

# LangLab's Pedagogical Superiority

*The reasons why students learn languages faster with LangLab*

## Introduction

Schools are increasingly incorporating language labs and looking for software that will bring language-lab capability to their existing computer labs. Most teachers have come to see the value of technology for speeding up language learning, but many teachers are still wary of technology and are not sure whether there is true pedagogical benefit in it. If we consider what progress students make when they are actually immersed in a foreign language and culture, however, and think about how closely the usual language class approximates this experience versus what can be accomplished in a lab and by accessing lab materials remotely, in homework and distance learning, there is a clear rationale for incorporating in-lab and remote practice into the curriculum.

With *LangLab*, computer-assisted learning is no longer limited to the listen-and-repeat exercises of the old audio lab; it can draw on multimedia files and the wealth of resources available on the Web in eliciting oral and written reactions to authentic expressions of a civilization. As students' mastery of the language advances, these responses can progress from the completely structured to the free-form and personal. Furthermore, there are sound reasons for concluding that technology can increase instructional time, optimize the student's time invested in learning a language, and help instructors make the most efficient use of the time they can devote to their students. Here are some of the major arguments; they explain why a solution like *LangLab*, which facilitates all-skill language learning with multimedia support in both in-school use and over the Internet, can do much to help institutions cope with the time and resource constraints teachers almost always face.

## Rationale

### **More teacher-student interaction**

The usual framework of classes devoted to teaching punctuated by occasional formal testing bears little relationship to how individuals normally acquire a language. Normally, an individual is guided by constant interaction, evaluation by others, and feedback in the form of their reactions. *LangLab* makes this constant teacher-student interaction possible. It is much easier for an instructor to approximate the natural process of language acquisition when the instructor can monitor and sample students' efforts in the language lab, and when the instructor can easily provide students with quick asynchronous feedback, in

conditions that let the instructor take a moment to assess the student's progress and think about what might most help the student improve.

**A step-by-step path to linguistic competence**

Software such as LangLab can provide a structured and gradual path to overcoming difficulties, whereas as in the classroom, it is difficult to bridge the gap between a simple presentation and illustration of aspects of a language and the way these aspects of a language might appear in authentic native speech, which is often too hard for the student to comprehend. When musicians who play an instrument learn a difficult passage, they never play it at full speed right away, but rather begin slowly, repeating the passage again and again, while gradually increasing the speed and adding elements of the transition to it. LangLab lessons enable students to do the same thing, to start by repeating something known; then they can add complexity and gradually remove supporting clues until students reach the desired proficiency. They can move from the completely structured responses of drills to responses that permit greater individual variation, and then to activities that call for synthesis of language skills and free responses.

**More interaction with authentic language and culture**

Use of the lab and its resources, including by remote access, increases dramatically the amount of time students are exposed to authentic language and cultural materials, as well as the time students spend practicing language skills themselves. With *LangLab*, instructors have the ability to draw on a huge combinatorial system of multimedia elements and activities in creating lessons that elicit frequent response, rather than just feeding students large chunks of material in CD-ROM form or as podcasts. The variety of exercises and activities holds students' attention, while the frequency of response draws students in and makes language-learning a lot more compelling.

Students take language-learning more seriously when the materials presented to them are authentic cultural artifacts, and particularly when they receive visual clues that present the cultural context of a language. In a regular classroom, the effort required to present visual material is significant enough that use of it generally takes the form of exposing students to large segments of material, to which they are reacting passively. Consequently, instructors have difficulty in judging what and how effectively the material is actually teaching the student. When they create *LangLab* lessons, however, there is no time wasted in presenting varied materials that provide the closest possible approximation to actual immersion in a culture. Since lesson items can include video in smaller segments moreover, the frequent responses elicited from the student give the instructor a way of seeing how effectively students are learning.

**More efficient integration of skills**

Similarly, the ability of *LangLab* to interweave elements in activities makes it far easier to work on all four language skills with each aspect of the language, ensuring that students master it in speaking and writing, too, rather than simply recognizing it in reading and listening. This coordinated all-skill practice requires meticulous organization best conceived and implemented in advance, through selection and assembly of the appropriate text, audio, and video files; it cannot easily be improvised in a regular class.

Furthermore, the mixture of activities required to providing this all-skill practice in a regular classroom requires manipulation of various audio-visual devices in addition to frequent switching from one activity to another. Since time is lost in explanations and preparation during each switch, the actual instructional time is substantially less than with software that makes all materials immediately available in the appropriate form at the appropriate points.

**Exposure to a realistic variety of speakers**

In the lab (or virtual lab, in remote use), students can be exposed to many speakers of the language in a structured way, preparing them for the variety of voices and accents they will encounter when meeting native speakers and traveling or living in the country. They can work up to the level of proficiency that will let them understand films, plays, televised debates, and other contexts with multiple speakers.

**More actual instructional time for each student**

In the classroom, the usual sort of instructor-student interaction results in students spending most of their time listening to other students with rudimentary language skills, since the instructor must have students participate and respond in turn rather than simultaneously. With *LangLab*, students are working in parallel; instead of spending most of their time listening to other students, they spend most of their time absorbing authentic language and responding to it by speaking or writing, as is the case when immersed in the civilization and interactions with native speakers.

Additionally, at the college level, the availability of materials for drop-in lab use at the student's convenience means that the student can receive exposure to the language that greatly exceeds what can be done in class. Students are unlikely (and usually unable, because of scheduling conflicts) to take a class that would have an equivalent number of class hours at fixed times on a regular basis.

