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DESIGNING A LANGUAGE LABORATORY FOR COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING

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The traditional layout for a language laboratory has several rows of student booths arranged *across* the room facing the teacher's control panel. The students can usually see the teacher, depending on his elevation above the booths, but they cannot see or communicate with other students very well. Some layouts have the control panel behind the students' booths with the teacher talking to the backs of the students. This is not generally liked by students, who prefer to see the teacher when he is talking to them. Nor can they see each other any better in this arrangement.

Already this description of the physical layout of a language laboratory has revealed *one element of communication* felt to be necessary by participants (here the learners) in a communicative situation. This is the desire to *see* the person with whom you are speaking. In a language learning situation this is desirable from a pedagogical point of view as well. After all, everyone generally agrees that communication by telephone is often found to be more difficult than "face-to-face" communication where each person receives reinforcement and confirmation of the meaning of the message from eye-contact and gestures. The communication process becomes more difficult (and less comfortable) when we isolate the verbal element alone.

This concentration on the verbal element is precisely what makes language laboratory lessons not as rewarding for the learner as might be expected given the large amounts of time and money that lessons in the laboratory represent. Because a major component of the communication process, namely the non-verbal element, is omitted in language laboratory teaching, what we have left is an artificial situation where voices are dismembered from bodies, and where the natural purpose of communication, that is the sharing of information with *somebody*, is ignored.

This notion of sharing brings us to a *second element of*

communication felt to be necessary by the participants (our learners), namely, *motivation*. A person will make a real effort to communicate only if he believes he has something worth saying. This is why boredom often occurs in language lessons where the emphasis is placed on non-communicative exercises and drills.

One way a speaker estimates the "worthwhileness" of what he has to say, is by his expectation of getting a *reaction* from his listener. In fact, it could be said that we communicate in order to get people to react. This reaction is often non-verbal (being conveyed by look, facial expression, or gesture) as much as it is verbal, and it is this type of reaction which makes communication satisfying to the speaker in that he knows his message at least has been received by the listener, if not necessarily understood. This is true, too, of the language learner. A reaction at the end of his having said something in the target language provides the learner with the motivation to try to communicate further in his language lessons.

And this is where a language laboratory can prove disappointing. Over reliance on the mechanical aspects of language, such as phonological production and structural drills, gives no positive feedback of a real communicative nature and leads to boredom once the initial period of novelty interest in the language laboratory is over.

Most disconcerting to the teacher is the well-attested finding that such language laboratory lessons are found to have little effect on the student's ability to communicate functionally, that is, in real life situations where he needs to use the target language.¹ Not surprisingly, the disappointment extends also to the student's overall examination performance whenever his general competence in the language is tested.

We can see, then, that the central problem with the language laboratory lesson is how to find the best way to *transfer* the mechanical skills learnt in the laboratory to other more communicative situations. The solution to the problem depends on two factors: the nature and content of the language laboratory lesson, and, because our physical environment affects the way we teach, the actual layout of the language laboratory itself.

In each of these factors there must be an increase in functional communication if language laboratory teaching is to prove efficient and effective. Lessons in the laboratory must be

planned in such a way that the overall objective of the lesson is to bring about a transfer of *any* mechanical skill taught in the laboratory to a functional context reflecting the way the student has to use that skill outside the classroom in real life. Without this transfer our language teaching is destined to be ineffective for making our students better communicators.

Unfortunately, too often the objective of a language laboratory lesson stops with the mere acquisition of a mechanical skill, such as, for instance, the discrimination between the *pot* and *port* sounds in English, without any practice of the skill in a real communicative situation being built into the lesson. It is therefore not surprising that research has shown that even though students may leave the laboratory having duly performed a particular drill activity, their outside language use still reveals the presence of the error that had been "corrected" in the laboratory.²

What our laboratory lessons must do, therefore, is to stress from the outset the communicative setting and functional use of the skill to be learnt, then provide practice of the skill itself, and lastly provide practice in transferring the skill to a practical situation. It should be realised that these three activities are elements of the *one* lesson with the major objective being ensuring the student's ability to use the skill in a communicative setting.

The model lesson proposed can be drawn up in this way:

INPUT: Teacher demonstration of the skill to be learnt in a communicative situation. Initial attempt by students to perform the communicative task. (Usually best done away from laboratory booths)

PRACTICE: Modelling practice of the specific skill. Self-practice by the students following a given model. Performance monitored by the teacher. (Done in the laboratory booths)

APPLICATION: Students' demonstration in a communicative situation of the skill learnt. Open dialogues. Group work. Role play. Teacher acts as adviser, offering encouragement. (Done away from booths)

Such a lesson plan has implications for the design of the laboratory itself. What is needed is a language laboratory layout

