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Title	Effective utilization of a language laboratory
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Source	<i>Teaching and Learning</i> , 1(2)77-89
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

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# **EFFECTIVE UTILIZATION OF A LANGUAGE LABORATORY**

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Pei Chun School is to be congratulated for the acquisition of a rather sophisticated language laboratory equipped not only with audio active comparative facilities but also a programme-editor and a response analyzer, costing, in total, one hundred thousand dollars. Undoubtedly, this is a giant step in the history of primary education in Singapore towards providing the pupils and the teaching staff with better facilities and richer resources for learning and teaching. However, to equip the pupils and the teaching staff with the know-how and utilization skills will perhaps be the next greater steps towards ensuring that all concerned will benefit from the initial large capital investment. Hence how to use it effectively will be the question of all concerned.

The followings are considered important factors affecting the effectiveness of the language laboratory instruction system in the primary schools.

## **1 The Human Elements**

There are two main types of regular users of the language laboratory in the school i.e. the instructor/teacher and the learners/pupils.

- (a) For effective utilization, the instructor has to have a complete mastery of the operation of all the gadgets on the console panel. It looks easy though, for one to read the labels and know their functions, but to manipulate them skilfully to get the desirable results, one needs constant and regular practices. Besides, it is also necessary for the instructor to master the programming technique and use the programming editor to tailor-make master-tape for the achievement of the lesson objectives. This is no easy task, for one

has to identify the lesson objectives in measurable performance terms so that at the end of the lesson, learners' performances and responses can be assessed and analyzed. The task will undoubtedly raise a number of problems. How to introduce various activities so as to break the monotony of repetitive drill? How to reinforce pupils' skills of learning sound discrimination and speech articulation? How to motivate learners to participate with eagerness and enthusiasm? How to incorporate the measuring instruments into the instruction? How to evaluate learners' progress? Unless there is a willingness to probe into such problems and find ways to resolve them, the language laboratory is not likely to be used effectively.

- (b) The learners have to, first of all, learn and practise willingly the manipulation of all the gadgets installed in the booth including the headset and the responding buttons. Secondly, they have to get used to wearing the headset for a long period. Thirdly, they need to be motivated to communicate through the system with the instructor and have the courage to rectify the mistakes made. Fourthly, they have to be trained to follow instructions and carry out willingly the drill or practices required. Last but not least, they need to learn willingly how to take note of their responses, and be made aware of their own progress.
- (c) Rapport between the instructor and the learners have to be cordial and strengthened so that a bridge of trust and mutual respect is built to facilitate learning and teaching in the rather mechanical but systematic drill-like manner most of the time.

## **2 The Strategies**

There are various instructional methods of using the language laboratory. The following can be considered systematic and effective:

