

VERBAL FLUENCY AND THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY

Desmond Cooper

Lecturer in English

Papua and New Guinea Institute of Technology, Lae

Revised Version of Paper read at the Third Annual Congress of the Linguistic Society of Papua and New Guinea.

One of the most serious criticisms of the use of the language laboratory is that it is at best a dialogue between the students and an electro-magnetic tape, and, at worst, the apotheosis of the system of parrot learning. In short, that it is a dehumanised method of language learning.

Recent experience in the use of language laboratory techniques in the teaching of English as a foreign language suggests that we need to criticise our concept of language laboratory use. Certainly it is very far from being the panacea of EFL, and it is hard to escape the accusation that it amounts to little more than a piece of sophisticated linguistic gimmickry, impressive indeed to the layman, but of marginal effectiveness in improving all-round speech performance.

There is much talk of the language laboratory being merely a tool, an extension of the teacher. If that is so, then it is a very expensive tool indeed, and we shall need to ask ourselves whether such a costly purchase can be justified in terms of results achieved. Is language teaching more effective as a result of its use? If we are to answer that question in respect of rote-drilling of language patterns and pre-determined responses, the answer must remain inconclusive. Certainly I am not convinced that any very marked improvement either in spoken or in written language has followed its intensive use as a pattern driller. One suspects that student performance would have remained roughly the same even if the language laboratory had never been used at all.

Our peculiar problem in P.N.G.I.T. is that students come to us already knowing a good deal of English, and with considerable verbal fluency. But they are fluent in well-established patterns of errors: errors of tense usage, articles, use of plurals, unorthodox constructions, and deficiencies of diction and intonation. Whatever use the language laboratory may have for learners starting from scratch, pattern drills at this stage seem to be of limited value, if not positively harmful.

Is there anything at all that the language laboratory can do to remedy this condition?

First one needs to make the point that language is primarily an oral art, and in my view real success in mastering language skills will only come from a largely oral-based approach. Now the deficiency of much language laboratory teaching material is that it relies too heavily upon a visual, written text. The spectacle, therefore, of thirty students dutifully working through a typical language laboratory script on structures or tenses, or whatever, eyes glued to the pattern formula, intoning the response to twenty given cues, is a melancholy one. The system lacks life and conviction, and there is often little in the script to motivate a genuine and effective response. The boredom barrier soon becomes formidable when the novelty of initial use has worn off. The listless look of students at the end of such a session confirms what the console monitor has long since suspected.

Anyone who has had to learn a foreign language will know that a structure can rarely be effectively assimilated in vacuo. The learning process depends very much upon the tone of voice, gesture, look in the eye of the "teacher", and contextual circumstances of the new pattern than upon simple mechanical repetition. This is especially true once the initial stages of language learning have passed. In a "real" situation there is also immediate relevance; the newly assimilated structure is intimately related to the circumstances of its introduction. Such a condition is virtually impossible to create in a set of language laboratory scripts that attempt to cover the entire gamut of, say, English structures or tenses. Even attempts to make the scripts acceptable by the inclusion of local references or allusions familiar to the student can only be said to ameliorate a situation that is basically unsound.

We can scarcely hope to improve the fluency of the learner in this way. The student is too tied to the visually presented word: language laboratory attempts to get beyond simple to more ambitious constructions requiring student modification or amplification tend to be too lengthy to be held in mind without the use of a script, and thus there is too high an error rate to justify persisting along these lines; there is, too, the consequent disappointment at repeated failures on the part of the student. The cerebral, analytical content is too obtrusive. What we should be doing is to concentrate more effort upon aural perception, of which I shall have something more to say later in this paper.

The strength of the assertion that it is the heard, and not the seen, word that should receive our most urgent attention was demonstrated to me a short while ago, when a student who is learning Spanish asked for my help in conversation. He was totally unable to comprehend a simple Spanish sentence (every word of which he "knew") such as Hay una silla en la habitación, and asked me how it was written in order to arrive at a

visually prompted understanding! This is precisely the problem with our students in New Guinea, who have been nurtured on a steady diet of written speech, with the result that their language processes are largely rational and academic. We have interpolated the written symbol between them and speech, with all the hesitancy and inarticulate fumbling after expression consequent upon it.

