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ACTUALIDADES INVESTIGATIVAS EN EDUCACION

## THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY AND THE EFL COURSE EL LABORATORIO DE IDIOMAS Y LA CLASE DE INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA

César A. Navas Brenes<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *This article examines the role of the audio-language laboratory in language teaching. The writer explains that the language laboratory is still a very helpful tool because learners can reinforce certain areas in which they are experiencing some difficulty such as the internalization of correct grammatical structures, pronunciation, and listening comprehension. This article contains a brief analysis of the results of a survey questionnaire that was given to students of the Conversational English Courses belonging to the Extension Program at the University of Costa Rica. Based on these results, the writer explains that the language laboratory is an essential component in this type of EFL program.*

**Key words:** ENGLISH TEACHING, TECHNOLOGICAL RESOURCES, LANGUAGE LABORATORY

**Resumen:** *El presente artículo examina la eficacia del laboratorio de idiomas en la enseñanza del inglés. El autor explica que el laboratorio de idiomas es una herramienta de gran utilidad con el objetivo de reforzar áreas en las cuales los alumnos presentan alguna dificultad tales como la gramática, la pronunciación inglesa y la comprensión auditiva. El artículo contiene un breve análisis de los resultados de un cuestionario dado a los alumnos de los Cursos de Conversación Inglesa perteneciente al Programa de Extensión Docente de la Universidad de Costa Rica. El autor explica que dicha herramienta es un componente esencial en este tipo de programas de inglés como lengua extranjera.*

**Palabras clave:** ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS, RECURSOS TECNOLÓGICOS, LABORATORIO DE IDIOMAS

### 1. Introduction

Listening comprehension is a key component in language teaching. Language programs with a communicative goal should focus on the quality of listening tasks based on authentic materials as well as appropriate audio-visual equipment. In terms of the authenticity of the content of listening activities, Kilickaya (2004, p. 2) explains that language “*learners feel better with authentic materials helping them involve in the ‘real’ language as long as we, as teachers, provide them with pedagogical support*”. Instructors may create tasks from short academic lectures, radio programs, authentic conversations, audio-books, songs, or short

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stories. In addition, audio-visual equipment should be part of all language courses in which technology facilitates the teaching-learning process. In regard to listening comprehension, most language programs include tape recording, digital data or even computer software in their curriculum. Carter and McCarthy (as cited in Bygate, 2001) point out that "*since the mid-1970s tape-recording has been sufficiently cheap and practical to enable the widespread study of talk—whether native speaker talk or learner talk—and use of tape recorders in language classrooms*" (p. 14). Besides tape recorders, the audio-language laboratory has been highly used in language teaching to make students aware of the characteristics of spoken discourse.

The audio-language laboratory has played an important role in language teaching for a long time. Its main objective was to help language students improve the aural-oral skills. With the implementation of the language laboratory, many language teachers developed new techniques in order to derive all possible advantages of this tool in the field of applied linguistics. Bygate (2001) expands on this and says that "*when tape recorder and language laboratories gradually came into existence in the 1950s, they were mainly used for pronunciation, grammar and translation practice, often in the context of courses named as such*" (p. 15). During the 1960s, the language lab rapidly became one of the most innovative audio components ever built; however, just as it became popular among some language teachers, others strongly criticized its use. This situation occurred for two main reasons. Certain language teachers who used the lab failed to implement appropriate activities especially designed for language lab sessions. Other teachers confused its role in the language classroom. Howatt and Widdowson (2004, p. 249) indicated that

audio-visual methods had their own technological rival, however in the form of the early language laboratory which came on to the scene at much the same time. It was a major installation and the cost distorted school equipment budgets for a long time, but its initial impact was weakened by the rather old-fashioned drill-based learning which it promoted.

These are two strong counterarguments that tend to obscure the effectiveness of the language lab. Some teachers argued that a lab caused additional problems related to space, cost, maintenance, appropriate materials, and teacher training opportunities.

What are the main functions of the language laboratory? According to Antich et al. (1988, p. 175), "*the main objectives of the language laboratory are to make the individual practice of students more effective, and increase the productivity of language teachers who*

*only need to focus on the student's production and the mistakes encountered.*" Language instructors may use the language laboratory in order to improve those areas in which the students are facing problems such as structure or pronunciation. Nevertheless, this does not mean that only these areas can be reinforced with the use of the language lab; on the contrary, all the language skills and sub-skills can be easily improved in the lab according to the level reached by learners.

A language laboratory is a teaching tool requiring the implementation of well-constructed tasks based on the students' needs. In contrast to other material aids like radios, tape recorders, DVD players or TV sets, language teachers must take into account some key considerations before using the language lab. A language lab should not be seen either as the teacher or a teaching method. The effectiveness of the language laboratory directly depends on the teacher's creativity and the listening activities he or she is going to use.

