

Format Preferences in Publishers' Recordings

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At the fourth annual business meeting of the National Association of Language Laboratory Directors held on 25 March, 1968, in Houston, Texas, a resolution was passed asking all publishers of foreign language textbooks with accompanying tape recordings or producers of such tape recordings "to make available custom duplicating in a variety of track configurations, backing materials and speeds, at a nominal extra cost to permit consumer use on an optimally convenient basis." We in the Language Laboratory at the University of California at Berkeley are well aware of the desirability of such a service on the part of producers, for we must often engage in lengthy correspondence or long-distance telephone calls to get tape recordings in the format we prefer. In some cases we have had to give up, either because the producer was unable to provide what we want or because he wanted so much more than the cost of an already expensive set. (Ideally, we would like to get all our recordings at 7½ i.p.s., full track, on high grade low-print 1.5 mil polyester tape wound on 10-inch reels or hubs. Then we would be saved the trouble of putting them into this form for storage as masters.) Not long ago we had occasion to discuss the question of tape format with a language text and tape publisher in some detail. It appears possible that a moderate number of options could be settled on, and that publishers could produce these in appropriate numbers, thus eliminating the cost of custom duplicating. We decided to survey local practices with respect to reel size, tape speed and track configuration, and to this end added a block of questions to a questionnaire already being sent for the purpose of getting information for the *American Language Laboratory Directory*.

In December of 1968 we sent our questionnaire to 219 institutions of higher learning in the State of California that could be expected to teach foreign languages. By the end of March 1969 only 145 had responded. Of these, 105 had usable replies to the block of questions on tape format.

The findings are tabulated below as percentages. (Note that percentages do not necessarily add up to 100% as questions did not require mutually exclusive answers. Moreover, many laboratories seem not to operate with a single set of standards. Contrast items three and four below.)

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Program sources use open reels.	96%
Program sources use cartridges.	18%
Program sources run at $7\frac{1}{2}$ i.p.s.	75%
Program sources run at $3\frac{3}{4}$ i.p.s.	84%
Program sources run at $1\frac{7}{8}$ i.p.s.	2%
Program sources run at 15 i.p.s.	1%
Programs are full track.	42%
Programs are half track.	62%
Programs are quarter track.	13%
Programs are 24 track.	1%
Programs are on 7" reels.	85%
Programs are on 5" reels.	45%
Programs are on 3" reels.	1%
Programs are on $2\frac{3}{4}$ " reels.	1%
Programs are on cartridges.	7%

The same information was obtained for student tape recorders—where the laboratory had them. Though not particularly significant for the question under investigation, these are shown below.

Student recorders use open reels.	71%
Student recorders use cartridges.	26%
Student recorders run at $7\frac{1}{2}$ i.p.s.	44%
Student recorders run at $3\frac{3}{4}$ i.p.s.	73%
Student recorders run at $1\frac{7}{8}$ i.p.s.	3%
Programs are full track.	25%
Programs are half track.	63%
Programs are quarter track.	7%
Programs are on 7" reels.	48%
Programs are on 5" reels.	36%
Programs are on 3" reels.	3%
Programs are on cartridges.	18%

A number of comments may be made on these figures. Some laboratories use both open reels and cartridges on their program sources, but open reels are preferred about four to one. Many laboratories seem to use both $7\frac{1}{2}$ and $3\frac{3}{4}$ i.p.s. speeds but $3\frac{3}{4}$ is preferred by a majority. This is perhaps unfortunate since the high quality reproduction needed for *foreign* language work is not so easily obtainable at $3\frac{3}{4}$ i.p.s.; the good reproduction of high frequencies necessary for distinguishing various fricatives from one another, while not impossible at $3\frac{3}{4}$ i.p.s., is more readily had with the tapes in ordinary use at $7\frac{1}{2}$ i.p.s. (Of course a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, and poor quality components anywhere along the line will negate good quality everywhere else.)

