

FUNCTIONS OF THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE LABORATORY IN THE JUNIOR COLLEGES OF FLORIDA

Catherine H. Sorensen
Okaloosa-Walton Junior College

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study of the foreign language laboratories in the junior colleges of Florida was threefold: (a) To make a survey of the physical equipment of the language laboratories; (b) To make a study of the utilization of the laboratories; (c) To make an analysis of the beliefs regarding foreign language instruction of the junior college language teachers.

Procedures

Language laboratories were defined as belonging to three categories: (a) Listen-Speak-Record laboratories with a magnetic recorder that permits student recording; (b) Listen-Speak laboratories with activated headphones permitting students to hear their own voices; (c) Listen laboratories with electronic equipment for listening only.

Two media were employed in gathering data: A questionnaire on the physical aspects and general utilization of the laboratory and a loosely structured interview with language instructors.

Involved in the study were the 29 junior colleges of Florida--public, private, Negro, and white--that offered courses in modern foreign language during the first semester of the school year of 1963-1964. The questionnaire was sent out to the language departments of the 16 among these junior colleges that had a language program at that time. Seventeen questionnaires were filled out and returned by representatives of these junior colleges, as one of the 16 junior colleges had two language laboratories. The information on these questionnaires formed the basis for the findings as to the nature of the physical equipment of the language laboratories and for part of the material presented regarding the general utilization of the language laboratories.

The interview was employed with 70 modern language instructors who were regarded as regular faculty members of the junior colleges included in the study. There were two forms of this interview: (a) Interview A, used for the 50 instructors in the 26 junior colleges that had language laboratories, and (b) Interview B, used for the 20 instructors in the junior colleges that did not have language laboratories at the time of the study. The data obtained through

the interviews contributed part of the information on the general utilization of the language laboratory and also formed the basis for the discussion of the beliefs of the junior college instructors regarding instruction in modern foreign language. In preparation for these interviews, the writer studied the background literature on the topics of the methodology of instruction in modern foreign languages, linguistics, the psychology of language learning, and the role of the language laboratory in language instruction. The writer recorded the interviews in shorthand and then summarized the interview summary sheets. Both forms of the interview included the topics of the training and experience of the language instructors, their goals and objectives of language instruction, and the implementation of these goals and objectives through methods and materials. Interview A included the additional topic of implementation of goals and objectives through the use of a language laboratory. In Interview B this topic was replaced by a discussion of plans for the installation of language laboratory or a discussion of the reasons that led to a decision not to install a language laboratory in four junior colleges.

Findings

Some generalizations indicated by examination of responses to the questionnaire and interviews are as follows.

Eight laboratories are Listen-Speak-Record laboratories with mean cost of \$9,530.12 and mean number of student positions of 21.12; seven Listen Speak laboratories with mean cost of \$7,120.00 and mean number of student positions of 26.4; and two are Listen laboratories.

The most common scheduling arrangement for language laboratories is for students to be assigned as members of groups for extra periods of laboratory practice each week. This arrangement is in effect in 8 language laboratories. Three schedule students as individuals for extra practice; two use the laboratories only during regular classes; and three junior colleges encourage voluntary extra practice in addition to class use of the language laboratories. Six junior colleges require two laboratory periods a week as extra contact hours of language experience in addition to regular class work in language, and five junior colleges require one extra period of practice each week.

The 70 junior college instructors were in agreement on three basic beliefs that determined their teaching practices: (a) Language is fundamentally speech; (b) Language is a communication skill to be acquired by the student; (c) Instruction in language also entails the development of understanding of the culture of the peoples who speak that language.

The 70 junior college instructors were in agreement as to the importance of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing as specific objectives of instruction in modern foreign language, for even the 10 instructors who did not mention them in their statement of specific objectives indicated by their statements on their teaching practices that they actually do emphasize the development of these skills. Cultural insight was recognized as a goal at all levels of instruction. Half of the instructors stressed the importance of the objectives of development of pronunciation, acquisition of vocabulary, and acquaintance with the structures of form and arrangement in the foreign language.

The commonest approach to language instruction, one named by 49 of the 70 instructors, is a "modified audio-lingual approach." This claim to the practice of a "modified audio-lingual approach" coincides with the expressed beliefs of 40 of these instructors that the audio-lingual approach means different things at different instructional levels. Reading and writing receive more and earlier emphasis in first-year language work in junior college than they would receive at the level of the secondary school. Twenty-one of these instructors stated that their modification of the audio-lingual approach was due to the higher maturity level of junior college students as compared with high school students; nineteen of these instructors, however, stated that their modification was due to their belief that junior college students are not so "motivated" toward their work as students in universities and four-year colleges. Eleven instructors stated that they follow the audio-lingual approach.