The language laboratory might be compared with a computer. These two devices are very expensive and their effectiveness relies not only on the features of their physical components but also on the quality of software used. A sophisticated computer requires advanced software in order to derive all its possible capability; similarly, the effectiveness of the language lab would be limited if poorly developed material (appropriate tasks) is utilized in the lab sessions. This was the main reason why the use of the language lab has been underestimated; as a matter of fact, Underwood (1984, p. 34) says that "*because of the way it ended up being used, the lab simply could not live up to its expectations. Although the hardware evolved through several increasingly sophisticated generations, the software did not pass.*" Instructors and language directors should constantly look for challenging activities so that students can really see the relevance of taking lab sessions.

Although the language lab was playing a relevant role among other material aids, its effectiveness began to be highly criticized. The same source explains that "*the lab was seen as a sort of tireless teacher's aid that could drill the mechanical aspects of language, freeing the teacher for more creative activities*" (Underwood, 1984, p. 34). A large number of teachers considered the lab as a substitute for teaching; therefore, the lab was seen "*as the center of language teaching, with the teacher assisting the lab operation and adjusting to it*" (Lado, 1965, p. 173). This was rejected by many instructors who considered that students were "*being lulled to sleep in the listening lab while listening to a cassette that included nothing but a conversation in a second language spoken in a monotone, lulling voice*" (Haphuriwat, 1989, p.41). Due to the fact that language instructors did not know how to implement creative tasks especially designed for the lab session, "*students were developing a strong distaste for*

*language labs, a distaste that unfortunately carried over to language learning in general*" (Underwood, 1984, p. 35). Unfortunately, most language teachers did not consider that the lab should also be used to reinforce other areas in which learners are facing problems.

Language labs should never be seen as a substitute for the instructor; on the contrary, language labs require better-prepared teachers who can put the new equipment and techniques to good use as well as conduct the class. When used properly, labs can greatly increase the effectiveness of good teachers, whether or not they are native speakers of the target language. (Lado, p. 174)

Language lab sessions, therefore, should be seen as a helpful complement of language courses as long as creative and special tasks are developed for its use. In other words, the study of new content and communicative activities may be conducted during the regular class period; then, specific areas such as pronunciation (the segmental and supra-segmental features of language), listening comprehension tasks, or further grammar practice must be reinforced in the lab with recorded material especially designed for language lab sessions. These activities may include pronunciation exercises, songs, cloze tests, and content questions based on interesting lectures or talks. Finally, another advantage of using a language lab has to do with the possibility of having some feedback; that is, students can record the content and explanations given by the teacher during language lab sessions. Then, they can listen to their own production and focus on their own mistakes. This is a significant advantage over the other two types of language laboratories that can be found in the market.

## **1.1 Review of Literature**

During the history of language teaching in the United States, technology has always played a key role. In the twentieth century, a wide variety of electronic devices had been used in order to make the process of learning a foreign or second language easier due to a new approach. It was obvious that the use of audio in the classroom began to gain territory rapidly. Regarding this aspect, Johnston (1987, p. 29) explains that "*the term audio refers to the electronic transmission of aural material, in both live and recorded forms. The audio medium is utilized in a number of technologies.*" This sort of technology, therefore, was used in order to develop students' aural-oral skills. All kinds of teaching aids have been used for different purposes such as teaching conversation courses or training language instructors. The following list of audio components in language teaching, for example, tries to summarize

some of the most important electronic instruments that gained importance in the field of applied linguistics in the United States:

1880s: The "**phonograph record** began to be used in the area of teaching" (Johnston, 1987, p. 29).

1920s: The first **phonetics laboratory** is constructed in "several American universities" in order to teach phonetics (Kelly, 1976, p. 240).

1924: The first **language laboratory** equipped with "sixteen sets of headphones linked to a single output" is built at Ohio State University (Kelly, p. 240).

1930s: The "**radio** was exploited for educational purposes" (Johnston, 1987, p. 29).

1940s: The **speech spectrograph** was invented in order to "analyze the waveforms and frequencies of the sounds that make up human speech." It was used in the field of acoustic phonetics (Crane, 1981, p. 230).

1950s: The **telephone** was used "on a smaller scale" in order to improve students' aural skills (Johnston, p. 29).

1950s and 1960s: Audio-material tools such as **audiotapes** and **portable recorders** were constantly used in education in general once they were technologically modified, and not only in "recorded lectures and language instruction" (Johnston, 1987, p. 30).

1970s and 1980s: According to Johnston, "**television** and **computers** emerged as the glamorous educational media" (Johnston, p. 30).

Even though most of these audio materials were included in language instruction in the United States, the use of some of them spread to other countries. From all these audio materials, none has been so modified as the language laboratory since new components were added to the equipment in order to derive all possible advantages. Later on, the language laboratory started to play a crucial role in language teaching in the United States.

## **1.2 The Audio-Language Laboratory**

When the language lab started gaining popularity in the United States, many administrators decided to keep up-to-date with this new teaching technology and incorporated the lab into their language centers. Eventually, the lab spread not only in language institutes but also in high-schools and universities due to the increasing interest in learning other languages. For many decades, the audio-language laboratory remained one of the most important audio materials ever built. Since its invention, it has suffered a series of

modifications in order for students and language instructors to seize all its capability such as the opportunity to record the material that is used during the lab sessions. Before listing its major advantages, it is important to keep in mind some relevant considerations. In her book **Teaching Foreign-Language Skills**, Wilga M. Rivers (1970, pp. 318-321) lists three important statements related to use of the language laboratory: (a) *"the language laboratory is not a method, (b) the language laboratory is not a teacher, and (c) the laboratory work must be an integral part of the language program"*. It is important to understand these three different ideas in order to comprehend some complaints that have been linked to the use of the language laboratory work.

