

SUCCESSFUL LANGUAGE LABORATORY PERFORMANCE

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The enthusiastic teacher does experience a sense of accomplishment and success in the daily classroom situation. The language laboratory experience, on the other hand, is decisively different. "Much of the negative feeling about the language laboratory can be traced to three sources: the lack of student participation, the absence of visual support for those who need it, and the rigidity of the teacher's control of laboratory activities"¹ The language lab experience should aid and benefit the student's overall learning process. Yet both students and instructors complain about the inadequacy, ineffectiveness and irrelevancy of the weekly language lab lesson. "Too often the teacher has been hindered in his attempts to utilize the lab facilities to the fullest by administrative procedures and technical failures"².

Allen and Valette affirm that the laboratory can be effective only if the students are involved in the scheduled activity³. There are numerous ways to involve the students and achieve success in language laboratory performance. The following is offered as one possible solution to the widespread problem of achieving an interesting and successful language laboratory to the student as well as the instructor.

BACKGROUND

My five years of experience using *Modern Spanish* at the University of Illinois afforded me the necessary background for observing student performance more critically when I transferred to the University of Wisconsin, Madison, as assistant to the basic course director.

Although at Wisconsin students were required to and did attend the Spanish lab sessions frequently, their noteworthy criticisms were taken into consideration, namely:

- 1) the rapidity and general difficulty of the MLA tapes,
- 2) the inadequate time for repetition or correction⁴,
- 3) the lack of coordination between the lab period and the regular "memorization and mimicry" session,
- 4) the insufficient amount of weekly criticism and evaluation on the part of the lab monitor⁵,
- 5) the so-called lab grade based on obligatory attendance⁶.

As assistant course director at Wisconsin, I decided to find a solution to the lack of success in student lab performance.

For this reason I consulted an article by Norma A. Garnett entitled "Making the language laboratory effective"⁷. According to

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Norma A. Garnette's article, there are six criteria fundamental to the effective application of the language laboratory:

- 1) skill of teacher as critic, model, guide;
- 2) enthusiasm and energy of teacher; teacher motivation;
- 3) excellence of program materials, closely related to the classroom materials;
- 4) an efficient, valid testing and grading program;
- 5) frequent and regular practice sessions, preferably two twenty-minute sessions each week; and
- 6) efficient and quality machinery that is adjustable to the needs and aims of individual school programs.

Conditions, 1, 2, and 6 had been satisfied quite adequately. Although we thought we had met points 3, 4, and 5, a careful re-examination revealed that these three conditions were seriously deficient in the Spanish laboratory program and that they had to be overcome.

PLAUSIBLE SOLUTIONS

✓ First of all, economic and academic restrictions on the distribution of class hours and lab sessions would not permit the bi-weekly twenty-minute sessions. Therefore, although the revised drills and questions could be used easily in shorter lab sessions, the single weekly fifty-minute lab sessions had to be organized to provide a varied linguistic experience.

✓ Second, given the financial and academic limitations, a reorganization of the Spanish lab program and an effective application of conditions three and four seemed almost impossible. With a minimum of extra work, material for an effective restructuring eventually became available. In addition, the language lab director's enthusiasm and the generous linguistic contribution of Spanish-speaking graduate assistants resulted in the following reorganization.

I. *Retention of former lab material*

Although much of the regular text's tape material was too rapidly presented and lacked the procedure of direct question to be answered by the students, at least half of the grammatical material was retained in order to provide practice in pattern^s and dialogue drills.

II. *Production and use of supplementary tapes*

Two new sets of tapes were produced to supplement the areas which were originally deficient and problematic.

A. The first set of tapes (supplementary drills and question-answer exercises for Spanish) was designed to accompany the tapes of any of the currently or subsequently published first-year Spanish texts. The fourteen practice tapes were structured and employed in the following ways:

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1. Except for two tapes containing person-number (-ar verbs) and tense (Present to Preterite substitution drills, each of the remaining tapes contained anywhere from eighteen to twenty-five direct questions covering the entire first year of Spanish. The following is a brief example of one question and answer tape:

1. *¿Conoce Ud. a mi amigo Pablo Martínez?*
Sí, lo conozco muy bien (answers are placed vertically on the student sheet so that they can be covered without hiding the question).
2. *¿De dónde eres tú?*
Soy de Venezuela.
3. *¿A qué hora oyen Uds. el radio?*
Lo oímos siempre a las cuatro.
4. *¿Dónde están sus padres ahora?*
Están en Méjico.
5. *¿Sabe Ud. hablar francés?*
Si, se hablar francés⁹.

