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The Language Laboratory and Modern Language Teaching

A Report on the Conference held at the University of the Orange Free State, Bloemfontein, 2nd October, 1965

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SNUGLY sprawled about the foot of Naval Hill, Bloemfontein, city of congresses, was also the venue for this historic conference. The University of the Orange Free State acted as host and the visitors were welcomed by the Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Groenewoud. Sincere thanks are due to Prof. Boeddinghaus for the spade work of finding speakers and organising their contributions into the closely-knit but effective whole that was achieved in this single-day conference. It was indeed a creditable performance.

More than a hundred language teachers, lecturers, school inspectors and academicians converged on the main lecturing hall. There was a strong contingent from Stellenbosch University and representatives from Rhodes, Fort Hare, Cape Town University, the University of South Africa, Witwatersrand and of course the local University and the College of Education. This is heartening to the Language Study Group because it proves that there is not only country-wide interest in what they are trying to achieve in the sector of language teaching, but that our higher educational institutions are aware of and indeed interested in the activities of the Study Group.

The proceedings started at eight o'clock sharp in the morning with a cordial welcome by the Principal of the University, Prof. Groenewoud and ended after a vote of thanks proposed by Prof. H. L. Krige as the sun was setting.

Before attempting to assess what was achieved one is tempted to echo a remark by Prof. Krige in his vote of thanks that the audience had been distinctly select and that attendance at the various sectional meetings had not faded throughout the day. These were men and women who had thought fit to forego the welcome "breather" before the stint of university examinations and the concomitant spate of jading "shop" discussions that would follow the marking of the examination scripts. And they had set out on their diverse journeys to be present at the conference organised by the Language Study Group of Johannesburg at Bloemfontein. It would be unfair to single out some names and leave out others because in some way everyone who attended the conference was equally important to the Study Group. One thing that can be unequivocally asserted is that the professional and academic level of the discussions was a tribute to everyone concerned.

There is no doubt that this conference is a landmark in the history of the Language Study Group and may one day be regarded as a turning point in the adoption of more scientific methods of language teaching. Numerous cogent points could be gleaned from every lecture but elaboration would take too long. However, the following generalisations may be of interest to others who were not themselves able to attend the conference.

Mr. Leslie Proctor of the Johannesburg College of Education gave a most provocative yet persuasive exposition on the theme, *The Language Laboratory and Language Learning*. His ready wit and masterly English address must have gained him many new admirers. His vindication of the language laboratory as a device that should be standard equipment at every university, college of education and indeed eventually every fair-sized school, was complete and unequivocal.

Mr. Nienaber's elaboration of the Language laboratory with particular reference to second language teaching, as he had tested it at the local College of Education, coupled as it was with those perfect specimens of spoken English consolidated whatever strategic positions Mr. Proctor had captured. The practical utility of a language laboratory in a college of education cannot be denied.

Prof. Boeddinghaus, surprisingly fresh and provocative after the strain of presiding as chairman all morning, in one of the sectional meetings gave a most instructive analysis of German pronunciation taught from tapes. He pointed out a number of "pitfalls" for the unwary or rather weary who resort to laboratory drills in teaching German pronunciation. It is safe to predict that this kindly smiling professor will turn out to be a most severe task-master where German tapes are involved.

His timely warning against slip-shod monitoring should be welcomed in all quarters.

Dr. J. L. du Plooy, Language Inspector and author of the immigrant language courses of the Department of Education, Arts and Science, had by far the largest audience in the sectional meetings. His subject was: *Die Probleme in verband met Programmering, die Beginsels daarvan en Konkrete Voorbeelde i.v.m. 'n Program vir Afrikaans as Tweede Taal.*" Attention was focused on the intricacy of the task, the time, money and manhours involved in producing programmed courses in languages.

The sobering effect this must have had on many optimistic enthusiasts is also to be welcomed.

Dr. D. L. Blair of the Department of Romance Studies of the Witwatersrand University was also a notable success. The subject was: *Audio-Visual Methods of Language Teaching and their Integration into University Teaching.* She was speaking with obvious authority and experience. Apt illustrations and equally pointed directions to helpers with the audio-visual aids contributed to the great popularity of this lecture. In fact Prof. Krige in his vote of thanks to the various speakers paid Dr. Blair a special compliment which was loudly applauded by the audience.

The final paper was by Dr. Stanley L. van Wijk, Chief of the Division of Audio-Visual Education of the Department of Education, Arts and Science. As is his wont the address was punctuated with witticisms which did not detract from the relatively detailed account he gave of the introduction by the Government of eight language laboratories to promote the teaching of the official languages to immigrants. The situation at the time was that language laboratories had been installed at the Technical Colleges of Pretoria, Witwatersrand, Vereeniging, Vanderbijlpark, Durban, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town. He indicated that language laboratories were to be installed in 1966 at Welkom and East London. (This has now materialised).

An important suggestion emanating from this speaker, was that the time had arrived to establish a central body to co-ordinate and integrate programming efforts throughout the Republic. The Language Study Group was enjoined to take the initiative to contact the National Advisory Council on Audio-Visual Education to effect this necessary work.

This hint has in fact been followed up and there is every reason to be hopeful about future developments. And that optimistic note is also the predominant impression everyone took away with him from this conference.

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