The instructors in the junior colleges that have language laboratories and the instructors in the junior colleges that do not have language laboratories mentioned similar values of language laboratories. They mentioned the following values, which are listed here in the order of the frequency of instructors naming them with the number included in parentheses: extra contact with the target language (61); constant practice of all students at the same time (61); listening to a variety of voices (33); provision for individual differences (32); listening to recordings of literary material (29); use in advanced classes through listening for acquisition of native-like comprehension of the language (25); avoiding of endless repetition of practice material by teacher (22); reinforcement of correct response (19); student recording for testing purposes (18); and student recording for purposes of practice through students' comparison of recording with model (11).

Of the 50 instructors in the junior colleges that have language laboratories, only seven were basically satisfied with the operation of their laboratories. The remaining 43 indicated dissatisfaction in certain areas with the operation of their laboratories.

The following reasons for dissatisfaction were mentioned: Not enough extra contact hours (39); failure to provide adequately for individual differences because of exclusive use of group practice (17); no scientifically constructed tests for evaluating audio-lingual skill (11); preference for a tape recorder rather than an expensive language laboratory (10); belief that machine cannot interact with students (10); no techniques for evaluating success of laboratory (8); and failure to provide for individual as well as group practice (2). Seventeen instructors expressed dissatisfaction with their materials, both textbooks and recordings, and expressed the opinion that the materials were not suited to the maturity level of the scheduling pattern of the junior college.

There was marked disagreement among the 24 instructors with Listen-Speak-Record laboratories and the 9 instructors with Listen-Speak laboratories having some recording positions as to the values of student recording or their satisfaction with their own recording practices. The instructors of only three junior colleges were completely satisfied with the use they were making of their recording equipment. The instructors of four other junior colleges stated that they were reasonably well satisfied with the use made of their equipment for student recording. In three junior colleges the recording equipment was used for testing alone, in six junior colleges it was used for recording of practice material, and in two junior colleges it was not being used at all for regular day classes.

Problems of maintenance were most commonly mentioned in Listen-Speak-Record laboratories or in the Listen-Speak laboratories with some recording positions.

In the nine junior colleges where plans are being made for the eventual installation of a language laboratory, the Listen-Speak laboratory is mentioned as the most probable choice by representatives of seven junior colleges.

In the matter of whether a specific instructor was responsible for general laboratory supervision, there were three arrangements found in the junior colleges. By the commonest plan, found in eight junior colleges, a specific instructor was in general charge of laboratory operation but without the release of any time from a full teaching schedule for the performance of duties of general laboratory supervision. In only three junior colleges did the laboratory supervisor have any released time--one class assignment per week in each case--to serve as laboratory supervisor. In the other five junior colleges all instructors were equally responsible for the operation of the language laboratory.

Implications

An inspection of the findings of this study, which deals only with Florida junior colleges, indicates that there is need for consideration of problems in several areas of language instruction related to the utilization of the language laboratory in the junior colleges of Florida. The following needs may be listed.

1. Study is required to determine the distinctive features of language instruction at the junior college level, as the opinions of the instructors interviewed reflect disagreement in this area. The following questions require consideration: (a) How should the objectives and methodology of beginning instruction in modern foreign languages differ from those at the high school or four-year college or university level? (b) What should be a satisfactory modification of the audio-lingual approach to suit students of the maturity level of junior college? (c) What should be the proportion of emphasis placed on the development of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing at the junior college level?

2. The role of the language laboratory as a tool for implementing the distinctive objectives of instruction in modern foreign languages at the junior college level needs additional study as indicated by the fact that only 7 out of 50 instructors were basically satisfied with the operation of their laboratory. The following questions demand clarification: (a) Which is more effective at junior college level: a library type of laboratory utilization or a group assignment type of utilization? (b) How frequently and for how long should students practice with electronic equipment each week? (c) Would a combination of a group and individual use of a laboratory be desirable? (d) What are the implications for choice of equipment to be derived from the answer to these last two questions?

3. A need, mentioned by 17 instructors, exists for the development of materials suitable for the maturity level of the students and also for the distinctive scheduling pattern of junior colleges, which varies from the high school arrangement of five regularly scheduled periods of instruction per week.

4. A need is evidenced for in-service training of junior college instructors in the use of the most modern electronic equipment and materials, as 37 out of the 70 language instructors interviewed expressed an opinion that they would like to attend an NDEA institute to gain such training and that they regret being ineligible for attendance at these institutes.

5. Need is displayed for research on the most effective manner of utilizing a language laboratory since the instructors interviewed stated that their opinions are based on theories rather than upon experimental evidence for the most part.