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## Activities for the Language Laboratory<sup>1</sup>

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The language laboratory has features which make it a valuable supplement to the classroom. Let us examine one exercise that makes use of most of these features and then look at other exercises that use them in a variety of ways. This article argues that when the language laboratory is not used on a library basis, exercises should contain these features. If this does not happen then the language laboratory becomes merely a substitute for the classroom, using exercises that could be performed better in the classroom.

First let us look briefly at using the laboratory with a library system and then at using the laboratory with all learners in the class doing the same exercise. With a library system, learners can choose which tape they will use and in some cases they can choose when they will work in the laboratory. When both of these conditions apply, then work in the lab can supplement classroom or it can be an alternative to some of the classroom work. The library system brings a great deal of flexibility to language learning and one of the requirements of the system is that there should be a large amount of varied material for learners to choose from. However, when the lab is used with all the class doing the same exercise at the same time, flexibility is lost and other features of the lab justify its use.

### Features of the lab

Now let us illustrate these features by examining an exercise that makes use of them. In the oral dictation exercise the learners listen to a taped text which has a pause after each word group of five to seven words. This type of recording is sometimes called an 'exploded' text because the inserted pauses make the text bigger. (That is, they 'explode' it.) The learners listen to the text as many times as they wish and after each group of words they repeat the group aloud to record them in the pause. They listen and compare their efforts with the original and make any necessary changes by recording again.

This exercise practises listening and speaking which are the two activities most suited to lab work. But the learners can work with material which is more difficult than the material that they usually meet in the classroom. This is because they can listen to the material as many times as they wish and can replay difficult parts until they master them. If learners need only to go through

a taped exercise once in order to do it correctly then they are not using their time in the laboratory to the best advantage.

The replay facility of the tape recorder allows learners to listen to difficult material many times in order to help them understand it. It also allows them to listen critically to their own performance in order to improve it. By recording, listening critically, and recording again they are able to perform better in the lab than they could in the classroom.

The lab also allows learners to record and re-record without erasing the model. Thus in the oral dictation exercise the learners always have a standard that they can compare their performance with and this will lead to improvement of their own performance.

Because the learners are working with pre-recorded material, the voice on the tape need not be the teacher's voice and the lab can introduce the learners to a variety of speakers of English. Thus the difficulty of the material can be increased by using unfamiliar voices and dialects.

The replay facility and the continual presence of a model are lab features that make listening and speaking exercises easier. This means that material which would be difficult in the classroom can be done in the laboratory. The oral dictation exercise could be made difficult by using an unfamiliar speaker, by having moderately long groups of words, and by using some unfamiliar vocabulary. This balancing of difficulty against the use of replay and an ever-present model ensures that use of the lab has the most value for the learners.

#### **Exercises for listening**

Let us now look at other lab exercises which use these features to help learners deal with difficult material. We will look at listening exercises first.

- (1) Instead of speaking onto the tape in the oral dictation exercise described above, the learners write what they hear. This makes the exercise like the traditional dictation exercise except that the material used can be fairly difficult and the length and speed of the word groups can be increased.
- (2) There is a variation of dictation which relies heavily on the replay facility of the laboratory. The learners listen to a recorded text which has no specially inserted pauses and they make a written copy of it. This exercise is particularly easy for a teacher to prepare. It takes only a few minutes to record a short text, but this provides a great deal of work for the learners.
- (3) Commercially recorded tapes of unrehearsed conversation (Crystal and Davy 1975, Dickinson and Mackin 1969, Under-

wood 1975) can be used in an editing exercise. These texts contain performance errors and other features typical of unrehearsed speech. The learner listens and makes a written record of the material omitting false starts, hesitation phenomena, immediately repeated words, and intonacy signals, and tries to correct the grammar. Brown (1978) and Dickin-son (1970) describe some of these features. This exercise makes the learners aware of these features and helps them see the 'ideal' text.

- (4) The dictation exercise with no inserted pauses can be made more difficult by reducing the amount of redundancy on the tape. This redundancy protects the message and makes it easier for a listener to follow what is being said. The redundancy can be reduced by adding continuous background noise (white noise) to the tape, by occasionally adding noise like a cough or a buzz so that some words cannot be heard and must be guessed, and by cutting sections out of the tape at regular intervals and splicing the tape together again. The reduced redundancy increases the difficulty and forces the listeners to give more attention to the clues that remain.

