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The Conference Language Laboratory or the Collective Audio-active Method of Proficiency Oral Practice

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1. Introduction

Oral practice as a means of learning a language has always been one of the most difficult aspects of teaching. For a number of years, language laboratories have been one answer to this problem. The essential benefit derived from oral practice in a language laboratory is the fact that the students of a group can all work at the same time, can listen to their own answers, and compare them with the correct ones. In ordinary oral practice, one student only can speak at a time. He cannot listen to his own answers.

In teaching assisted by audio-lingual equipment, unless it is computerized, the methods used are grounded on a strict question-answer pattern, where one precise answer only corresponds to the question. A great variety of patterns based on imitation, completion, substitution, and transformation can be designed according to different methods of conceiving language teaching and practice. Their purpose is to enable the students to acquire, gradually and logically, the knowledge required for the normal use of the language.

It is commonly accepted now that laboratory work has to be combined with adequate preparatory and revision work, both oral and written, carried out under the teacher's supervision.

Oral practice outside a language laboratory, whether independent of a programme assisted by audio-lingual methods or not, can range from exercises based on strict question-answer patterns to exercises of free expression.

Now, when the students have reached a certain standard of proficiency, there will be a need to change — and this also applies to laboratory practice — from a stage where stress in oral work is being laid on syntactical structures to a stage of free expression, which is the discussion of facts and ideas. This is particularly the case when the students want to utilize the foreign language as a means of communication in their own sphere of studies, such as law, economy, business, administration, sociology, science, etc.

Should all the advantages of the audio-lingual equipment be abandoned to enable methods based on free expression to take over and replace the more formal ones? The answer is no, as there are various possibilities of using electronic equipment to assist in oral practice and to meet a number of requirements.

Let us first explain about the requirements of oral teaching designed for students who have nearly reached a proficiency stage in a foreign language, and want to practise it for oral comprehension and expression in situations similar to those they will be called upon to face in their future professional activities. We shall then describe the type of audio-lingual equipment that can meet these requirements and propose the method of using it.

We shall base our remarks and developments on the information gathered from an experience of teaching business English to students of the *Ecole des hautes études commerciales* of the University of Lausanne carried out over the 1970–1971 year of studies. The language laboratory used in the experiments mentioned is an adapted version of the STA 482 model, originally an audio-active laboratory for individual work of the firm *Elektron Werk für angewandte Elektronik GmbH*. This new equipment was conceived and installed to assist in collective proficiency oral practice.

2. Basic Requirements of Proficiency Oral Practice

The situation that the students, when using a language, will basically have to meet in their professional future can be described as a conference situation. In the circumstances typified by a conference, a certain number of activities are involved. They are of two kinds, those related to the comprehension and those to the expression process.

The first consist in understanding the others with their different accents, pronunciations and intonations, their different choice of expressions and way of combining them in their speech. Besides the effort of pure comprehension, there will be the most important aspect of trying to keep in mind the main points of what has been said, in order to be able to take the floor and carry one's point, if necessary. This particular effort of summarizing not only requires understanding of what has been said, but thinking in the language of one's partners.

The active side of the participants' contribution can consist in reading some notes, in enlarging upon them, in passing remarks or making comments on what has just been said or even in delivering a whole speech and answering possible questions or objections. The main purpose of any such activity will be for the speaker to succeed in conveying his meaning to the audience. We need not insist on all the complex aspects of such a task. Let us only point out that the manner in which a language can be used in the instances mentioned can range from a very colloquial use to a more formal one or even to oratory style.

3. Description of the Audio-lingual Equipment

After outlining the basic requirements of oral practice with proficient students, we shall now describe the audio-lingual equipment that has been worked out to meet these particular requirements.

The leading thought in designing a specific audio-lingual equipment that could assist in oral practice where the activities involved by a conference situation would be covered, was to start from exactly that basic situation, and then examine what facilities could help in the various stages of the procedure.

To materialize for the students the idea of participating in a conference, that is to say a debate or discussion, a prior condition was to lay out the class or the group round a conference table. The ideal number of students is from 12 to 16.

The linguistic material used for the lessons is primarily the one that a conference provides — talks, discussions, and comments of the participants themselves. This is where the first audio-lingual aid comes in. Everything said is better heard and listened to if it is spoken into a microphone and transmitted over loudspeakers. There are five microphones, one for the teacher's and four for the students' use, two on both sides of the table. They are attached to cables and are within everybody's reach.