**(a) Management by Objectives**

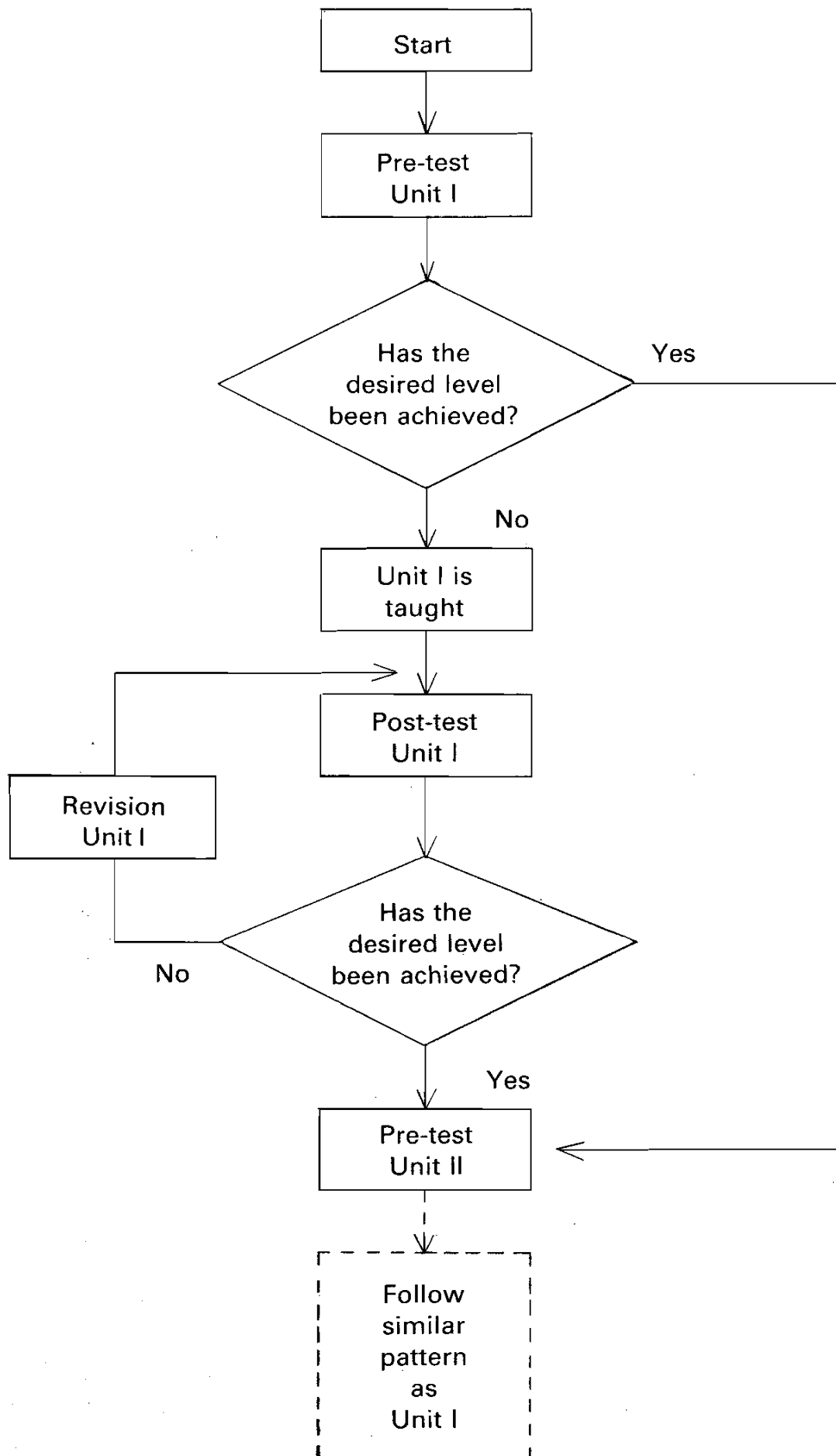
By and large, this is the most scientific and systematic approach in any training system. The content and the skills to be learned are broken down into small units, and each unit is written in the form of a series of performance objectives. Evaluative instruments or tests are then devised to assess the extent of attainment of the objectives.

Prior to the teaching of the unit I, a pre-test is administered to assess the learners' competency in the unit. If their performances are found to be reaching and above the desired level, the unit is then skipped over, and the pre-test of next unit is administered. On the other hand, if their performances are found to be below the desired level, the unit is taught and a post-test follows. Those who passed the post-test will go for the pre-test of the unit II. Those who failed will revise unit I and sit for the post-test once more. The flow chart in the next page illustrates the paths to be taken by learners of different abilities.

With the availability of multiple channels and response analysers in the sophisticated language laboratory in Pei Chun, it is feasible to adopt the above strategy. Less instruction time is needed for those who are more proficient than others. Boredom is avoided and the lesson could be more challenging to the learners.

**(b) Utilization of Audio-visual Aids**

Repetitive language drill can be very boring to the learners when the novelty of using the laboratory wears off. One of the strategies to break the monotony is to use other forms of media such as the transparencies, slides, films and film-strips. In actual practice, the materials presented through the aids serve also as the contents for discussions, practices, as well as for testings.



**FLOW CHART OF INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY**

### **(c) Language Games and Activities**

To reinforce pupils' language skills without tears, it is often necessary to introduce interesting communication activities or games to sustain pupils' effort of learning the language. Many activities suggested in 'A handbook of communication activities for young learners – SRLC occasional papers No 6', can be adapted for use in the language laboratory.

