

LangLab PASSPORT vs. Classroom-Management Software

Despite some overlap, LangLab PASSPORT and classroom-management solutions are largely complementary products. Classroom-management products enable the teacher to choose files and send them to students; the teacher does so more or less on the spur of the moment, broadcasting instructional resources to students working together in a computer lab. LangLab PASSPORT provides the ability—but also requires the teacher—to plan and organize a lesson in advance, structuring it in pedagogical units that can combine skills and use varied instructional resources.

With LangLab, the teacher does not have to improvise the lesson. The teacher can take the time to plan it thoughtfully, inventory relevant resources, and assemble them in items of lessons. The teacher can do this work from home or in an office environment free of distractions. Classroom-management software does not provide—or make it easy for the teacher to create—an organizational structure for lessons. It is not designed for preparation of lessons in advance, but rather for sending instructional resources to students on the fly. This major difference in functionality has the following pedagogical consequences.

- From the pedagogical standpoint, it is unwise to count on harried teachers being so brilliant as to be able to sit down in the lab and immediately choose, locate, and broadcast the most relevant and effective instructional resources, sending them to students with classroom-management software. It simply takes more time and thought to assemble coherent lessons that teach all skills and are varied and engaging.
- Indeed, because classroom-management software simply allows sending arbitrary files to students, it does not really support the concept of a structured “lesson” per se. With LangLab, a teacher can construct a lesson in which the items represent a sequence with a pedagogical purpose. The items are small, manageable increments, with the possibility of having one item build on another. Items in sequence can reinforce an aspect of language with complementary activities, bringing together different skills so that they reinforce one another. By going through a sequence of items, students derive a sense of progress that larger blocks of material rarely give them. Furthermore, if there is an aspect of the material to be covered that remains problematic for them, it is much easier to diagnose and deal with their difficulties within a sequence of small steps rather than in a less focused monolithic block of material.
- