

ATTITUDES TO THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY - A BRITISH PERSPECTIVE

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The results of a comparatively large-scale enquiry into the attitudes towards the language laboratory of a total sample of 1338 students in schools in one area of Great Britain are now available and could well be of interest to American teachers and educators concerned with the language laboratory. This investigation was conducted in 1972 in 40 schools in the East Midlands of the United Kingdom and is the biggest single study to date of attitudes to the language laboratory amongst English school students between the ages 12 and 16.

The questionnaire used in this survey (which was personally supervised by the researcher) consisted of three parts: a) 5 series of simplified Osgood-type bi-polar adjectival scales designed to test students' preferences for certain kinds of language activity in the language laboratory; b) a set of 56 two-way forced-choice questions (pre-recorded on tape to standardize presentation) appendix A enquiring into a range of attitudes to the language laboratory and requiring students simply to agree or disagree; c) a free-response section to cover any other attitudes that students might want to express.

In response to the first part of the questionnaire about language activities, students as a whole registered preferences in the following descending order: first - IMITATING FRENCH PRONUNCIATION (repetition exercises); second - ANSWERING QUESTIONS IN FRENCH (comprehension questions, conversation practice); third - LISTENING TO FRENCH (aural comprehension, transcription); fourth - PRACTISING FRENCH GRAMMAR (structure drills). A fifth activity - DESCRIBING STORIES OR PICTURES IN FRENCH (guided oral composition) was included in the test but results were not included in the final analysis as this activity was rarely practised in the schools visited. It is interesting to note in passing that structure drills which have been described as particularly suited to the language laboratory were placed last in preference by students.

The second part of the questionnaire which asked students simply to agree or disagree with a whole range of attitudinal statements gave a mass of findings too complex to summarize in a few words. However, two broad conclusions which may seem paradoxical emerge from the data. First, it is clear that a majority of students appreciate the laboratory generally, as is shown by the total number of agreements on the following statements:

- No. 1. "Using the lab makes a welcome change from classwork" 84.8%
- No. 14. "I should like to use the lab more often" 54.0%
- No. 2. "I would not mind if we stopped using the lab" 37.0%
(i.e. 63% of students agree that they would miss the lab if they stopped using it). Despite this general vote of confidence in the language laboratory fewer students were willing to agree that they had made definite progress in linguistic performance:
- No. 23. "I feel that my French accent has definitely got better with the lab" 54.9%
- No. 29. "The lab has built up my confidence in speaking French" 50.4%
- No. 5. "The lab makes you able to answer in French more quickly" 42.5%
- No. 16. "The lab has improved my understanding of French a lot" 35.9%
- No. 32. "The lab has helped my knowledge of French grammar a lot" 28.4%
- No. 10. "The lab has been a great help with my written classwork" 17.3%

While language laboratory enthusiasts may be disappointed by some of these figures, it is perhaps significant that **gains in aspects of speech production** head the list of self-assessed progress.

The free-response section of the questionnaire predictably came up with a variety of comments shedding new light on the laboratory but which cannot easily be summed up here. A few remarks illustrate the range of responses noted:

- "The earphones stick into my earrings and I cannot wear them in the lab."
- "Please can someone invent left-handed booths - please!"
- "We would get in the lab more often if we had a definite day each week"
- "I thoroughly enjoy working with the lab as though I rule over it."

These are the very broad outlines of this piece of research. There is not enough space here to mention the variations of response according to the differing determinants of sex, age, school-type, or attitude to the French language. Nor can we cover the results of interviews with teachers in these schools. Even though generalisations from one situation to another are to be avoided, particularly in comparing the British and American situations, it is to be hoped that these findings may add to the present pool of experience in operating the language laboratories in our schools.