According to Rivers, the language laboratory can be used in order to implement a technique that belongs to a certain method or combination of different methods; however, she strongly recommends that the language laboratory should not be used with certain methods because it would cause *"so much time wasted"* (1970, p. 318). Even though its use is not essential in teaching the aural-oral skills and the sub-skill of pronunciation, it would help a lot to improve students' listening comprehension, speaking, pronunciation as well as grammar in communicative contexts. The writing skills can be taught when learners have already achieved an oral competence in the foreign or second language. The same author says that *"teachers need to study carefully and critically the available materials to see that they are based on sound grammatical and pedagogical principles and are interesting to the students"* (Rivers, 1970, p. 319). This last statement means that if the teacher does not pay attention to the type of material he or she is going to bring to the language lab session, the use of the language lab and its effectiveness in helping students acquire L2 would be greatly diminished.

During the first years of the use of the language laboratory, many language teachers felt somehow released from implementing innovative and creative material for the lab session. Robert Lado (1964, p. 173) describes this misconception as *"the lab-as-the-center attitude"* in which language teachers consider the material brought to the lab session as the center of the teaching process. The language laboratory should not have *the* central role in the language classroom; on the contrary, teachers must pay close attention to the improvement reached by their students during the time they spend in the lab sessions. Because of boring and mechanical material used in the language lab sessions, a large number of *"students quickly got tired of the novelty, began to resent being forced to sit there wearing those uncomfortable earphones, and started taking the booths apart"* (Underwood, 1984, p. 3). However, one of the most important advantages linked to the language lab is

the fact that for the first time students were able to actively participate as much as possible repeating utterances aloud instead of waiting for their turn. Rivers expands this idea:

In a class of thirty and more students, it has not been possible during classroom sessions to give each student all the practice he needed, and there has been no effective way of controlling the amount and accuracy of his learning practice out of schools hours. With the establishment of a laboratory, much of this individual practice takes place in a situation where an accurate model and immediate correction of mistakes are available. Each student is provided with carefully graded and sequenced learning practice, and a way of verifying how he is progressing. It must be emphasized, however, that the effectiveness of the learning is dependent on the thought and care which the teacher has put into the programming of the practice tapes. The work of the students in the laboratory will be only as good as the program with which they are asked to work. (1970, p. 320)

The language lab session is a complement to the time spent in the classroom; in other words, *"the work in any one laboratory must consist of practicing what has been taught in a previous class lesson, or work for which the student has been prepared in some way by the teacher"* (Rivers, 1970, p. 320). The teacher should take into account the language areas in which students need further practice. There is a teaching principle that says that the teachers should not evaluate something their students have not practiced yet. Rivers says that if the students have not *"reached the stage where the work programmed for a particular laboratory session, it is better to omit that session"*; otherwise, the students are going to drop out in "frustration" and "disappointment" (1970, p. 321). Even though teachers might include lab sessions in their courses, it does not mean that all the techniques are linked to audio-lingual principles since different methods or approaches can be combined. In contrast, other experts argue that the language laboratory offered two positive aspects in the classroom. As a matter of fact, Howatt and Widdowson (2004) point out that:

The lab could do two things which the teacher either found difficult or could not do at all. First, it allowed learners to hear themselves speak. This was a novel experience in the 1960s, and quite entertaining for a time. However, comparing your own efforts with those of a native model on the tape demanded skills that most school children did not have, though it was a valuable facility for more sophisticated adult students. Second, it was an excellent resource for developing listening comprehension and it could offer a range of different voices that went far beyond the teacher's own resources, but, once



again, this required a certain amount of sophistication from learners, particularly if they were working on their own (p. 319).

These days, the field of applied linguistics requires teachers who can easily deal with technological innovations. Commercialized language programs contain modern resources to make the acquisition process more challenging and appealing. Teachers are expected to have some knowledge of complex hardware and learning software. Nunan (2005) indicates that the notion of "*Information Technology (IT) is becoming ubiquitous these days, with numerous education departments requiring teachers to demonstrate a degree of technological literacy. Many teachers, however, are unsure of what technology is and what it is not*" (p. 167). As a result, instructors should rapidly adapt to these tools of instruction without considering them a teaching method or approach but as a means to facilitate learning. Instructional technology in language teaching may include the Internet (web sites, chat rooms, discussions forums, online dictionaries and data bases), video conferences, multimedia resources, sophisticated language laboratories, and DVD players.