The further convenience of the on-demand remote access *LangLab* makes possible ensures that students will be able to overcome scheduling constraints imposed by their involvement in multiple activities and will be able to find time to work with the material.

**Optimizing the instructor's time**

*LangLab* optimizes the instructor's time. In a regular class the instructor must try to give students equal opportunities to participate, without necessarily being able to focus on those who need more help. In addition to the teacher having to try to elicit participation from each student in turn, teacher-student interaction is constrained by the relative slowness with which students with imperfect language skills generally can respond. The occasions an instructor has to interact with each student are too few; nevertheless, during each student's participation, the time the instructor spends interacting with the student may exceed what is required to evaluate the student's skill level, diagnose problems, and give the student guidance in improving. Using *LangLab* in a language lab (and outside, for remote assessment and feedback provided using the Teacher module), an instructor can quickly sample or "spot check" a student's linguistic performance, focus on the problems and on the students who need more work and guidance, and skip over or respond in a more perfunctory way to those who appear to be progressing satisfactorily. Additionally, teacher-student interaction can be

initiated by the student:: since *LangLab's* Client module permits the student to call the instructor and ask for help, a monitored session is somewhat like an "office hour" in which the instructor is available to all, and can devote time in proportion to need rather than arbitrarily striving to give equal attention to all for a necessarily short period.

On a more pedestrian level, instructors often complain that their evaluation of written work is slowed down by the difficulty of deciphering students' handwriting before they can actually assess their performance! With *LangLab*, students can type written answers that instructors can review far more quickly.

**Optimizing the student's time**

Using *LangLab* at their own pace in the language lab (and outside, when doing homework by remote access), students can use their time optimally. Given a diversity of activities that teach the same skills and aspects of a language, students will be able to select those activities that best suit their individual styles of learning. Students can also concentrate on those aspects of the language that they need to practice more, rather than being constrained by the one-size-fits-all approach and pace that must be used when material is presented in class. Students consequently see results faster, and the satisfaction of accomplishment tends to make them spend more time interacting with the material. Additionally, because they are in a situation in which self-paced learning is possible, they tend to take responsibility for their learning and engage with it, rather than seeing themselves as "customers" or observers who can remain largely passive as the instructor labors to teach them.

In the classroom, students do not have the ability to replay what the teacher and others are saying or their own performance. Using *LangLab*, however, they can easily repeat material they have difficulty with, until they attain the requisite aural discrimination ability or learn to comprehend what they could not initially. Furthermore, they can listen to themselves and easily compare their own oral production with models.

**More productive teacher-student interaction**

Language-lab software like *LangLab* supports and increases greatly the productivity of teacher-student interaction. In a regular class, an instructor has only a very small sample of each student's skill levels to evaluate. When students work in a lab and outside, making recordings that are available to the instructor afterward, the instructor has far more to go on. Quick random-access sampling of student's work possible in real-time monitoring combines with later, more leisurely assessment to give instructors a much better idea of how the student is progressing and what the student needs to concentrate on. Not only does the instructor have a clearer vision of the student's entire skill profile, but the instructor can also intervene and provide personalized feedback to students in a way not possible in class, and at the precise point needed. Students can replay their recordings, compare their responses to a model and to the instructor's comments (perhaps repeating responses as directed by the instructor), and make better use of the instructor's suggestions. Students love this personalized feedback; they also relate better to oral comments by the instructor than to comments or mere grades instructors have written on papers. (Students often have trouble deciphering an instructor's written comments, especially when the instructor comes from a country in which handwriting is somewhat different.)

**Easier tracking of student's progress and time spent**

In a regular class, it is cumbersome, at the least, to review students' progress over the course of a semester, and it is obviously impossible without recordings to gauge the evolution of students' aural comprehension and speaking abilities. With written work, papers must be returned to students, and instructors cannot count on being able to retrieve them for later review unless they take the time to photocopy everything. Because *LangLab* can make the entire record of students' written and aural/oral work instantly available to the instructor, it makes it very easy for the instructor to review students' progress and make general comments on it.

Similarly, *LangLab* will provide instructors with a record of how much time each student has spent on each lesson and each activity. The instructor can then judge whether the student is devoting sufficient effort to the course and can compare the time put in to the results.

**Ability to tailor curricula to a class**

*LangLab* makes it easy to alter and customize a curriculum for a particular group, while maintaining constant instructor evaluation of student's progress. As students' learning profiles and difficulties become clear, instructors can add or drop learning activities to optimize students' time spent and provide targeted reinforcement. Although an experienced instructor will endeavor to bring this flexibility to a regular class, in the absence of work in the language lab, reinforcement is essentially limited to written work that can be done outside class or exposure to audio materials (generally selections from CDs, since materials such as podcasts are necessarily less focused) that students can listen to independently, but without any possibility of teacher-student interaction.

**Support for pedagogical research**

Because instructors can easily see how much time students are spending, they can compare the average time students spend on an activity to their initial estimate of the time required and to the results the activity produces. This comparison tells the instructor whether the activity is, in fact, harder or easier than the instructor expected, whether it is appropriate for the level of the class, and whether it is an efficient way of teaching an aspect of the language. The instructor can then engage in pedagogical research, trying out various pedagogical methods and activities to see which are most productive for a given group of students.

**A tool for better course design**

*LangLab* is conducive to intelligent course design that starts with goals and standards, and works backward to the supporting activities that make it possible to achieve them in small incremental steps. Because students can easily perceive this incremental structure of learning, they see the progress they are making and derive satisfaction from this progress.

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*Language Magazine. published an earlier version of this article in its August 2006 issue, under the title "The Lure of the Remote Lab."*

