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Pair Practice in the Language Laboratory: The MEDIATEC

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Pair Practice in the Language Laboratory: The MEDIATEC[1]

A MEDIATEC is a language learning format in which pairs of students have direct access to their own study materials (books, tapes, and one tape recorder per pair) and study *in pairs* as part of a larger group under the general coordination of a teacher-coordinator-monitor-animator[2]. The MEDIATEC is possible in any classroom equipped with an adequate number of tape recorders, or in any language laboratory equipped with a *Pair Lesson* function[3].

Pair Practice in the Language Laboratory

Anyone who has ever used a language laboratory has noticed at least two major problems:

1. Affectivity is close to zero.
2. Most beginning students have not yet learned to even notice, let alone correct, their own mistakes.

The contrast with pair practice is obvious. It is *fun* to work with a class-mate and boredom is thereby eliminated. Since two heads are indeed often better than one, students' chances of thoroughly understanding the material are enhanced. And since it is easier to recognize another's mistakes than to recognize one's own (and since doing so is a helpful step in learning to recognize one's own mistakes), it is likely that each pair will soon learn to be self-sufficient and self-correcting.

The Cybernetic Classroom

The word 'cybernetic' comes from the Greek word 'kuberneiteis' and means 'helmsman' or 'steersman' (i.e., as of a boat).

Cybernetics usually refers to control functions in sophisticated machinery, but it can equally be used to refer to the way in which human beings use feedback to correct their actions – in the present case, *speech* actions.

If we can train our students to function more and more *efficiently*, by first learning to direct (i.e., 'steer') their partners and eventually themselves, we will have the ultimate in cost-effective (i.e., maximum productivity at minimum cost) language education.

When students have learned to function semi-independently in this way, we have what may be thought of as a *Cybernetic Classroom*.

Language Learning

Efficient language learning requires three principal conditions[4]:

1. Absence from Anxiety
2. Affectivity and Attention
3. Activity

Anxiety in language learning stems from a variety of causes:

1. The mere presence of the teacher can cause anxiety in many learners.
2. Performing before a large number of people, as in a language class, is anxiety-provoking.
3. Fear of correction is inhibiting.
4. Anxiety is created when one
   a. does not know what to do,
   b. does not understand the material,
   c. and/or can not keep up with other students.

Although most readers will recognize that the state approaching panic[5] which some students experience when asked to perform is not conducive to

learning, it is interesting to note that at least one kind of anxiety can be the result of *boredom*. This occurs when the 'good' student finds his attention wandering, becomes anxious, and — precisely because he is a 'good' (i.e., well-intentioned, motivated, and disciplined) student — *forces himself to concentrate*. Unfortunately, it has been determined that forced concentration of this sort greatly *reduces* learning efficiency[6], a finding which will be new to almost everyone and distressing to many.

Affectivity, which we take to mean the presence of feeling, involvement, and interest, guarantees *attention*. Compare the reading of a dull study assignment with that of your first love-letter to get an idea of the role of affectivity. It is clear that the student who is mechanically repeating and/or doing substitution drills in a language lab may not be particularly anxious, but he is usually not very involved, either[7]. Likewise, the student in the back of the lab reading the latest comic book or studying for another class is probably relatively relaxed, but his attention to the learning task at hand is zero. Obviously, learning in either situation is either non-existent or minimal.

Speaking *activity* is so essential in developing production ability that at least one recent study[9] has shown that there is a direct correlation between the number of hours students practice speaking and their scores on a production measure.

The problem in this case is that in most language classes the teacher speaks about one half of the time. The other half of the class time is allotted to the students, *with usually only one student speaking at any given moment*. It is therefore unlikely that individual students get more than one to two minutes speaking time per class on the average, in a class of 20 or more students. This may be no more than *about 30 minutes of speaking a year* in some cases.

The Answer

If a class of 30 students works in pairs 95% of the class time, you have, not

one class divided into 15 groups, but *15 distinct classes of two members each.* Since conversation/communication requires at least two people, you have the minimum in this respect. Since more than two increases inhibition and lowers individual activity, you also have the maximum from another point of view.

Even the most active teacher can not possibly spend more than an average of six minutes with each such group during a 90-minute class period, but those six minutes will provide the most individualized (and least embarrassing to the learner) error correction the students have ever experienced, since nobody else will be listening, or paying the least attention whatsoever.

