

Using The Language Lab: New Approaches

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One of the most successful tools for learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is the somewhat under-utilized language lab. Due to continual advancements in educational technology, with more and more sophisticated learning materials being made available in the form of CD ROMs, e-mail and the internet, the language lab is rapidly becoming obsolete as a learning tool. Traditional audio-lingual methods of using language lab facilities may illustrate the lab's shortcomings as a language learning device. Consequently, the activities that are usually done in the lab tend to be repetitive and unstimulating for students.

Used in the traditional way, the lab offers few opportunities to enhance critical thinking skills. When coupled with a content-based research project, however, there are many ways in which the language lab can be used imaginatively and productively for students. Although it is used mostly for improving listening/speaking skills, it can also be used in different ways to improve reading/writing skills (while simultaneously working on pronunciation problems) through activities designed for the lab.

We decided to devise a project that would incorporate all four skills and that would entail library research and recording in the language lab: creating a mock radio program. Like a traditional radio program, students would record interviews, monologues or panel discussions. Prior to the actual recording, the students researched a given topic in the library, synthesized the information and produced a script. Subsequent to the recording, students evaluated each others' tapes according to a list of guidelines. Moreover, this project proved an interesting and stimulating alternative to the routine classroom work carried out during the semester. The students worked part of the time outside of the classroom and were required to submit a finished project with less teacher control and more student independence.

Procedure

1. The teacher introduces the radio project by providing samples of different types of broadcasts in Western radio. For example: news broadcasts, talk radio, sports shows, documentary reports. Each uses a different method of broadcast from monologue or dialogue to panel discussion or interview. Students have to identify the method in each sample and then discuss the style of broadcast in their favorite Japanese radio programs.
2. Students are told that they are going to devise their own radio broadcast. The teacher decides whether to place the students in groups or pairs.

3. The students are given a list of possible topics to choose from. They can be anything ranging from culture, fashion or sports to more serious topics such as current affairs or politics (for examples, see Appendix A).
4. Students must decide, given the topic chosen and the number of people in their group, which broadcast format they wish to follow.
5. Students are acquainted with the possible range of sources for their research. For example: library books, newspapers, the internet, encyclopedias and videos. They are then dispatched to the library to start their search for materials. This can be a several hour long process, depending on the difficulty level of the guidelines.
6. Students return to class with their information. With the teacher's guidance they put it together in the form of a written report, interview or discussion. The final draft is checked by the teacher for grammatical and syntactical errors. The students practice reading aloud in preparation for recording it in the language lab. The teacher monitors their practice sessions, giving advice on pronunciation, intonation and stress patterns.
7. Students spend a class period in the lab recording their broadcasts. The reports should not be longer than five minutes each.
8. The final step involves the students listening to each other's tapes and evaluating them. This can be carried out either in the language lab or in the classroom with a tape recorder provided for each group. The students are given an evaluation sheet to fill out about each broadcast they listen to (see Appendix B for sample of evaluation sheet).

The following summarizes the schedule with total days needed to complete the project being seven to eight days (schedule may vary depending on class size and teacher's approach).

- Day one:** introduce project providing samples of radio broadcasts
- Day two:** introduce topics for students to choose from
- Day three/four:** students go to the library to research topic
- Day five:** students write a draft of their report in class
- Day six:** students finish drafts, have them approved by teacher and practice performing them
- Day seven:** students record reports in language lab
- Day eight:** students listen to and evaluate tapes

Assessment

We found this project to be a very worthwhile exercise for Freshman English classes for a number of reasons. Given the broad range of topics they could choose from and the various styles of broadcasting they could implement, every student found something interesting to write about. This project afforded them an opportunity to reinforce or learn important research skills. A number of students didn't know how to access the relevant information in the library. Bearing in mind that it is not necessarily within the ambit of Freshman English teachers to provide our students with these type of skills, nevertheless learning them at an early stage in their student careers can only serve to improve standards in all areas of study including Freshman English. One way to ensure competence in the area of library research is to introduce students to the library early in the first semester through the use of a library exploration worksheet or by setting simple but specific research tasks.

Furthermore, as students were working partly independently, it was difficult for teachers to monitor the progress of their efforts. It was therefore pleasantly surprising to see some of the excellent materials students were able to produce for their reports.

Writing their drafts in the classroom served to practice writing skills in various forms such as report-writing, writing interviews and dialogues. The students also became familiar with the concept of plagiarism as they struggled to put all their information simply into their own words. Naturally their grammar and syntax improved as they worked with the teacher on each draft; they learned the importance of adhering to high standards, and given the gradual step-by-step approach, they found how easily achievable the final product was.

Recording the reports in the language lab was a straightforward activity. The students quickly became acquainted with the mechanics of recording. Students briefly practiced their broadcasts before recording them.

The evaluation procedure was a very important part of the project. Using evaluation worksheets (see Appendix B), students listened to and assessed their peers' work. This was fun for the students to do listening to their own and their friends' voices on tape. Peer assessment is a valuable part of the learning process. It requires a lot of thought and detailed group discussion to reach their final conclusions. It was impressive how maturely they approached this task. Generally they showed themselves to be critical but fair in their assessment and comments.

Conclusion

As an alternative to the routine of textbook-based classroom activities which are very much teacher controlled, students have a chance during this project to work independently and rely to a large extent on their own resources. From the brainstorming beginning to the final evaluations, the students get to display a number of different strengths and skills. The variety of activities to be undertaken ensures that the project

commands enough student interest throughout. Most students seemed pleased with the final outcomes of their efforts.

Appendix A

Politics

Interview a political expert from America. Discuss who will be the next president of the United States and why.

Interview a political expert from Kosovo. Discuss why there has been fighting in Kosovo, and what could happen in the future.

Medicine

Interview this year's Nobel Peace prize winners in medicine or have them participate in a panel discussion. Discuss why they won the award and the importance of their discovery.

Technology

Interview Bill Gates. Ask Mr. Gates about his legal battles and the future of Microsoft.

Deliver a monologue about e-books (electronic books). Discuss the future of books in general—which will be more convenient and/or popular? Why?

Sports

Interview an expert in Japanese sports. Discuss the popularity of sumo wrestling and its future.

Have a panel discuss whether American football and basketball will become more popular in Japan.

Film

Interview the director of the popular Japanese film *Hana-bi*. Discuss why the film was so popular and the future of the Japanese film industry.

Appendix B

Evaluation sheet

Names_____

Group letter_____

Group letter on tape_____

Topic_____

Rate these statements from one to four, one meaning poor to four meaning excellent.

1) The topic and information is very interesting. 1 2 3 4

2) There is no hesitation in the speakers' voices. 1 2 3 4

3) The topic was well researched. 1 2 3 4

4) I now know more about the topic after
listening to this tape. 1 2 3 4

5) The speakers' voices are very clear. 1 2 3 4

6) There are few grammatical mistakes on the tape. 1 2 3 4

7) I want to hear more about this topic. 1 2 3 4

Comments_____