### **1.3 Advantages of the Language Lab**

The use of the language laboratory has a series of advantages. Wilga M. Rivers (1970, p. 321) refers to the following positive aspects regarding the use of the language lab in teaching English:

(1) For the first time in the history of foreign-language teaching, each student may have the opportunity to hear native speech clearly and distinctly. (2) The students may hear this authentic native speech as frequently as he and his teacher desire. (3) The taped lesson provides an unchanging and unwearying model of native speech for the student to imitate. (4) In the language laboratory the student may listen to a great variety of foreign voices, both male and female. (...) (5) Each student may hear and use the foreign language throughout the laboratory session, instead of wasting time waiting for his turn in a large group, as he does in the usual classroom situation. (6) The laboratory frees the teacher from certain problems of class directions and classroom management, enabling him to concentrate on the problems of individual students.

In addition, language teachers and students can also encounter other possible advantages during lab sessions:

- a- In language lab sessions, students can listen to different speakers recorded in high-quality tapes;
- b- In the language laboratory, each student can participate and practice as much as possible while repeating sentences aloud. If a listen-response-compare laboratory is available, the learner can record the lesson. Then he or she can listen and compare his or her own responses with those of the tape; and
- c- The language laboratory makes oral-aural assessment easier since teachers may separately evaluate students; thus, learners will not have access to other people's answers. During an oral exam the teacher can focus on the oral production of the student he or she is interviewing. Afterwards, he or she can listen to the tape and take notes and make corrections. A feedback form with mistakes can be given to students as well.

Some experts have focused on the effect of the language laboratory on language acquisition in contrast to regular classroom settings. Gass, Mackey and Ross-Feldman (2005) conducted a study in which they analyzed the quality of conversational interactions in classrooms and laboratories. These linguists worked with a group of participants who studied Spanish as a foreign language. After analyzing the data collected, they did not find major differences between the two teaching settings. In regard to the teaching of pronunciation, Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (1996) pointed out another advantage in using a language lab where students can record themselves. They have suggested that controlled practice in the teaching of pronunciation can be conducted in a listen-respond-compare language laboratory. They said that:

Another controlled practice technique that works well if a language laboratory is available is that of mirroring or shadowing. To begin, learners read over the written text of a speech sample—be it a conversation or monologue—several times making sure that they understand it well. Then learners listen to the tape several times while reading along silently until their eyes follow the text in coordination with the speaker. Using a two-track tape system, learners record their voice while reading along with the speaker trying to maintain the same speed, rhythm, stress, and intonation. Finally, learners can play back the two simultaneous recordings and compare them. (p. 199)

This type of activity may help students improve their pronunciation in the target language. Thus, the language lab is an excellent teaching tool that can be used to teach students from different levels of oral competence such as beginning, intermediate, and

advanced students. Antich et al. (1988) suggest that "*the language laboratory is very helpful in teaching advanced students, especially people who are focusing on a certain field of the language*" (p. 176). They say that there is a wide variety of techniques for this purpose; this type of students is also able "*to keep in contact with additional material for the courses that contain different styles and speakers*" (p. 176). The same source explains that as they are advanced students they are able to recognize their own difficulties in any area such as the pronunciation of some phonemes and allophones or intonation; therefore, they can correct these mistakes by themselves.

## **2. Methodology**

This section consists of the analysis of the survey carried out with subjects who took the Conversational English Courses belonging to the Extension Program at the University of Costa Rica. The number of subjects that participated in the survey was 185. They studied English as a foreign language, and in most cases their native language is Spanish. Besides beginning and intermediate students who received lab sessions, advanced students also answered the survey questionnaire because they had taken lab sessions in the previous courses. All these subjects represent 10 different language levels. They were divided into three proficiency groups; that is, 81 students were beginners (from levels 1 to 3), 47 were intermediate-level students (from levels 4 to 6), and 57 were advanced students (from levels 7 to 10). The subjects in this survey range in age from 17 to 60; 101 subjects are men and 84 are women. These students enrolled in the classes that started in 1998. There were no limitations or obstacles in the choice of the subjects.

The survey questionnaire (see Appendix 1) includes seven closed questions and three free-form or open ones. It deals with the effectiveness of using the language laboratory to improve students' listening comprehension, pronunciation, and grammar; however, the survey also attempts to determine how students took advantage of recording the lab session, and whether they studied it at home or not. Some of the comments given by the subjects will be included in the analysis of the questionnaire results. The results of this survey questionnaire will be presented in two ways. First, the results will be discussed in order to evaluate the findings. In this part, once the results of each question have been presented, the researcher will try to give an interpretation of those percentages. Second, the results of the survey questionnaire as well as the students' comments to the three free-form items of the survey

questionnaire will be presented in Appendix 2. Afterwards, the writer will include some basic recommendations for teachers on how to utilize the language lab properly.

### **3. Analysis of the Results**

The survey questionnaire has three main objectives: (a) to analyze the effectiveness of the language laboratory in teaching listening comprehension, pronunciation, and grammar; (b) to find out which material aid students prefer: a language lab or a tape recorder, and (c) to determine whether or not students take advantage of feedback.

The first item deals with the effectiveness of the language lab sessions to improve students' listening comprehension. The main purpose in asking this question is to determine the improvement that students have shown in their listening comprehension. In this item, 23% of the subjects marked the first choice ("very good"), while 42.7% of them marked "good." In other words, 65.7% of the students considered that the language lab is very helpful in order to improve this skill. On the other hand, 29.7% of the students marked "regular," 2.7% marked "poor," and only 1% chose "very bad." Several learners believe they have improved their listening comprehension due to the practice in the language laboratory.