2. The question on the tape and a corresponding short correct answer were distributed to the students on mimeographed sheets; the questions in one column, and the answers in the opposite column. The question-answer sheets were used the first time the questions were presented. The students were instructed to answer each question in the time provided without looking at the answer¹⁰. They were to look at the answer after the tape repeated it. The process for each question is structured in this manner:

- a). The student hears *¿Dónde están las chicas?* twice.
- b). He answers in the time allowed¹¹.
- c). He then hears: *Están en su cuarto.*
- d). The student is asked to repeat the correct answer.

This type of questioning corresponds to the grammar-based questions of the memorization and mimicry (subsequently referred to as MM) session.

3. After the questions are asked and answered, the sheets are collected, and the tape is played again. This time the student creates his own answer again or he remembers and pronounces the correct tape answer¹².

4. Then a short quiz based on the questions or drills is played. Students quickly hand in the papers to the lab monitor who corrects them and turns them over the next day to the MM instructor so that the students can see their errors immediately.

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5. Depending upon the drill or questions, a sufficient amount of time is provided so that students can repeat the structure, answer the question and listen to the monitor's phonetic, semantic or syntactic correction.

6. The actual question-answer time varies from a minimum of ten minutes to a maximum of twenty-five minutes per tape. This allows plenty of time for other types of language lab drills or pronunciation evaluation when using the fifty-minute lab session. If the library type laboratory or twenty-minute lab sessions are preferred, students can benefit linguistically from the question-answer tapes, and teacher can restructure them to fulfill conversational aspects of individualized instruction. To achieve the performance objective of conversation using *-ar* verbs, students can work alone and take the conversation quiz whenever they are ready for it¹⁴.

B. The second set of tapes includes twenty-one quizzes; twelve are based on the previously mentioned question-answer tapes. The remaining nine deal with various cumbersome grammatical difficulties. Except for the fact that there are fewer items and two quizzes per tape, this second set of tapes follow the same structure as the practice set. For obvious reasons, quiz *a* of tape 3 was given alternately with quiz *b* of the same tape¹⁵. The quiz tapes emphasize the following kinds of grammatical points:

- 1). Present tense *-ar*, *-er*, *-ir* verb conjugations in drills and questions.
- 2). *Ser* and *estar* in drills and questions.
- 3). Radical-changing verbs.
- 4). Regular and irregular preterites in tense substitution drills and questions.
- 5). The present and Imperfect Progressives.
- 6). The object pronouns and the reflexive used in the formation of the passive voice.
- 7). Imperfect tense conjugations in drills and questions and in contrast with the Preterite tense.
- 8). The comparatives in questions.
- 9). The Present Subjunctive in drills and questions.
- 10). The Present Perfect Indicative in Questions.
- 11). The Imperfect Subjunctive in questions and drills.
- 12). The Future and Conditional tenses in substitution drills and questions.
- 13). The Pluperfect Subjunctive, Conditional Perfect and other tense covered in questions employing the three contrary-to-fact "if" clauses¹⁶.

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Each quiz tape instructs the student to lay aside all material, write his name, his section number and the name of his regular instructor. He is instructed to answer the questions with a complete sentence or substitute the new verb as the case may be¹⁷.

III. *Correlation of lab and regular class work*

The lab instructor corrects the quizzes, records the grades and returns them immediately to the class instructor. The students receive the quizzes approximately one day later¹⁸. Each grammatical item of the question-answer and corresponding quiz tape is scheduled to be played *during* or *after* the time it is being presented in the class and never before. Library or audiopassive type labs can allow the question-answer or drill tapes to be distributed or dialed at any time, however, quiz tapes should be scheduled only on designated days.

