track and then repeating the sentence, then listening to a question related to the sentence and answering the question. A question in English

can also be translated and the reply given in Afrikaans. For example, the tutor on the master track: "My bagasie is op die stasie". The student repeats that: "My bagasie is op die stasie". The tutor then asks "Wat is op die stasie?" The student: "My bagasie is op die stasie". The tutor: "Where is my baggage?" Then the tutor translates: "Waar is my bagasie?" The student translates: "Waar is my bagasie?" The student replies: "My bagasie is op die stasie". In this method the guiding principle of the whole technique is that learning means memorising, and memorising and repetition are closely associated. The basis of memorising is virtually repetition and thus repetition is freely used with variation so that mental saturation does not occur too rapidly. The student is gradually led through to the present and past and future tenses and numerals and salutations, commonly used phrases and expressions, the negative in the simple sentence and inflexions of the adjective and so forth. But throughout each session, the emphasis is placed on pronunciation and increasing of the vocabulary. Word order is explained by giving sentences as examples, starting (a) with the subject (b) with the adverb of time (c) with the adverb of quantity and with the phrase of time, also with the phrase of place. It is attempted to accustom the student to the flow and the rhythm of the language and to make his ear the chief help in using the correct word order. A great deal of use can be made of dialogue and of the interrogative in consolidating phrases which the student has learned and also in providing practice in the use of plurals and the inflexions of the adjective, etc. It has also been helpful to use such aids as film strips and films to extend the vocabulary by depicting the image of the word through the eye, seeing the object on the screen and also through the ear, hearing the spoken word. To make learning attractive, it is essential to discuss something which is interesting and conversation is based on actual daily experiences. In the more advanced course, the main emphasis is on speaking and reading. This course is partially specialised in that the vocabulary must include terms and expressions commonly used in the oil industry. The students use magazines and newspapers and also prepare talks on a variety of subjects. They indulge in role plays and in impromptu dialogue and in order to encourage spontaneous speech and to facilitate thinking in Afrikaans rather than endeavouring to translate English phrases.

What are the advantages of the language laboratory? Firstly each session can be programmed and the spade work can be done on tape. This leaves the tutor free to guide, assist and correct each student while he is working. Secondly, each student can progress at his own rate, and he is



not affected by others in the group. Thirdly, the tutor is, in fact, giving individual lessons with personal help to each student. The fourth factor is that all self-consciousness is obviated as the student works alone in his cubicle. Each student can repeat and correct himself as many times as he wishes to do so and he thus has the benefit of practice. By the use of electro-acoustic equipment, the speaking time is increased considerably. Another factor is that by recording his response and then hearing a correction from the instructor, the student can compare his own version of pronunciation etc. with the instructor's version, and thus he finds it easier to correct his own faults. The student's full attention and concentration is also fixed on the subject in hand, and if his attention does waver, he can run the tape back and listen to that portion again.

The language machine also has certain limitations and problems. Firstly, it would be difficult to handle more than eight to twelve pupils, if they are to be successfully monitored, and if they are to give responses which must be checked. I understand that larger groups have already been handled, but this must of necessity reduce the time that the tutor can devote to each student. Secondly the student may develop confidence in speech on the machine but may lack this when he faces an audience or even one person in flesh and blood. Thus free discussion and role plays and talks in the group should be organised regularly. The intensity and concentration of this method and the physical and psychological factors of a small cubicle and of earphones does not allow sessions to be more than 45 minutes to one hour. The cubicles cannot be made fully soundproof and there is a measure of distraction when all the students are talking. If the student reduces his voice to a whisper, it does not allow for correct pronunciation and the proper formation of the words with the lips and the mouth. However, after having conducted one course and hearing the responses of the students, I am convinced that the advantages of the language laboratory far outweigh the disadvantages, and I feel confident that the language machine is an excellent aid to teaching. It can assist the teacher to get results that are worth while in the relatively short period that is sometimes all that is possible in the highly-gearred machine of industry and commerce to-day.

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