The second item deals with the effectiveness of using the language laboratory in order to improve the students' English pronunciation. In this case, 23.7% of the subjects marked "very good," and 44.8% answered "good." That is, 68.5% of the students think that they have improved their English pronunciation through the practice done in the language lab. In addition, 25.4% of the learners place their improvement somewhere in the middle, and just 4.3% of the students answered "poor." That is, they did not think that the practice on pronunciation that was done in the language lab has been beneficial. Moreover, only 0.5% of the students answered "very bad;" this means that a very small percentage believes that they have not received any benefits at all from going to lab sessions and practicing their pronunciation. A slight percentage of the people (1%) did not mark any category.

Item number three attempts to assess whether students actively participate in the language lab sessions repeating utterances aloud. There was a special reason for asking this question. In fact, John H. Underwood (1984) really wonders whether students take advantage of "speaking into a deaf machine" (p. 35). He says that learners can exclusively take advantage of the language lab sessions when they are "involved in the meaning of what is said;" that is, they are able to understand the material they are listening to and give correct responses (p. 36). Underwood says that "the effectiveness of a language lab exercise, or a

classroom activity, depends on how actively students are participating" (p. 36). Regarding this aspect, 44,8% of the subjects said that they always participate in the practice at the language laboratory, while 43.7% of the people answered that they sometimes get involved in the practice. However, 8.1% of the students answered "almost never," and just 1.6% answered that they never participate in the lab session. This item reveals that 88.5% of the subjects do take advantage of the language lab session and get involved in all the exercises assigned by the teacher.

The fourth item deals with one of the most important characteristics of the listen-respond-compare laboratory: feedback. Using a listen-respond-compare language laboratory enables students to record the material they have practiced in the lab session; for this reason, they can eventually listen to their improvements as well as the mistakes they have made. In this case, 19.4% of the subjects said that they always listen to their tapes not only in order to listen to their improvement but also to pay close attention to their mistakes. Moreover, 46% of the students answered that they sometimes listen. These percentages positively show that 65.4% of the students do listen to the material recorded in the language lab sessions at home. On the other hand, 10.8% of the learners answered "almost never," while 16.2% of them answered that they never listen to their tapes. Finally, 7.56% of the people did not answer this item.

The fifth item has to do with the student's improvement in the area of oral grammar. In this case, 19% of the subjects said that they have improved their grammar. In addition, 46.4% of them responded that the activities or exercises were good, while 29.1% answered "regular." This item shows that there is a positive result that consists of 65.4% of the people who have improved their grammatical structures because of the practice carried out in the language lab. On the other hand, only 2.16% marked "poor," and 1.08% "very bad"; 2.1% of the people did not answer this item.

The next item deals with the length of the language laboratory sessions. The students of the *Conversational English Courses belonging to the Extension Program at the University of Costa Rica* attended the lab sessions one hour every week. In this case, they were asked to say if the language lab sessions should be lengthened, kept the same, or even reduced. The results of this item directly depend on the results of the previous questions; that is, they would insist that the lab session should be lengthened if they are getting benefits from it. Amazingly, 68.6% of the subjects considered that the language laboratory session must be lengthened, while 28.6% answered that it should be kept the same. On the other hand, just 1.62% of the learners considered that it should be reduced. Moreover, only 1.08% of them did

not answer this item. These results show that students of the Conversational English Courses perceive some improvement when they received lab sessions.

Probably, the most interesting result can be found in the last closed item. In fact, it is based on the affective considerations of learning a foreign or second language. Some students—mostly adults—do not like to repeat utterances aloud especially when the language teacher is using a tape recorder. Many authors considered that repeating utterances in the student's booth is beneficial for those learners who do not like to make mistakes in front of their classmates. As a matter of fact, Wilga M. Rivers (1970) says that "*the laboratory booth provides the students with psychological isolation which releases them from some of their inhibitions about making embarrassing foreign-language sounds in front of his fellows*" (p. 321). It is very important to take into account that this isolation is not going to last forever or even interrupt the learning process; on the contrary, once the learner has reached an advanced level, he will feel "*more confident about taking part in oral work in class*" (Rivers, p. 321). The researcher's purpose in asking this question is to show that a great number of students feel more comfortable repeating utterances aloud in the language laboratory rather than in a classroom with a tape recorder. At the moment of repeating utterances aloud, 71.8% of the subjects feel more comfortable in a language laboratory; on the other hand, only 16.7% of them prefer to use a tape recorder. 11.5% of the students did not answer this question. These results show that the language laboratory is seen as a valuable tool by students who attend the Conversational English Courses. This does not mean that the language laboratory is the only audio material used in these courses; on the contrary, language teachers also use TV sets and tape recorders.

