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The Place of Language Laboratories in the Education System

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INTRODUCTION

I THINK I must make it clear at the outset that I am not an expert on language teaching. There are far too many experts in education today, particularly if we include all those parents who are ever ready to advise principals and teachers in forthright terms on a wide range of professional matters—and I have no wish to swell the numbers. The only persons who are competent to advise on language teaching techniques are those who are qualified by experience or who are actually engaged in teaching or research. These remarks may well lead you to ask yourselves why I have the effrontery to address you during this conference. Well, the answer is that I can, perhaps, claim to be an educationalist and that my talk this morning will be confined to the impressions I gained during a recent visit overseas and to suggestions regarding the place of the language laboratory in the education system.

Traditional approach to language teaching

Now for a long time it has been a concern to many educationalists that languages have been taught by a majority of teachers largely as an intellectual exercise and perhaps as a means of conveyance of culture, and this has resulted generally in the everyday spoken use of the language being neglected. The root of this may well be the restrictive influence of the public examination system which seems to encourage many teachers to organise their teaching on the basis that the syllabus cannot be covered in the time available unless formal methods are used throughout the course; that in any case, the examination for which the students are being prepared consists mainly of reading and writing.

As I indicated at the beginning, I am not qualified to enter into the various arguments relating to the techniques of language teaching. Nevertheless, I am certain that the advent of the language laboratory has given those teachers who favour the oral approach an invaluable aid.

Earlier I referred to the influence of the public examination system on language teaching. The layman might well ask why the examinations do not include a compulsory oral examination. Those of us here who have had experience of examinations on a provincial or national basis know full well the administrative difficulties of conducting oral examinations for large numbers of students and the complex examining techniques involved. The advent of the language laboratory might minimise these difficulties and in the future, when all schools are equipped with language laboratories, it may well be possible to introduce a compulsory oral examination. One G.C.E. examining body in Britain does, in fact, make an oral examination obligatory and, moreover, insists on a pass in it as a prerequisite to a pass in the language as a whole. I had personal experience of the reaction of heads and teachers to the obligatory oral examination a year or so ago when schools in the Federation changed over from the Cambridge Certificate system to the G.C.E. system. The particular G.C.E. body not only made an oral examination compulsory but also prescribed that a pass in it was necessary in order to pass in the language as a whole. A majority of heads and language teachers protested vigorously, mainly on the grounds that the imposition of an oral examination would result in an unduly high failure rate. Their protests were so vigorous that I took the matter up with the examining body during a visit to London. Their reply was that their philosophy of examinations defined a modern language as a means of communication, and skill in it could not be tested without a compulsory oral examination. This was cold comfort to the anxious heads and teachers who felt that the oral approach, although desirable on educational grounds, would be time consuming and prejudice the pupil's progress as a whole. However, their fears were shown to be groundless for, in the first examination the results were better, not worse, than those of the average in the former School Certificate examination.

Language centres

When I visited Britain in 1962 the language laboratory was beginning to make its appearance on the educational scene. This year, that is, two years later, I found it was regarded as an indispensable tool in the teaching of modern languages. Moreover, it was generally agreed that the greatest service the language laboratory has rendered to modern language teaching has been to define language as first and foremost a skill in communication. Thus, today language teaching is able to get down to its fundamental task of teaching a skill.

In Britain, the availability of language laboratory equipment with its clarification of the language teacher's role, together with the growth of programmes of international comparative studies, as well as the increase in communications, has led to the establishment of a number of language centres. Many of these are located at technical colleges where full-time and part-time courses are provided. Typical language centres I visited included those at the Ealing Technical College and the Holborn College of Law, Languages and Commerce. The primary function of these centres is that of servicing. They provide the necessary intensive courses which give the businessman, the administrator, the diplomat or the scientist, the grounding in the foreign language he needs to pursue his activities. My reference to intensive courses reminds me of my visit to the Shell Centre, London. When I asked why four weeks had been selected as the length of the course for staff going to Indonesia I was told that that was the time normally taken to obtain a visa.

The establishment of these language centres has stimulated considerable interest in modern languages, so much so that the majority of the courses at the technical colleges are recreational. One interesting feature of this type of course which I noticed at the Ealing College was that the staff use the methods developed for intensive language teaching. I am quite certain that the growth of these courses can be directly attributed to the use of language laboratory methods.

Some language centres also train interpreters and translators and accept responsibility for the training of language teachers. With regard to training, I saw an interesting example of the scope and effectiveness of language laboratory methods during a visit to the Holborn College where a course in Russian was nearing completion. The course was established because the Ministry of Education wished to encourage the inclusion of Russian in the curriculum of the high schools but were precluded from so doing by the non-availability of teachers of Russian. After considerable investigation the Holborn College agreed to organise a nine-months course for graduate teachers having at least one modern language in their degree, so that by the end of their course they would be capable of teaching Russian up to G.C.E. "O" level, that is Standard IX. The course has proved most successful, so much so that the Ministry has now asked the College to mount a nine-months course designed to qualify primary teachers to teach French in the primary schools, the basic admission requirement for the course to be a pass in French at G.C.E. "O" level.