At the end of the semester lab monitors hand over lab evaluations to the regular instructor. In borderline cases, the lab monitor confers briefly with the instructor to determine the most just solution possible.

RESULTS

Since very few students were repeating Spanish during the second year¹⁹ at Wisconsin, our reactions had to be measured first in terms of observation, enthusiasm, motivation, and student and teacher evaluations; and, second, in terms of whether or not we had actually satisfied points three and four²⁰ of the six conditions fundamental in effective language lab application. Based on reports written by the instructors, our results²¹ can be summarized with the following observations:

1. Lab monitors who had taught under the former system noticed a sharp increase in attendance and an improvement in enthusiasm and motivation during the lab sessions.

2. Previously limited to phonetic evaluation, the veteran lab instructors indicated their delight in basing their final evaluation not only on phonetics, but syntax and morphology as well. Although their work was executed in the lab, they now felt that they had exercised and participated in the total linguistic development of the Spanish student.

3. The consensus of experienced lab and MM instructors was that students, as a result of the coordination of practice and quiz tapes, could form complete Spanish sentences more readily.

4. Due to continuous practice in forming new and complete sentences, the student's pronunciation had also improved greatly.

5. "Veteran" MM instructors experienced a general improvement in the oral question-answer sessions and the oral-aural sections of their quizzes and hour exams.

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6. The weekly lab quizzes seemed to be a prime motivating factor. Both instructor and final student course evaluations confirmed that the grade stimulus was still quite strong with a majority of college students.

7. In comparison to the adverse reactions of the previous year, the language lab sections of the final student course evaluations²² were for the most part void of negative reactions of complaints about a lack of coordination between laboratory and regular classroom work. The few adverse comments polled dealt with the study of foreign language as a Liberal Arts degree requirement.

8. Although the course evaluations were anonymous, instructors were able to spot the surprisingly positive evaluations of those few students who had studied under the former system.

9. The lab director was able to report to the board of governors that the four new audio-active type labs were being used almost to full capacity during the day.

10. One former lab instructor, who is now an Assistant Professor at another University of Wisconsin campus, immediately incorporated the two sets of tapes into his beginning college classes. Their use has been extended to other Wisconsin state universities.

In addition to the third edition of *Modern Spanish*, the two sets of tapes were ordered for temporary use in the Intensive Spanish course offered at Wayne State University, Detroit. Students there attend the regular class three hours and the language lab one hour per day, four days a week for ten weeks. Once again, final student evaluations parallel the Wisconsin students' positive statements about the language lab session.

These two series of tapes are by no means the ultimate in supplementary lab materials. Many are in existence already. Creativity, need and the resourcefulness of the good foreign language teacher will produce other interesting and successful laboratory programs.

NOTES

¹Edward David Allen and Rebecca M. Valette, *Modern Language Classroom Techniques* (New York, 1972), p. 30

²Kenneth Chastain, *The Development of Modern Language Skills* (Philadelphia, 1971), p. 402.

³Allen and Valette, p. 30.

⁴An adequate amount of time would depend upon the general academic ability of the students. Edward M. Stack in the third edition of *The Language Laboratory and Modern Language Teaching* (New York, 1971), p. 141 suggests that "the best way to insert pauses of

proper length is to have the speaker say the answer to himself, allowing the "Cushion" of three counts".

⁵The lab monitor was without exception a competent graduate teaching assistant in the Spanish department (a policy which for economic reasons is not always the case at other universities).

⁶At the end of the semester, the students received a letter grade which was based on their phonetic performance and which constituted ten per cent of the course grade. Since they did not receive a list of their pronunciation errors, many students viewed this final lab mark as an attendance grade. Consequently although at least one third skipped the lab session entirely, the majority attended rather begrudgingly the weekly lab sessions which became hours of sheer boredom.

⁷Norma A. Garnett, "Making the Language Laboratory Effective," *Hispania* L (May, 1967), p. 319.

⁸Stack, p. 140 suggests that "pattern drills may be classed as (a) replacement (substitution), (b) transformation, (c) chain transformation, (d) paired sentence, (e) fixed increment, (f) analogy, and (g) questions drills".