There is a wide variety of answers gathered from the free-form questions. There were three reasons for including this sort of items: (1) to find out why students want the language laboratory sessions to be either lengthened or reduced; (2) to know why they prefer to use the language lab or a tape recorder for repeating utterances aloud; and finally, (3) to elicit some of their general comments or opinions about the quality of language lab sessions. Since this type of items are somewhat difficult to process and analyze, the researcher followed a procedure David Nunan (1986) calls *key word analysis*. That is, the writer synthesized some of the comments in different categories according to the types of statements; later on, those statements were grouped according to general topics regarding different aspects of the language lab sessions of the Conversational English Courses. These categories can be seen in Table 1 in this section. Some comments can be found in Appendix 2.

CATEGORY	NUMBER
<b>Reference to language/learning/learner</b>	
The language laboratory makes the learning process easier	8
Concentration	4
Correction	16
Feedback	14
Repetition	3
Individuality	4
More confidence	3
I have learned more	6
Enjoyment	3
Never get bored	2
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>63</b>
CATEGORY	NUMBER
<b>Reference to the language skills and sub-skills</b>	
It helps to improve students' listening comprehension	25
It helps to achieve a native-like pronunciation	17
Grammar	4
Vocabulary	2
All language skills and sub-skills	3
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Reference to the environment of learning/time/effectiveness</b>	
More time is needed	51
The quality of sound is excellent	15
A smaller group is necessary	3
The teacher does not know how to operate it	1
The hardware needs to be fixed or changed	1
Advanced-level students should also attend lab sessions	4
It can be improved	1
Lab sessions are not important	3
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>193</b>
<b>Subjects who did not answer any of the three free-form items</b>	<b>31</b>

**TABLE 1:**  
STUDENTS' COMMENTS ABOUT THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY SESSIONS GIVEN BY THE CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH COURSES BELONGING TO THE EXTENSION PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF COSTA RICA

According to the first category (reference to language/learning/learner), students wrote positive comments about some advantages of the language laboratory that were mentioned in the theoretical framework such as correction, feedback, concentration, and confidence. In the second category (reference to language skills and sub-skills), the subjects also wrote positive statements regarding the effectiveness of the language lab in teaching listening comprehension, pronunciation, and grammar. Finally, in the third category (reference to the environment of learning/time/effectiveness) the learners pointed out the importance of giving more time to the lab sessions. Some of them considered that the quality of sound in the lab is very good, and some advanced students would like to have language lab sessions in their courses too. These comments also support the results gathered from the open items of the survey questionnaire. For further reference regarding the results of the survey questionnaire see Appendix 2.

Although many language experts have strongly questioned the effectiveness of the language lab in teaching foreign languages, this brief analysis showed the positive opinion of the students toward the use of the language laboratory in learning English in a contemporary language course; specifically, in the Conversational English Courses.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Most language learners who participated in this analysis see the importance of the language lab in order to reinforce students' listening comprehension, pronunciation and grammar. As mentioned earlier, a language laboratory may be used as any other teaching tool no matter which method or approach the teacher is following. Language lab sessions may now include digital material apart from traditional cassettes in order to practice listen-repeat exercises. Seidlhofer (1991, cited in Carter and Nunan) says that this practice "*is still widely used in coursebooks which are accompanied by CD-ROM or tape and particularly popular in language lab exercises*" (p. 62). The reason why the researcher did not refer to any method or approach in which the language lab may be used is that nowadays language instructors combine techniques and procedures from different methods and approaches. On the other hand, the language lab sessions may serve as an important component of the language classroom if they are used properly.

There are two important aspects regarding the implementation of the language lab in any contemporary language course in which the main objective is to achieve communicative competence. As a matter of fact, John H. Underwood (1984) says that "*the question of whether the language lab can be adapted to communicative methods remains to be*



*answered*" (p. 37). The language laboratory may be perfectly adapted to any communicative method; in fact, in the Conversational English Courses at the University of Costa Rica, all the programs are mostly based on the Communicative Approach. Nevertheless, this does not mean that teachers use different techniques taken from other methods. Therefore, the language lab can be considered an important component of the language class.

Another conclusion deals with the role of the language laboratory in order to help students improve their language skills and sub-skills. A language laboratory must never be considered either a method or a teacher. In other words, it functions as an audio material that is used in order to provide learners with additional practice in all those areas that need to be reinforced. All that practice might be especially given in a lab session; that is, learners can practice different techniques that serve as a complement to the whole classroom; for this reason, it should not be seen as an exact repetition of the material already presented in class. Language teachers must implement creative and interesting techniques especially designed for language lab sessions. In relation to listening comprehension tasks, one source (Aguilar, Arias, Guevara and Gutierrez, 2003) highlights the importance of preparing supplementary activities for language laboratory sessions that will accompany students' English textbooks. They explained in their research project that:

Professors should try to use more supplementary materials focused on listening activities to vary the sessions, complement the textbooks and take more advantage of all laboratory resources. These activities should be appropriate for the level and interests of the students. It would be a good idea that all professors contribute to compile supplementary materials for common use and coordinate laboratory activities among all the groups. (p. 87)

These researchers focused on the analysis of the listening skill development with the courses Basic English I and II at the University of Costa Rica.

These are relevant advantages that cannot be easily found either in the use of a tape recorder or in a listen-respond lab with activated headphones. On the contrary, the most important disadvantage of the listen-respond compare lab is its cost; for this reason, it may be somewhat easier for universities and language institutes to afford such expensive equipment.