We should, therefore, be suspicious of language laboratory procedures that seem to duplicate the worst features of scribal language teaching in the Territory. No secondary virtues that they possess - such as a guaranteed total involvement of all students in the learning exercises - should blind us to the imperative that (I contend) should underlie all language instruction: that a living verbal exchange be the basis for effective depth learning.

If mindless repetition of set drills is to be condemned as damaging to effective learning, what legitimate language laboratory uses remain to us?

First, I think, the language laboratory can serve as a useful pacer. Teachers of EFL often despair of achieving the right pace and phrasing of English in their students. The written language approach has invariably implanted an almost insurmountable barrier to fluent, well-phrased speech. Following the language laboratory procedure outlined below, I have been sufficiently impressed with the student response to feel cautiously optimistic that the language laboratory may have an important role as a corrective to pace, phrasing and intonation.

The instructor should take care to select a short, sustained piece of colloquial writing, involving as much dialogue as possible. Stilted, unnatural expression should be rigorously avoided. The dramatic short story is often ideal for this. But on no account must the student be permitted to sight it. It is his ear that we are seeking to develop at this stage, not his eye.

The selected passage should be read aloud to the group first, care being taken to reproduce the normal rhythms and pace of conversational speech. If the chosen piece is well read and dramatically presented, the instructor will have gained the awakened and alert interest of the group. Students will then proceed to the language laboratory booth, where the story will be read again by the instructor over the "all call" channel in phrased segments, taking great care to achieve "naturalness". In the pauses between the phrased segments, students are invited to repeat what they hear, striving to capture both the pace and intonation registers of the instructor. At the same time, the whole procedure will be recorded on the student recorder. This enables both the instructor and the student to

back-check individual performance. As with guided writing in written English, this would have to be a regular part of language laboratory work, for eventual effectiveness will, I believe, depend upon extended and repeated work of this nature. Furthermore, this is best done "live", since any massive failure on the part of the group is easily detectable to the instructor despite his headphones and can be immediately corrected. Clearly, in such a situation outlined, the student is both, hearing and speaking. He is being reached at a number of different levels at the same time: his registers are constantly subject to imitation and check-back; his speaking pace is made to conform to native usage; he is forced to hold integrated speech segments in his mind and to reproduce them orally; his sense of tense usage and vocabulary is receiving constant and meaningful reinforcement; he is being obliged to develop a critical listening capacity that will serve him well in his struggle to master the sounds and structures of the language.

Of course, any vocabulary that may present difficulty must first be dealt with by the instructor orally and contextually. No "explanation" of a word should be given: the word should be used repeatedly in varying contexts and students should be invited to use it repeatedly themselves in response to questions ("yes/no" answers will not be acceptable) and then in contexts of their own devising. Any temptation to have recourse to academic preparation of vocabulary based on reading and written research must be firmly resisted. Viva voce must be the rule, so that when the student first hears the story read to him, afterwards proceeding to the language laboratory for the next stage, he will already have overcome any possible vocabulary (or, indeed, any structural or idiomatic) difficulty.

It is gratifying to find (i) how segmentally paced and intonal techniques achieve real flow, and (ii) how enthusiastic student response is -- they have a true sense of linguistic achievement. Of course, the language laboratory text may then, if desired, be given to the student as the basis for a guided writing assignment. Reading of the text, and writing endeavour, may now legitimately proceed.

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the opportunities for students in T.P.N.G. to hear good English are relatively few. They are more likely to use place talk amongst their peer groups, and will also be apt to use and hear (and so to reinforce) inadequate English forms in conversation with other indigenous speakers of English. Here again, the language laboratory comes into its own as a linguistic resource library: students should be encouraged to make regular use of a well-stocked library of vitalized recordings in English, such as we at the Institute of Technology are setting up. Again the short story

form most lends itself to this, though there is no reason why serialised recordings of larger works should not be attempted. Poetry, too, especially narrative, can also be employed successfully this way. And thus the student is benefitting in depth by learning his language primarily from a living source, and not from the daunting columns of the contrived and artificial "exercise".

Preliminary results in the use of this method have proved encouraging, time will show whether they are any more effective in the long run than other methods rejected as unsuitable. At least past lack of success in depth should encourage us to re-evaluate our techniques -- certainly we have little to lose and a great deal to gain. The essential thing is to develop language laboratory techniques that ensure that language students secure their language instruction from a living and vital laboratory experience from which artificiality and contrivance have been reduced to a minimum.