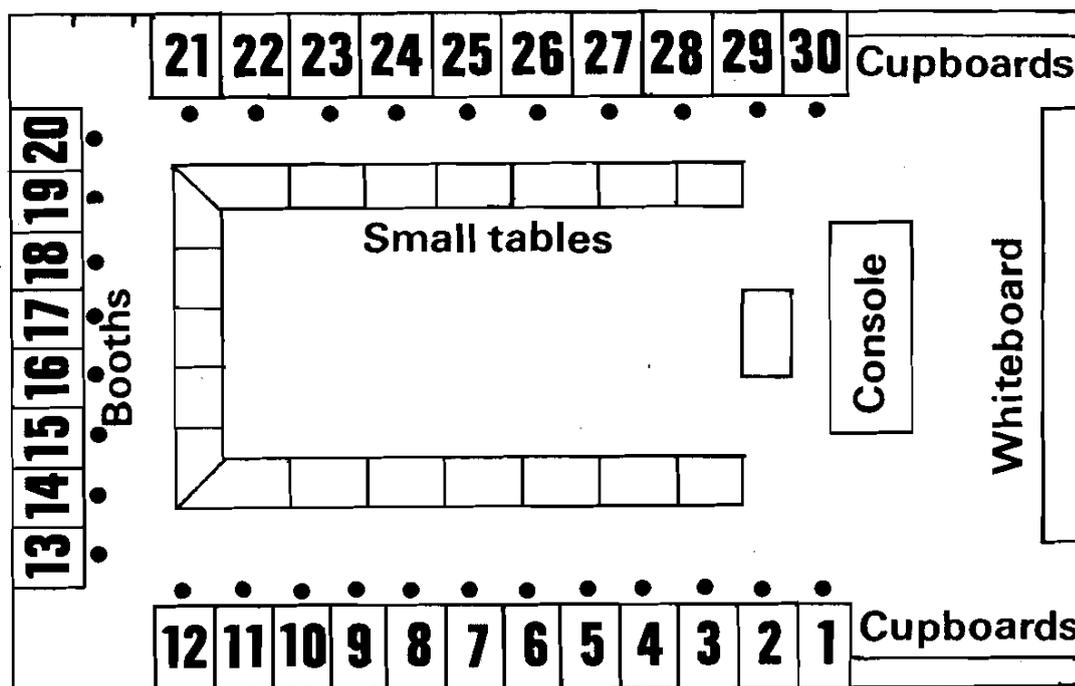
which will allow the communicative INPUT and APPLICATION sections to take place away from the booths, with the students arranged in such a manner that they will be encouraged to speak to one another as in a real life situation. As we said earlier, speaking to someone means *looking* at someone.

The traditional layout of a language laboratory, with its booths arranged across the room in rows, does not allow the students to take part in language activities away from their booths, and so the teacher is prevented from conducting the INPUT and APPLICATION sections which are so essential to an effective language laboratory lesson. The teacher therefore would have to fragment the lesson by conducting those sections outside the laboratory in the normal classroom. Many teachers, however, would not accept the inconvenience of taking the class to different rooms for different parts of the lesson, and would tend to follow what happens in many instances – the class comes to the laboratory “cold” (that is, without classroom preparation of what is to be done in the booths), and leaves without adequate transfer of the skill taught being applied to a communicative situation.

The solution lies in redesigning our language laboratories so that the booths do not occupy all the available space in the room, but instead are arranged around the walls of the room so as to leave the central space free for various communicative arrangements of desks. In addition, there should be a space large enough to allow movement in such activities as role playing and acting out dialogues.

Such a communicative design has been adopted by the Institute of Education, Singapore, for its latest language laboratory. The response from those who have used the laboratory has been so favourable that the Institute’s other language laboratories are to be converted to this round-the-wall design.

Here is a floor plan of the new design.



The moderate-sized room still contains the same number (30) of booths (each 90 cm wide) as it did with the traditional design, but now, using the extra space provided by this arrangement, small tables have been arranged in a horse-shoe pattern which encourages active dialogue. The students sit around these tables when the INPUT and APPLICATION sections of the laboratory lesson take place. The same set of chairs serves both the booths and the tables. The tables are easily rearranged if the teacher desires to use group work as part of the lesson.

The table in front of the teacher's console is sometimes used to hold a TV and Video Recorder for class viewing of video materials. Similarly, the arrangement of the room is ideal for screening 16mm movie films, especially since the windows have been covered with sound-proofing tiles, as have the walls.

This laboratory design has, therefore, made the language laboratory multi-functional, in contrast to the fixed and often limited use of the traditionally designed laboratory. Because of these extra functions and because the entire language lesson, including practice in the booths, can be conducted in the one

room, it would be more appropriate to call this type of laboratory a Language Activity Room. The new name would emphasise the more active role I have described as necessary for achieving language transfer in contrast to what often happens in traditional language laboratories.

From the financial point of view, school administrators might also note that installation and wiring costs are cheaper than they would be with the traditional layout, since no cross-floor channels between individual booths and the console have to be made.

It is suggested, then, that for a number of theoretical and practical reasons the conventional layout of the traditional language laboratory should be replaced by a fuller concept in design which sees the separate booth practice not as an end in itself, but as only one element of the laboratory lesson whose main objective should be the students' performance of certain communicative tasks. The students' ability to cope with this type of activity is the crux of a successful language laboratory lesson.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 See, for example, R L Allen "A reassessment of the role of the language laboratory", *Journal of English as a Second Language*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1968, and R N Campbell, "The language laboratory and pronunciation teaching", *English Language Teaching*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1968.
- 2 See W Tiggemann (trans.): "The problem of transfer in foreign language teaching using a language laboratory", *Programmiertes Lernen und Programmierter Unterricht* Vol. 6, No. 4, 1969.