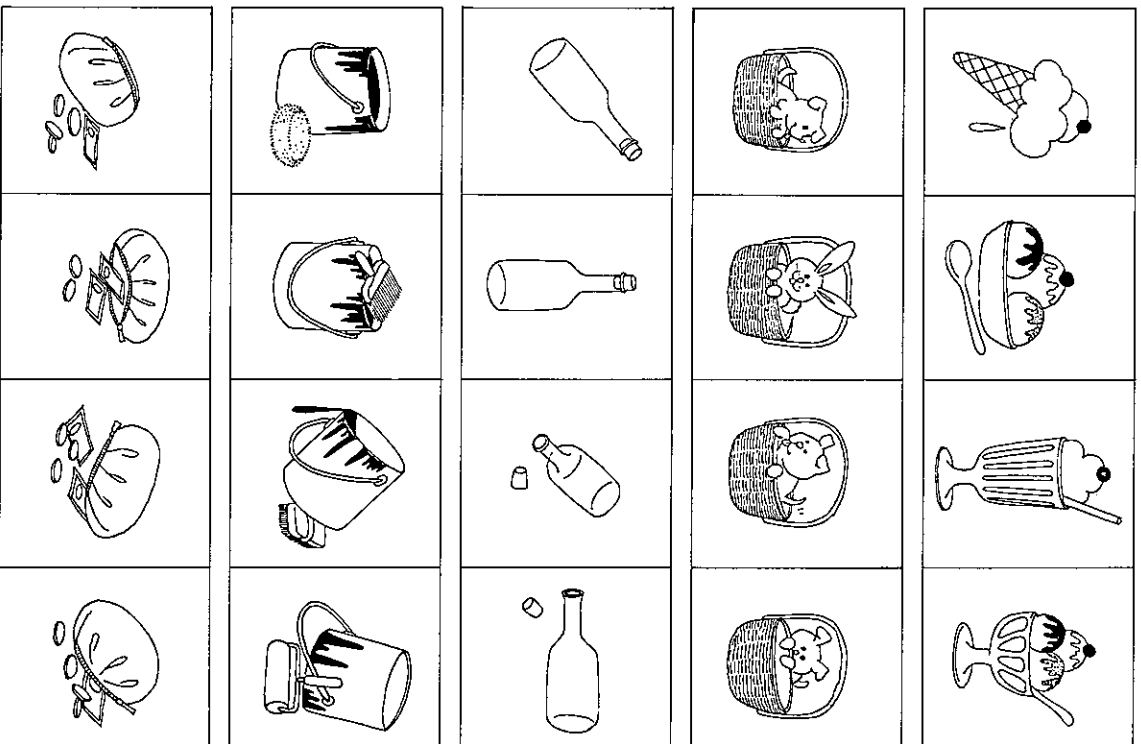
#### Exercises for speaking

Speaking exercises in the laboratory rely heavily on the learners' ability to monitor their own performance.

- (1) The oral dictation exercise makes use of an exploded model on the tape. A similar exercise can make use of an unexploded model. The learners have a written script of the model on the tape. They listen and follow the script. Then they make their own recording of the script. They can practise as much as they like before recording, and they can record and erase until they are satisfied with their recording. The exercise is more difficult if there is no model on the tape and the learners have only the written text to work from. Whitson (1978) suggests using this as a way of testing pronunciation. Difficulty is further increased if the learners do not have a special model or written text but have only a picture, map, or real object to describe. The aim of the exercise is for the learners to become critical of their own performance and to make improvement by re-recording and eliminating previous mistakes.

- (2) The exercise just described can become the basis for a combining arrangement exercise (Nation 1977). Each learner has a picture to describe. The learners record their descrip-

tions, listen to them, and re-record until they are satisfied with their performance. Then they change places and listen to the description recorded on the tape. Each learner must then decide if the description she is listening to refers to the same picture that she described on her tape or a different one. The learners can then change places again and listen to other descriptions. Here are some sets of pictures that could be used.



Each learner of course receives only one from a set of pictures and the pictures are distributed at random. Some learners have the same picture. Each learner keeps his picture well hidden from the other learners. This exercise has several advantages. It involves both speaking and listening for the communication of necessary information. It allows learners to compare their descriptions with other learners' descriptions and learn from the comparison. As well as this the exercise is fun.

### Observing learning

All the exercises described here provide an opportunity for the teacher or teacher trainees to observe learning. For example when a learner does the dictation without inserted pauses, the teacher can sit next to the learner and watch the improvement that occurs through each replay of the tape. When the learner mis-hears a word and writes it, is this word changed as a result of repeated listening or does the mistake persist? Why are some parts of the dictation more difficult than others? Are some parts of the dictation impossible to do? How many replays are made before there is no more improvement?

The exercises in this article are particularly suited to language laboratory work because they give the learner a chance to tackle difficult material, cope with it, and learn from it by making use of the facilities provided by the laboratory. The teacher should also use this chance to discover more about the learners and the exercises that they do.

### Note

1. Editor's Note: The usefulness of this article is not confined to the language laboratory situation. The listening exercises could be adapted to a mini-lab or carried out with a simple tape or cassette player. The picture describing exercise would also be suitable for group work.

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