⁹We include here the entire list of questions from tape SPI. 028.03 and the corresponding quizzes in tape SPI. 029.03:

1. ¿ Tienen Uds. hambre?
2. ¿ Viven Uds. cerca del parque central?
3. ¿ Entiende Ud. a su profesor de español?
4. ¿ Cuántos años debe tener su hermano?
5. ¿ Te gustan los frijoles negros?
6. ¿ Dónde están sus padres ahora?
7. ¿ Por qué tienen Uds. que volver pronto?
8. ¿ Recuerdan Uds. el número de la casa de María?
9. ¿ Qué Prefieren Uds., huevos o frutas?
10. ¿ Cuando trae usted el libro?
11. ¿ Qué hace usted con los muebles?
12. ¿ Cuando van Uds. al mercado?
13. ¿ Necesita Ud. regatear en el mercado?
14. ¿ Por qué no oyes nada?
15. ¿ Apagan Uds. el radio cuando sus hermanos estudian?
16. ¿ Por qué parece Ud. tan aburrido?
17. ¿ Quieren Uds. dejar algún recado?
18. ¿ Tiene Ud. ganas de estudiar?
19. ¿ Qué quieren Uds. hacer mañana?
20. ¿ Cuando vas a traerme el libro?
21. ¿ Qué pone Ud. en la lista?
22. ¿ Tú siempre le dices la verdad a tu papá?

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23. ¿ Ud. le da café a su hermano?
24. ¿ Pueden Uds. ir al mercado a las cinco de la tarde?
25. ¿ A quién miras ahora?

Quiz A:

1. ¿ Conoce Ud. a mi amigo Pablo Martínez?
2. ¿ Cuando van Uds. al mercado?
3. ¿ Cuando trae Ud. el libro?
4. ¿ Qué pone Ud. en la lista?
5. ¿ Qué quieren Uds. hacer mañana?

Quiz B:

1. ¿ Qué hace Ud. con los muebles?
2. ¿ A qué hora oyen Uds. el radio?
3. ¿ Qué prefieren Uds., huevos o frutas?
4. ¿ Te gustan los frijoles?
5. ¿ Por qué tienen Uds. que volver pronto?

¹⁰My personal observations, lab monitors' reports and the short quiz justify the statement that most students were able to provide their own correct answers

¹¹Approximately twenty to twenty-five seconds were allowed for direct questions.

¹²If the student remembers the correct tape answer, he has learned a structure which is generative and can be applied to similar utterances.

¹³Most of the lab monitors had taught under the rapid system and witnessed a change in performance and a lack of frustration. Our observation lead us to the conclusion that there was adequate time for all responses.

¹⁴Rebecca M. Valette and Renee S. Disick, *Modern Language Performance Objectives and Individualization* (New York, 1972), p. 78.

¹⁵Cf. note 9 for an exemplary quiz tape.

¹⁶The most common tenses used in the three contrary-to-fact clauses are:

1) *si*, plus the Present Indicative, results in the Future or its equivalent,

2) *si*, plus the Imperfect Subjunctive, results in the Conditional,

3) *si*, plus the Pluperfect Subjunctive, results in the Conditional Perfect or the Pluperfect Subjunctive.

¹⁷After the quiz is completed, the student is instructed to stop writing and hold up his quiz.

¹⁸If the laboratory system used is the library type or if the lab monitor is not competent in the foreign language, the lab department can send the quizzes to the foreign language departmental office.

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¹⁹Although these changes were implemented and used during the second year with a new group of beginning students, there were, in fact, several students who had to repeat 101, 102 or both courses that year. These students noticed a decisive improvement in the lab session and the coordination of the lab and MM sessions.

²⁰Excellence of program materials, closely related to classroom materials, and an efficient, valid testing and grading program.

²¹Since no comparable experiment appears to exist, our results, are subjective at best.

²²Similar results for course evaluations were polled by Sarita G. Schottta in "Student Evaluation and Foreign Language Programs: A Case Study," *Foreign Language Annals* VI, 4 (1973), pp. 500-519.