The following are recommendations for language teachers before using the language lab:

1. Be sure you know how to operate the equipment.
2. At the beginning of the language course, explain to students what they are going to practice in the language lab. Remember that if they do not depend too much on written materials, they will take more advantage of the language lab sessions. In addition, explain that they can record the language lab sessions and study at home the material they have recorded.
3. Short periods of time in the language laboratory are more effective than long ones.
4. The main objective of the lab session is for students to have extra practice in the areas where they are having trouble; this means that the exercises studied there should not be an exact repetition of the material already seen in the rest of the class.
5. Teachers should not use the lab for the entire lab session; that is, they should also use other teaching aids such as a blackboard, an overhead projector, a TV set, and many others. A combination of resources is a plus.
6. Once the teacher has finished with the presentation of the pattern drills, he or she must have students use the material they have just practiced in real conversations.

In fact, W. M. Rivers says that this is an important part of the language lab session; she says that

with just a minute or two of this sort of simple conversation, you can break up the artificiality of the drill situation, reminding your students and yourself that the real reason why people use a language is not to produce right answers, or even to increase their competence in it, but simply to say things to one another. (1970, p. 99)

Likewise, a language lab session must have a short presentation of the materials that are going to be practiced; in addition, it must have a good end in order for the students to show the improvement they have reached thanks to the practice. Therefore, if teachers who need to incorporate the language laboratory to their courses take into consideration the suggestions for designing good pattern drills and using the lab, students will certainly derive all the advantages of this teaching tool.

It is widely known that technology has been affecting a large number of fields of study and language teaching is one of those. In fact, new components such as a video screen have been added to the language lab in order for students to take advantage of visual support. In addition, computer software especially designed for language teaching has been used in

large computer labs not only in universities but also in high schools and language centers all over the world.

Although many experts have strongly criticized the language lab as being useless in developing students' skills and sub-skills, this paper has shown that students believe that the listen-respond-compare laboratory is a very useful component to improve students' listening comprehension, pronunciation, and grammar in a specific language program at the University of Costa Rica. It is essential to indicate that one must not generalize from the results of this study and suggest that the same situation takes place in other course programs. Furthermore, it will be useful to conduct a similar survey in oral courses that belong to the English Major in the same university and assess some feedback given by students and professors.

Does this topic deserve further investigation? In general, this topic is suitable for additional research due to the strong influence of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and multimedia laboratories. Hanson-Smith (1999, cited in Carter and Nunan) have said that

at the start of the twenty-first century multimedia has become virtually synonymous with computer. With these changes, issues in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) have also evolved from an early emphasis on how to use the new technology to research on technology's effects on learning. (p. 107)

For this reason, it will be very useful to analyze the impact of technology (in this case the computer lab) on language acquisition in these Conversational English Courses. New series of English textbooks such as **Touchstone** by McCarthy, McCarten and Sandiford (2005) now include self-study audio CD and computer software that even allows students to record themselves and compare their production to the original conversation. **Touchstone** is currently used in levels 1 and 2 at the UCR Conversational English Courses. These students of different levels can take sessions at the computer lab as well as regular audio-language sessions within the same program. Teachers have the possibility of evaluating the effectiveness of the audio-language laboratory in contemporary courses with students of different levels, ages, and communicative needs.

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**APPENDIX 1  
QUESTIONNAIRE**

**University of Costa Rica  
Escuela de Lenguas Modernas  
Cursos de Conversación**

Level: \_\_\_\_\_ Sex: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

1. In which category would you place the improvement reached in your listening comprehension through the practice performed in the language laboratory?

1. very good ( ) 2. good ( ) 3. regular ( ) 4. poor ( ) 5. very bad ( )

2. Have you improved your English pronunciation thanks to activities performed in the language laboratory? In which category would you place this achievement?

1. very good ( ) 2. good ( ) 3. regular ( ) 4. poor ( ) 5. very bad ( )

3. Do you take advantage of the language laboratory sessions, and actively participate repeating words or sentences aloud?

1. always ( ) 2. sometimes ( ) 3. almost never ( ) 4. never ( )

4. In this course you are able to record the language lab session; as a result, you can listen to your improvement as well as to the mistakes you have made. Therefore, do you take advantage of this opportunity and practice at home the material you have recorded in class?

1. always ( ) 2. sometimes ( ) 3. almost never ( ) 4. never ( )

5. Have you improved your grammar through exercises performed in the language lab sessions? How would you place this achievement?

1. very good ( ) 2. good ( ) 3. regular ( ) 4. poor ( ) 5. very bad ( )

6. Do you consider that the length of time of the language lab sessions should be augmented, kept the same, or reduced?

1. augmented ( ) 2. kept the same ( ) 3. reduced ( )

Do you have any special reason in choosing answers #1 or #2?

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7. At the moment of repeating sentences aloud, which of the following devices do you feel more comfortable with?

1. a language laboratory ( )      2. a tape recorder ( )

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Do you have any comment about the language lab session in general?