## **3 The Software**

The language laboratory instruction system cannot function effectively and efficiently without adequate and appropriate software, which include lesson plans, programmed tapes, textbooks and audio-visual aids.

### **(a) The Lesson Plan**

This is the 'brain' of the instruction system. Without the plan it is difficult to evaluate fairly and accurately the success and effectiveness of the system. The plan helps the instructor to produce the programmed-tape in advance, gather the necessary audio-visual aids, devise the test items and to conduct the lesson with confidence and competence.

A lesson plan is incomplete without the following:

- (i) the performance/behavioural objective
- (ii) test items and other means to assess the extent of achievement in (i)
- (iii) content and source of instruction materials
- (iv) methods of instruction
- (v) teaching aids.

The lesson plan and the programmed-tape will form the main items of a packaged module together with other aids.

An example of lesson plan is in the Appendix for reference.

## **(b) Instruction Tapes**

Instruction tapes programmed according to performance objectives with test items included are not commercially available in Singapore. Hence, a great amount of time is needed to plan and produce them in the laboratory. Needless to say, the tape should have verbal instructions, clearly telling the learners what they are expected to achieve and how to achieve the objective. The tape should also have the learning materials, drill exercises, test items, and assignment for reinforcement.

It is estimated that to produce a 30-minute tape, a minimum of 90 minutes are required for preparation and production, even though with the aid of a programme editing machine. The teacher using the laboratory, therefore, needs the extra hours if he/she is to do an effective job during the instruction time.

## **(c) The Course-book**

The course book is a convenient tool providing the teacher with materials to use. However, the content should be suitable to the need of the learners. Neither should they be so easy that offer no challenge to the learners nor should they be too difficult that will kill their interest. The sequence of the content should neither be followed slavishly at the expense of learners' rate of progress. Hence, the course-book should be used with constant assessment.

## **(d) Audio-Visual Aids**

These can be various drawings, diagrams, charts, illustrations, pictures, presented through transparencies, slides, film-strips, etc. Music, rhymes of songs relevant to the topic and useful to achieve the lesson objectives should also be included as teaching aids after careful selection. These aids will help to sustain learners' interest in the topic and speed up their understanding, aid memory and facilitate testing.

## **4 The Hardware**

The efficiency and effectiveness of the instruction system depend also a great deal on the reliability and proper functioning of the machines and equipment in the language laboratory, especially when the laboratory is frequently used. Nothing affects the learner's learning more than the intermittent faults of the equipment in his/her booth or interruption caused by machine failure. Hence, it is necessary to have someone to maintain the equipment when the warranty period is over.

### **(a) Preventive Maintenance**

Proper care and safety need to be exercised in the handling of electrical and electronic equipment in the laboratory. The learners should be trained to handle the tapes the correct way and with clean fingers. The headsets and microphones need to be kept clean for hygienic purposes. The tape-head pinch rollers of the tape recorders should be cleaned regularly with cleaning fluid to ensure clarity and fidelity of the sound produced.