Self-Access Materials

Not to be confused with self-study materials, *self-access materials* are really *pair-teaching materials*, so that over 95% of the work can be handled by groups of two or three students working together in constant activity. Instructions on performing the exercises are provided on the tapes, in student texts, in a special manual in the students' language[9], and by the instructor. Materials of this sort are available in a course called THRESHOLD[10] (available in five languages: British and American English, French, Spanish, German, and Italian) which provides 300 hours of intensive pair work.

Each student requires a text and each pair needs the cassette tape which is being worked on at that point.

The Mechanical Procedure

1. Students don their headsets and *turn sideways*, so that the members of each pair face each other.
2. The instructor activates the Pair Lesson function by throwing the Pair Lesson toggle switch to the right.
3. The members of each pair may now converse *through their headsets*, without interference from other pairs. The teacher can also monitor

any pair by simply monitoring either member.

4. One member of each pair may now activate his tape recorder by pressing the Practice control or the Forward/Play control. It is important to note that language labs differ in this respect, since in some labs it is impossible for students to hear each other in the Forward/Play mode. A little experimentation will smooth over this difficulty.

5. Both members of the pair can now hear their tape and each other, and the teacher can monitor their practice.

The Methodological Process: Zero Lesson, Demonstration, Assist, and Release

The *zero lesson* is a preliminary explanation of the MEDIATEC approach, the *what, how*, and *why*. Students want to know in advance what they are going to be expected to do, and how and why they are going to do it. This is also an important time for the teacher to convey the impression that he *knows what he is doing*. Lozanov points out that learning increases if the students' confidence in the approach and in their teacher is enhanced[11].

It is important that the students *understand the content* of the zero lesson. If, therefore, the teacher is unable to speak their language, he should avail himself of an interpreter. In no case should he try to give such an explanation to a beginning class in the target language. If no interpreter is available, the teacher may simply have the students read the methodological overview section in the *VADEMECUM*[12].

The *demonstration* is provided by the voices on the tape, to which, at first, the students simply listen. The analogy is clear if you think of anything that you have ever learned - how to drive, ski, or type, for example. First, you *see* (or, as in the present case, *hear* someone *do* whatever it is that you are going to work on. This gives you an overview of the task and provides you with a feel for the integration of the whole.

The *assist* is also provided by the tape. At this stage, students do their best

to repeat what they hear, even though not always successfully. A parent may hold up the toddler who is trying to walk, but one would have to be very generous to call the result 'walking'. Still, it is a beginning.

The *release* is accomplished at the students' own pace, and each pair is left on its own to determine its own rate of progression. The students have three aids in their enjoyable task: the book, each other, and recourse to the teacher - but this last only when necessary, which it usually is not.

Two things important for both teacher and student to remember about the release are that

1. the time involved is often greater than one would imagine. In an analogy with typewriting, it is clear that, compared with demonstration and assist, the actual practice, or release, may require *tens of times* the amount of time that the other two do together. It may be noted that adequate release, or practice, is precisely what students usually do *not* get in a language course.

2. what we can call the 'threshold of satisfaction' largely determines how efficiently the students will learn. It is possible to *repeat* over and over again without learning much of anything[13]. It is only when the students work with *awareness* of what they themselves and their partners are doing that learning occurs. This attitude of care may be nurtured by the instructor.

Students soon learn to demand higher standards of each other and of themselves. They begin to pay closer and closer attention to error detection and correction, and this focus itself generates increased energy and motivation. They are no longer simply repeating; they are now actively, even agressively, engaged in the far more exciting task of *teaching each other*.

It is when the students themselves voluntarily begin to spend more time to ensure greater care in their practice that we can say that they have raised their threshold of satisfaction.

The Teacher's Role in a MEDIATEC

Linguistically, the teacher need *not* be a native speaker of the language he is teaching, since the materials themselves do most of the *demonstrating* and *assisting*, and the students in each pair aid each other to achieve understanding, accuracy, and fluency. It is desirable that the teacher know the language better than his students do, but even this is not absolutely necessary. The teacher does *almost no teaching of the language*, but he may provide valuable assistance by monitoring and correcting student language, if he is able to do so.

Attitudinally, the teacher must be prepared to 'get out of the way'[14] and let them get on with it. Curran says that most teachers are 'sick to teach'[15] and that, to paraphrase St. Paul, the teacher must 'decrease' (i.e., withdraw or diminish) that his students may 'increase' (i.e., flourish or gain in strength).