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**APPENDIX 2**  
**STUDENTS' COMMENTS ABOUT FREE-FORM ITEM #1**

6. Do you think that the length of the language lab sessions should be augmented, kept the same, or reduced?

1. augmented ( )      2. kept the same ( )      3. reduced ( )  
Do you have any special reason in choosing answer #1 or #2?

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**Comments:**

- 'Because we need to practice more, and try to listen to different topics.' (level 6)
- 'There is a lot of material, but not a lot of time.' (level 7)
- 'It should be augmented because it permits feedback.' (level 1)
- 'It should be augmented because it permits to learn English faster.' (level 10)
- 'Because one hour per week is not enough to increase skills and reach objectives.' (level 6)
- 'It is the best learning system because it allows the learner to familiarize with the language and its pronunciation.' (level 7)
- 'We need more practice. I believe that the lab sessions should be of 2 hours per week.' (level 5)
- 'The listening exercises help you to understand grammatical structures and pronunciation. We need more time in the lab.' (level 6)
- '15 or 29 minutes should be added to the lab session.' (level 3)
- 'It should be augmented because it allows the development of interesting exercises in order to improve listening comprehension and pronunciation.' (level 1)

**STUDENTS' COMMENTS ABOUT FREE-FORM ITEM #2**

7. At the moment of repeating sentences aloud, what of the following devices do you feel more comfortable with?

1. a language laboratory ( )      2. a tape recorder ( )  
Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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**Categories:**

**Language learning/learner**

- 'It's very helpful and you never get bored.' (level 6)
- 'When you are in the language lab, it's easier to understand.' (level 7)

**Language skills and sub-skills**

- 'The lab is very important to develop all language skills.' (level 1)
- 'I think it is the best form to increase your abilities in pronunciation.' (level 9)
- 'It allows me to improve my listening comprehension and pronunciation.' (level 7)



### **Feedback/correction**

- 'I can check my answers and repeat the exercises.' (level 7)
- 'I can listen to all the mistakes I made.' (level 8)
- 'Because you can listen to the mistakes and correct them.' (level 1)
- 'Because you correct yourself immediately after you listen to the sentence.' (level)
- 'Because you are corrected at the same time.' (level 10)
- 'Because I can listen to my mistakes over and over, and correct myself.' (level 2)

### **Concentration/quality of sound**

- 'I think it's necessary because students can concentrate in the class.' (level 10)
- 'I prefer the lab because while using a tape recorder, the sound is not good. In the lab you keep concentrated because there is less external noise.' (level 1)
- 'Because you can record yourself with a high quality of sound although you must complement your learning at home in order to correct yourself.' (level 1)
- 'You pay more attention in the lab because of the use of headphones' (level 1)
- 'I feel more concentrated on my job.' (level 4)
- 'The quality of sound is not very good with a tape recorder.' (level 1)
- 'The noise of the environment is minimal.' (level 6)

### **Confidence**

- 'In the lab, I feel more relax and comfortable; therefore, I learn more.' (level 6)
- '...maybe because the teacher is there, and he gives me confidence--you know--because I know I'm learning.' (level 6)

### **Techniques**

- 'Playing songs helps to practice the language, and the learning becomes nicer.' (level 2)

### **Individuality**

- 'Because the learning process is more individual.' (level 1)
- 'The teacher can check our pronunciation individually.' (level 1)

## **STUDENTS' COMMENTS ABOUT FREE-FORM ITEM #3**

8. Do you have any comment about the language sessions in general?

### **Categories:**

#### **Language/learning/learner**

- 'It is a necessary tool in an English class.' (level 7)
- '[learning with the aid of the language laboratory] is the best way to learn English because one practices dialogues through different teaching methods.' (level 1)
- 'It's excellent. A whole improvement of each of the studied units is reached.' (level 1)
- 'I like it very much. I have a nice time and learn at the same time.' (level 6)
- 'This is the best learning system I've ever registered in. The course should be carried out in the language laboratory.' (level 1)
- 'Definitely it's a good complement to the classes.' (level 1)

**Language skills and sub-skills**

'I love very much going to the language lab, because I learn and improve my listening comprehension.' (level 6)

'It's a good way to improve our pronunciation.' (level 1)

'I believe that it's a useful way to improve listening and pronunciation.' (level 2)

'I think that the language lab sessions have helped me to improve my pronunciation.' (level 10)

**Feedback**

'[...] I can record the class and study it at home.' (level 2)

**Time**

'It's interesting the use of reportages and news, but we need more time.' (level 7)

'It should never be eliminated because it's very helpful, but the sessions should be longer.' (level 1)

'More time is necessary in order to practice the lessons.' (level 5)

'So far, I would like to have an-hour-and-a-half language lab session.' (level 3)

**Advanced levels (7-10)**

'I don't know why we don't have lab sessions in this level.' (level 9)

'It's important to keep the lab sessions in the high level in order to practice our English.' (level 9)

'The lab sessions should be kept in the advanced courses.' (level 7)

**Confidence**

'[...] it reduces our fear to talk.' (level 1)

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Note: In some cases, the researcher had to translate some comments into English, especially some opinions written by students from the first levels.