

What Do ESL Students Need from the Language Laboratory?

Effective Use of Technology in ESL

This needs analysis is primarily concerned with the effective use of technology in English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculums. The purpose of research was twofold: to begin short-term rejuvenation of the existing curriculum—with all of its restrictions of time, money and faculty attitudes—and to determine the needs of our faculty and students to aid in planning a new lab facility.

The Center for English as a Second Language (CESL)

At this point, a short explanation of our situation is in order. The Center for English as a Second Language (CESL) shares the current lab with the Department of Foreign Languages. There are 65 positions, run by an old Califone dial-access system. We have four Apple computers and a video viewing area. Our staff consists of a full-time director, technician, part-time coordinator for CESL and student workers. In terms of use of the lab, only CESL has scheduled lab classes daily (one hour) while the Foreign Language Department uses the lab on the library system, with students listening to tapes in the lab.

The Research Questionnaire

The questionnaire was intended to gauge out-of-class use of the lab, but it goes much further in indicating what interests and needs students have. It was also designed to highlight areas of improvement to be made in the curriculum.

There was a total of 488 respondents to the questionnaire, which was administered each of five terms, March to December 1988. It was presented during Week Five of the eight-week term to insure that students had had time to acquaint themselves with the lab and the materials available. Students answers were coded, tabulated and analyzed on DBase 3Plus.

The Results

The most interesting results of the questionnaire survey concerned the issues of how often students used the lab outside of class; what other materials would you like to have in the lab; and, what would make the lab better.

Twenty-three percent (23%) of the students indicated that they never use the lab. This is an area I have begun to address by planning better lab orientation sessions for the students, as well as more comprehensive training for the graduate students and faculty. These sessions highlight materials and facilities available as well as dispel discomfort about use of the lab.

When it comes to other materials students would like to see in the lab, interest in video was striking. No matter what the linguistic level of student, interest in video ranked first or second on everyone's list. At present, we have very limited video capabilities (two machines that go to the classroom, and a new seminar area within the lab office where video viewing is possible); instruction with video is an area that demands attention. This is also an area that is quickly becoming diverse, with many types of technology available.

What can make a lab better? Over half (51%) of respondents thought different materials would improve the lab. Twenty percent (20%) suggested additional equipment; twelve percent (12%) thought improvements in staff and hours would make the lab better, while five (5%) gave other suggestions. When asked what they would like to see, students responded as follows: Thirty-eight percent (38%) wanted a computer lab; thirty-one percent (31%) wanted a video lab; twenty four per cent (24%) wanted a teacher to help them individually; and seven percent (7%) wanted all of these additions. Judging by the responses, the results of this questionnaire are a strong call to materials developers to come up with new materials that exploit current pedagogical methodology. Much of what is available is reminiscent of the days of "pattern practice." These results are also a call to equipment developers to interact with classroom teachers to enhance the capabilities of the equipment and its efficiency in the teaching process.

Student Concerns Must Be Our Concerns

There are specific solutions to the problems and long term plans that we need to make in response to students' needs. At present we are attempting to integrate the lab into the curriculum through classroom assignments, promote out of class use of learning materials by means of a lending library of all materials in the curriculum, build a video library, and begin an off-the-air taping schedule to enhance both audio and video collections. The goal is the successful integration of all these ideas and needs in a new facility.

The greatest challenge is changing attitudes toward the lab, both on the part of faculty and students. Through efficient use of machinery and effective use of materials a productive integration of the lab is possible and will make the new technology a tireless partner in the teaching process.

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