What is heard over the loudspeakers can be recorded by a tape recorder (B) in the teacher's console, which is located at one end of the table. There is a

control panel mounted on the console for all the necessary operations. The recordings can, of course, be played back over the same loudspeakers, two of them, fixed on the wall behind the teacher. The fact that the voices are emitted from the teacher's end focuses the attention on him while he discusses and corrects, with the students' participation, the recorded talks, debates, and comments played back.

Now, owing to another tape recorder (A) in the instructor's console, recorded material for the purpose of comprehension, discussion and comments can be transmitted over the loudspeakers. This material may be recorded from a great number of sources, such as readings of passages of various texts, radio broadcasts, records, tapes, cassettes, and also live recordings. All the sources are easily available by means of a good radio and a portable recorder, which are part of the language laboratory equipment. This recorded material, which can be specially selected and presented for teaching purposes, can be transmitted over the loudspeakers from tape recorder A in the teacher's console and copied at the same time on recorder B for ensuant play-back and comments.

In addition, there is a record player installed in the console. The records can be played over the loudspeakers and recorded on tape recorder B. Through the teacher's microphone, comments can be superimposed when copying from the record player or tape recorder A to tape recorder B. Finally, a radio, a tape recorder, a record player can be connected to the console for recording or direct transmission over the loudspeakers.

The unpleasant whistling sound that is often produced by simultaneous working of microphones and loudspeakers can be completely suppressed if the right type of uni-directional microphone is used and the loudspeakers are correctly located.

This short description of some of the technical possibilities of the audio-lingual equipment used in the experiments carried out at the University of Lausanne, can give us an idea of the wide range of possibilities that are offered to supply linguistic material for discussions and to record sequences of this material together with the teacher and the students' discussions and their comments for the purpose of further play-back and criticism.

4. The Collective Audio-active Method of Proficiency Oral Practice

The students need to learn a foreign language as a means of communication, particularly of oral communication in their professional future. The method used is one to promote greater efficiency in all the activities involved by a conference situation. We have assumed that such a situation provides one

where all the aspects of mental activity required by oral communication are to be found. The basic idea was to take advantage of such a situation to acquire an extensive vocabulary and greater fluency in using correct language, *without altering fundamentally the notion of debate, discussion, which is essential in a conference.*

Without electronic equipment, the teacher's or the students' critical remarks concerning language questions are intruding on the notion of debate, where the exchange of ideas is in the foreground. This will result in the fact that the students will become disinterested in the matter discussed, will lose the incentive to participate and will get the impression that the work done is mainly formal.

By means of electronic equipment, the two stages of idea exchange and actual formal language teaching can be largely kept apart, but stress can always be put on the fact that correct comprehension and expression are first requisites for satisfactory communication. Let us examine two different situations:

a) Discussion Material Supplied Directly from the Students' and the Teacher's Participation

In this case whether a debate is ensuant on a talk delivered by a student or on a subject that is put in discussion by the teacher, all the proceedings will be recorded. This allows playing back of the whole or part of it for comprehension and correction. Every passage can be explained or played back until it is understood by everyone. The teacher and the students will make their remarks concerning language questions. This stage of understanding and correcting will rouse the students' interest for two reasons:

- 1) They want to clear the points they missed in the talks and discussions;
- 2) They are eager to hear and appraise their own work (form and contents) and compare it with the others'.

In short, the teacher's correcting and instruction work will meet the students' motivation for greater efficiency. Again, unless the teacher's help is necessary or gross mistakes have to be corrected right away, the critical remarks will be consecutive to and not simultaneous with the talks and discussions, and therefore will not interfere with the expression and exchange of ideas.

b) Discussion Material Supplied from Recordings

Short or larger passages recorded from the various sources mentioned, played over the loudspeakers, will provide material for discussions. The passages will usually be played back first, until the students have reached

full comprehension of them. Notes on terminology will be taken under the teacher's advice. Complete understanding of a passage can only be verified providing a correct summary of the ideas expounded is given by one or several students. This will then supply a subject for a debate. Again, the summaries and the debates are recorded to be played back for the purpose already defined above.

5. Conclusion

The possibility of supplying the students with topical subjects or other material selected and presented in a vivid and challenging form is of utmost importance to stimulate their attention and co-operation. The fact of talking into a microphone and being recorded may only inhibit their efforts at the very beginning. It will soon become a major incentive by dramatizing the importance of expressing oneself and conveying one's meaning. As we have pointed out, great importance is attached by the students themselves to the fact that they can listen to their own recorded contributions. For the teacher, this is, of course, a most valuable opportunity of illustrating and enlivening his correcting and instruction work.

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A propos de deux ouvrages récents sur l'enseignement des langues aux