Professionally, the teacher must have a thorough understanding of the materials and of his language laboratory equipment. This means doing as much initial preparation as possible, preferably including observation(s) of a successful ongoing class. This may be followed by a few experimental sessions with a small group, with the expectation that mistakes in coordination will be made, but not fatal ones.

1. The teacher's primary job is to make sure that each pair knows what it is supposed to be doing all of the time, and that each pair is functioning relatively efficiently most of the time. The fact that the students may be making numerous linguistic mistakes is secondary at this stage. *If the students are doing what they are supposed to be doing, they will soon learn to correct each other with a high degree of efficiency.*

2. The teacher's second job is to *animate* the class. He must nudge, encourage, or cajole students into action. They must get moving and keep moving. This is rarely a problem once the students get over their initial hesitation at working in this new way, since they then begin to

have fun learning together. The important thing is that they always know what they are supposed to be doing and how to do it.

A Final Word

It is by no means necessary that all work be done in the lab booths, since many pair exercises do not require the tapes at all. This kind of work increases as students become able to handle the language more freely. Once they have learned to work independently in pairs, they may move around in the corridors, or even outside.

As regards equipment, it is best to approach the lab with the attitude that if anything can go wrong, it probably will. Know your lab, and be prepared for eventualities.

Imagination is sometimes required to cope with unexpected situations. A student may be absent one day, leaving his partner without anyone to work with. In this case, the best remedy is to get an extra tape recorder from the lab office, borrow a pair of students from your class, and have them work as a group of three, off to one side.

Students at Osaka University of Foreign Studies like this way of working so much that they have incorporated it into some of their extra-curricular language study activities.

I like it, too.

Notes

1. MEDIATEC is both a word and a concept developed at the CEEL (Centre for the Experimentation and Evaluation of Language Learning Techniques) in Geneva, Switzerland.
2. See the discussion of the teacher's role in a language laboratory MEDIATEC later in this article.
3. It is important to note that not all language laboratories are equipped with this

function. The interesting reason why this is so may include the fact that, although providing the function itself is no great problem for the hardware technicians, its possibilities have received scant attention from materials developers and teachers. It is probably not too much to say that the Pair Lesson function as used in the MEDIATEC provides us with the most humanistic and student-centered learning ever seen in the language laboratory.

4. Ferguson, 1980, *Passim*.
5. Eysenck, 1962, p. 203.

   ... conditioning is related to anxiety for the simple reason that it has been shown conclusively that the ease with which a conditioned reflex is formed depends very much on the anxiety of the person on whom the experiment is being performed. What is more, there is a good deal of what is called "stimulus generalization" in the anxious person.

6. Ferguson, (1980, p. 38) says that "It has been shown experimentally (Lozanov, 1967 and 1975; Toy, 1973; Pashmakova, 1975) that a state of high cortical vigilance, whether from anxiety or concentration, reduces the ability to learn."
7. Lamendella, 1979, p. 18:

   As an efficient means of performing a repetitious cognitive task not related to communicative interactions, many learners functionally disassociate the speech copying circuit from higher level language systems during pattern-practice drills.

8. Ferguson, 1982.
9. VADEMECUM, produced by the CEEL for use with THRESHOLD. The Japanese version is available from DIDASKO LEARNING CENTER, 6-7-31-611, Itachibori, Nishi-ku, Japan 550.

   A Vademecum is defined as a "book, manual, or guide that a person regularly carries with him for frequent use." From the Latin *vade mecum*, "go with me."

10. Ferguson, 1982b.
11. Racle, 1976, p. 155.

    The more prestige the source of the information has, the better the recipient will accept and retain the information.

    This prestige and credibility must be present in ... the material, the method, the documents used in teaching, and above all in the teacher. Everything must have the same orientation so as to engender in the student a total confidence contributing to his development.

12. For example:

外国語学習のための道しるべ

道しるべ　1.　ルール

　まず，このシリーズを使って学習する時に，必ず守っていただきたいルールが
あります。それは

(1)　だれか他の人と一緒に学習すること。

(2)　テープに吹き込まれている説明や，この「ワデーメークム」の説明に正し
く従うこと。

(3)　練習のための音楽が聞えてくれば，テープを止めて，もう一人の人と満足
するまで練習すること。

以上のことは，最も基本となる約束ごとです。必ず守って下さい。

13. Lamendella, 1979, *passim.*
14. Gattegno (1972) calls it the "subordination of teaching to learning."
15. Curran (1977, p. 114) says that "an ancient philosopher speaks of the creative thinker as being 'sick to teach'".

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