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¹(An abstract of a thesis presented at the University of Leicester in 1975
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QUESTIONNAIRE ON PUPILS' ATTITUDES TO THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY

- 1) Using the lab makes a welcome change from classwork.
- 2) I would not mind if we stopped using the lab.
- 3) We do not use the lab often enough to make it worth while.
- 4) You can usually hear the sound of the French more clearly through
the earphones than you can from an ordinary tape-recorder in class.
- 5) The lab makes you able to answer in French more quickly.
- 6) There does not seem to be enough air in the room and the atmos-
phere often gets very stuffy.
- 7) When the teacher is not listening in you are easily tempted to slack
and waste the time.
- 8) The lab often gives me a rather unpleasant feeling of being cut off
from the rest of the class.
- 9) I often find I am repeating the right answers without understanding
what I am saying.
- 10) The lab has been a great help with my written classwork.
- 11) We often get questions which can have more than one possible
answer so that we do not know which one the machine wants.

- 12) Often the gaps for the answer are too long.
- 13) The possibility that the teacher might listen in at any moment makes me very nervous.
- 14) I should like to use the lab more often.
- 15) Often you can not hear the sound of the voice properly because the recording is so faint.
- 16) The lab has improved my understanding of French a lot.
- 17) The lab usually gives me a real headache.
- 18) You can usually hear the sound of the French more clearly through the earphones than you can from a teacher in class.
- 19) Lab lessons do not seem long enough for us to take in all we are given.
- 20) With the lab you get a lot more individual help from the teacher than you do in class.
- 21) When it comes to repeating a phrase I often forget the beginning of it.
- 22) When the teacher interrupts me to point out a mistake it often makes me lose the thread of what we are doing.
- 23) I feel that my French accent has definitely got better with the lab.
- 24) On your own in the lab you do not feel such a fool when you make a mistake.
- 25) In the lab I feel as though we are not corrected enough by the teacher.
- 26) All the funny noises from the machine get on your nerves.
- 27) The fact that in the lab you can not learn from the mistakes and good points of the rest of the class is a big disadvantage for me.
- 28) The lab helps you concentrate solidly so that by the end you feel you have worked really well.
- 29) The lab has built up my confidence in speaking French.
- 30) We do not seem to practise the work enough before doing it with the lab.
- 31) When the tape continues without stopping it helps keep your mind on what you are supposed to be doing.
- 32) The lab has helped my knowledge of French grammar a lot.
- 33) Lab exercises usually seem to be about very dull and uninteresting subjects compared with class exercises.
- 34) The other pupils' voices speaking all around you often put you off.
- 35) The points we learn in the lab come in very useful afterwards in classwork.
- 36) Often when I am repeating something my mind wanders off so that I am just answering mechanically.
- 37) There do not seem to be as many varieties of lab work as there are of classwork.
- 38) The mere fact of being shut inside a booth makes me feel uneasy and restless.

- 39) Saying the same phrases over and over again in the lab makes the French come more naturally.
- 40) It would be easier to understand the French if we could see it written down more often.
- 41) Often the gaps for the answer are so short you are too busy working out the meaning to bother much with the pronunciation.
- 42) The earphones get so uncomfortable they often stop you concentrating.
- 43) The thought that the teacher might listen in at any moment is good for your concentration throughout the lesson.
- 44) Doing again in the lab something you have gone over before in class is usually very helpful.
- 45) Often the spaces for the answer are nowhere near long enough for you to think and fit in all the words in time.
- 46) The lab forces you to concentrate so hard that you often feel utterly brainwashed by the end.
- 47) The fact that the lab usually gives you the chance to speak more French than in class is a big advantage for me.
- 48) I enjoy working the controls of the machine.
- 49) When you have done an exercise with the lab once you lose interest giving the answers a second time.
- 50) Looking at all the buttons and switches on the machine takes my mind off what we are supposed to be doing.
- 51) Most of the time with the lab you are learning at a speed that suits your own ability.
- 52) I often find I have trouble getting the machine to do what I want it to do.
- 53) I find it very helpful listening to the difference between my version and the correct French on the tape.
- 54) When you have done an exercise with the lab once it gets boring hearing your answers played back again.
- 55) I am often scared that something might go wrong with my machine any minute.
- 56) I like hearing what I sound like speaking French on the tape.