Use and design of the language laboratory

For reasons I gave earlier I hesitate to touch on the question of the teaching techniques to be employed in conjunction with language laboratories. Nevertheless, as a former administrator, I must point out that normally, before an administrator would approve expenditure on the equipment for a language laboratory he would wish to be assured that the provision would increase the effectiveness of the teaching and that it would earn its keep. I am convinced that language teachers generally will not exploit the full potential of the language laboratory unless they receive some training in the various techniques and in the planning of appropriate courses. The language laboratory is an expensive investment and I suggest it would be prudent for education authorities to take steps to ensure that it pays good dividends. The Colleges of Education and the University Education Departments could play their part by making appropriate provision in the professional courses for language teachers.

The use of visual aids in language teaching is well-known, and those of you who have visited language centres in Paris will be aware of their clever exploitation by French teachers. I suggest therefore that in planning language laboratories we should not overlook the provision for projected pictures for the class as a whole as well as for individual booths. In this regard I suggest that consideration might be given to the use of the film strip and slide projectors—which can be synchronised with recorded tape—and the overhead projector.

I found in Britain that there was some difference of opinion concerning the number of students' booths that should be provided in a language laboratory. The Shell Centre puts the number at eight; the Ealing and the Holborn Colleges use 16; while the Chorley Grammar School, the first Secondary School to be equipped with a language laboratory (September, 1962), uses 32 booths successfully. It is difficult to prescribe any hard and fast rules for there are many considerations involved, e.g. length of the course, intensity, etc. I suggest that, generally, a laboratory for

adults in a technical college, should have a maximum of 16, while in a secondary school the number should not exceed 30. In the school language laboratory, because of the size of classes and the limitations of finance, the use of 30 booths is inevitable, and as one teacher put it: "it has to be accepted that the teacher cannot act as a monitor and has to be what he is forced to be: a random sampler and a lifeline for those in distress".

On the equipment side I should like to refer to a recent development, namely, the introduction by some hardware manufacturers of the cassette-loaded tapes for the student tape deck. This feature which eliminates tape handling by the student, has many obvious advantages. I am sure it will be welcomed by many teachers particularly by those who have experienced the hazards of tape machines in the school field.

In my reference to the use of the language laboratory you may have noticed that I have avoided the use of the term "programme". This has been deliberate for I feel that the use of such phrases as "programming a course" may result in some confusion and imply that the language laboratory is a form of teaching machine which employs the technique of programmed learning. I am not suggesting that a course in a modern language cannot be programmed in conjunction with language laboratory methods. On the contrary I am aware that research is currently taking place at Sheffield University in respect of an English Course for foreigners and, nearer at home, I understand that at this College, Mr. Proctor is engaged in similar work for a course in French. Nevertheless, I think it would be wise in the early days to introduce the language laboratory to teachers as an aid to language teaching—possibly as an extension of the use of the tape-recorder—so that they may without prejudice get down to the essential task of mastering the elementary techniques.

Place of the language laboratory in the education system

I am quite convinced from what I saw and heard overseas that the use of the language laboratory in the teaching of modern languages has shown clearly that it results in a considerable speeding up of the learning process, provides motivation and stimulates interest generally in language study. It has obviously come to stay and I think we must regard the provision of a language laboratory as essential to language teaching as a science lab is to the teaching of the natural sciences. So that in the future when the planners draw up schedules of accommodation for schools and colleges they must include language laboratories on a priority no lower than that allocated to science labs.

In the educational pyramid I visualise the place of language laboratories on the following basis:

In *schools:* as an invaluable aid for teaching a language as a means of communication.

In *technical colleges:* covering a wide field but concentrating on intensive courses.

In *colleges of education* and *university departments of education:* as a tool for teaching and for investigating the techniques of language learning and teaching.

In *language departments of universities:* as an aid for research into pure and applied linguistics.

CONCLUSION

I should like to conclude by trying to peer into the future and visualise the language laboratory of the next decade. My guess is that it will include a form of programmed learning, associated with visual as well as with audio equipment. The cheap video tape recorder is appearing on the horizon. Its availability would enable a course in the language laboratory to be fully audio-visual on an individual basis—which is not very easy to achieve with the equipment presently available to us (although it's comparatively simple on a class basis). Such audio-visual equipment, associated with a programmed course (either in text book form or in a teaching machine), would give a completely individual course in which the student would be able to proceed at his own rate. Opposition to this might come from certain quarters on the grounds that such development might eliminate the teacher. However, as was stated recently in an article, "unfortunately for mass teaching, fortunately perhaps for humanity, no machine or routine yet devised can supplant the human being". And as the programmers say: "If a teacher can be replaced by a machine, he deserves to be!"