## **5 Supporting Systems**

### **(a) After-sales service**

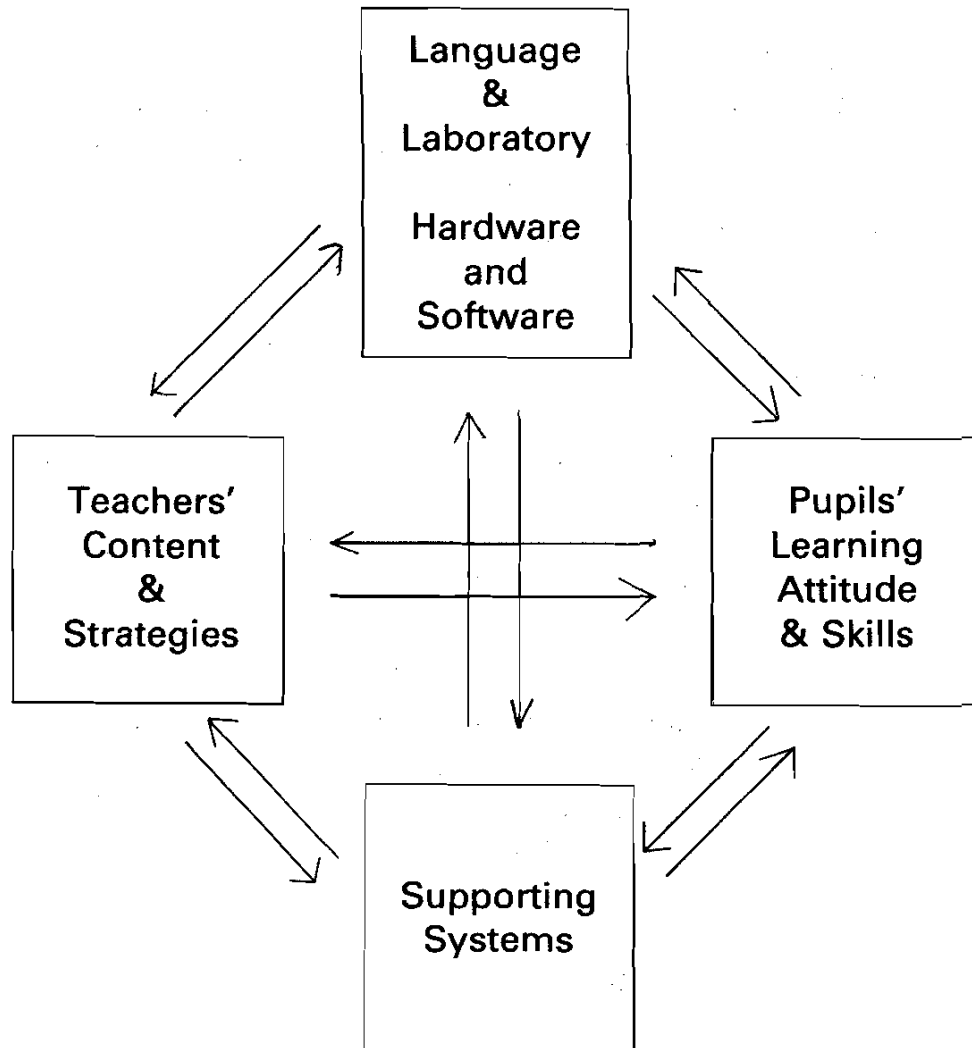
As both the teachers and laboratory attendants are not trained with the knowledge and skills to repair the sophisticated electronic equipment, it is necessary to secure the after-sale service from the agent, so that any major or minor faults occur can be rectified without unnecessary delay.

### **(b) Motivation**

It cannot be over emphasized that constant encouragement and support from the administration are essential to sustain the effort and enthusiasm of those who have worked very hard and made a good start. Flexibility and utilisation of room for experiment should be allowed to promote creativity and innovation in such bold attempt of providing learners with better facilities and richer resources for teaching and learning.



To summarise the above, a paradigm of the inter-relationship in the instruction system is given as follows:



It is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate the conceptualised principles of the above paradigm. However, we have briefly delineated the main and common factors affecting the effectiveness of the language laboratory instruction system. They are by no means exhaustive. It is hoped that they could be considered by others who wish to adopt this instruction system. It is also hoped that other factors affecting the system's effectiveness can be brought up for discussion.

**LESSON PLAN**

- Class* : Primary 4
- Subject* : English Comprehension
- Topic* : Where is Blackie?
- Lesson Objective* : Pupils choose the appropriate responses to question relating to the followings:
- (a) What is the story about?
  - (b) What did Mr & Mrs Lee do about the dog before they went for their holidays.
  - (c) How did Mr & Mrs Lee discover that they have brought the wrong dog home?
  - (d) Why was the dog barking all the way home?

*Introduction (Pre-test)* :

Teacher: "Boys and Girls, I am going to tell you a story. Listen carefully to what it is all about."

The tape of the story is played. At the end of the story the following questions are asked.

Teacher: "Listen carefully to the question and press the button to give your answer."