Some misunderstanding of the term "full track" seems evident in the responses. We use the term for recording in which the entire

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width of the $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch tape is used for a single recording, in one direction. Some respondents seem to have understood the term to mean that both sides were used separately—what we would call two track. Assuming this, the expected lack of preferences for full track program sources is smaller than the two to three shown. Quarter track sources are in fairly common use now. The one 24 track response was for an institution which uses portable tape players with one-inch tape.

Seven-inch reels are preferred by about two to one, though a good number of laboratories use both. (The new figure for cartridges given here is smaller than the figures above. This is to be accounted for by the fact that "cartridges" had to be written in on a line marked "other".)

There are considerable differences between local practice with respect to program sources and student tape recorders. (Note that percentages are calculated on the basis of 105 usable responses, not the number using student tape recorders.) None are of significance here but the even greater use of the slower speeds is probably to be deplored in passing.

The last question asked the respondent was what form he would like to receive his publishers' tapes in. Results are tabulated below.

Wanted tapes on reels.	80%
Wanted tapes on cartridges.	2%
Wanted $7\frac{1}{2}$ i.p.s. speed.	42%
Wanted $3\frac{3}{4}$ i.p.s. speed.	47%
Wanted full track recordings.	26%
Wanted two-track recordings.	11%
Wanted four-track recordings.	1%
Wanted half-track recordings.	35%
Wanted 7-inch reels.	32%
Wanted 5-inch reels.	8%

Some useful generalizations may perhaps be drawn. Whereas practice shows a ratio of about five to one on the question of reels versus cartridges (but some respondents use both reels and cartridges), desiderata are 40 to one in favor of reels (excepting the many instances of "don't care" not tabulated above). The expressed preference for $3\frac{3}{4}$ i.p.s. speed, though not large, is almost identical with the figure for actual practice. Again, the figures for track configuration are, unfortunately, not always clear. One thing is sure: Though four-track program sources are not uncommon, almost no one expects to get his tapes from a publisher that way. Even assuming that the persons who said full track meant what we call two track—and certainly this is not so—as many respondents want half track as reels as against 5-inch reels runs four to one as regular two and one

in actual usage in the laboratory. Again, however, cases of both-and are included.

A number of respondents said they did not care what form they received their tapes in. Perhaps this is because so many (87%) reported they had their own dubbing equipment and are capable, presumably, of putting their materials in another form if they so wish. However a few respondents did add notes asking for units of set lengths, 15-20 minutes, 30 minutes, and hour lengths respectively. A couple asked for one lesson per reel. These conveniences bear somewhat on the problem of indexing, a matter treated in another NALLD resolution passed at the same time as the one referred to at the beginning of this communication.

It might be unwise to establish any policies on the basis of these findings alone. Similar surveys should probably be made in other parts of the country and among secondary schools as well as colleges and universities. (Also, the questionnaire should be designed to obviate the misunderstanding that arose with respect to track and configuration in the questionnaire we sent out.) Nevertheless, on the basis of the evidence from this survey it appears that a manufacturer could offer the following tape format options—in order of preference:

1. Open 7" reel, $7\frac{1}{2}$ i.p.s., full track
2. Open 7" reel, $3\frac{3}{4}$ i.p.s., full track
3. Open 5" reel, $3\frac{3}{4}$ i.p.s., full track
4. Cartridge, $3\frac{3}{4}$ i.p.s., full track

The recommendation of full track is made because of the low number of schools using two-track materials and the obvious problems: A cut or break damages two lessons; duplication is difficult; lessons are hard to locate, and so on. But more particularly, we suggest full track because almost all equipment that plays half track material handles full track material automatically. Also, there is an off chance that this way one will get slightly better reproduction, although perhaps largely only in cases of indifferent functioning of local duplicating or playback units.

Tape speed of $7\frac{1}{2}$ i.p.s. is to be preferred to that of $3\frac{3}{4}$ i.p.s. for the reason mentioned above, i.e., for its better reproduction of high frequencies. Again, it is interesting to note that in actual usage it is not much less popular than the $3\frac{3}{4}$ i.p.s. speed, in spite of its costing twice as much.

Of the four options given above, the first two ought to satisfy more than 70% of the purchasers; all four would give a selection wide enough to satisfy most institutions interested in acquiring foreign language tapes.

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