1 Q: In the story, what were Mr and Mrs Lee doing?

A: They were

- (1) going abroad for treatment
- (2) going somewhere for picnic
- (3) going abroad on business
- (4) going abroad for holiday
- (5) going again to Holland

2 Q: What was the dog called?

A: It is called

- (1) Blanky
- (2) Blackie
- (3) Blonky
- (4) Brownky
- (5) Bracky

3 Q: Why did they look for a good place to leave their dog?

A: They did it because

- (1) they dislike their dog
- (2) they hate their dog
- (3) their dog will run away
- (4) they love their dog very much
- (5) their dog is naughty

4 Q: What did they do just before they left for their holiday?

A: They took their dog

- (1) to a place where dogs are not well looked after
- (2) to a place where dogs are very well looked after
- (3) to a place where dogs are fairly well looked after
- (4) to a place where dogs are not fairly well looked after
- (5) to a place where dogs are extremely well looked after

5 Q: What did they say to Blackie and how?

- A:
- (1) They happily said goodbye
  - (2) They happily said goodday
  - (3) They sadly said goodbye

- (4) They sadly said goodday
- (5) They sadly said goodnight

6 Q: Why did they decide to wait for Blackie until the next morning before going to get the dog?

A: They did it because

- (1) they got back home early at night and thought that the shop might be closed
- (2) they got back home very late at night and thought that the shop might not be closed
- (3) they got back home very late at night and thought the shop might be closed
- (4) they got back home very early and thought that the shop might not be closed
- (5) they got back home late and thought that the shop might be closed

7 Q: How did Mr Lee go to collect Blackie the next morning?

- A:
- (1) He drove off happily in a van
  - (2) He drove off hurriedly in a car
  - (3) He drove off hastily in a car
  - (4) He drove off happily in a car
  - (5) He drove off sadly in a car

8 Q: Had Mr Lee brought Blackie home?

- A:
- (1) Yes
  - (2) No

9 Q: How do you know?

- A:
- (1) Because the dog said so.
  - (2) Because Mr Lee said so

- (3) Because Mrs Lee said so
- (4) Because the dog barked all the way home
- (5) Because the dog did not enjoy his stay at the place.

10 Q: Where is Blackie?

A: He is

- (1) at home with Mr and Mrs Lee
- (2) in the park
- (3) at the seaside
- (4) in the garden
- (5) in the place where dogs are well looked after

### **Procedure**

Response analyser will be used to compute the percentages of individual and class achievements. Pupils who score 90 and above will switch over to channel II for more advance exercises or games, or enrichment programme e.g. children's programme of SBC or children's song.

Other pupils will be asked to pay attention to the pronunciation and meaning of the following words:

Blackie, sadly, going abroad, drove off, collect.

Pupils in Channel I will listen to the story again. At the end of the story they will be asked to answer the same set of questions.

Response analyser will be used to compute the individual and class performance. Pupils who score 90 and above will switch over to Channel II. The rest of the pupils will listen to the story for the 3rd time and attempt the same questions. This process will go on until over 90% of the class can achieve the lesson objective.

*Teaching Aids* : Pictures illustrating the meanings of the new words

## Content

Mr and Mrs Lee were going abroad for their holiday. They had a dog called Blackie, which they were very fond of, but they could not take him abroad with them. So they looked for a good place to leave him while they were away. At last they found a place which looked after dogs very well, while their owners were away. They took Blackie there just before they left for their holiday and sadly said goodbye to him.

At the end of their holiday, they got back home very late at night and as they thought that the place where Blackie was staying might be closed at that late hour they decided to wait until the next morning before going to get him.

So, the next morning, Mr Lee got into the car and drove off happily to collect Blackie. When he reached home with the dog, he said to his wife, "Do you know, I don't think Blackie can have enjoyed his stay at that place very much. He barked all the way home in the car as if he wanted to tell me something." Mrs Lee looked at the dog carefully and then answered, "You are quite right. He was certainly trying to tell you something. But he wasn't trying to tell you that he hasn't enjoyed his stay at that place. He was only trying to tell you that you were bringing the wrong dog home. This isn't Blackie!"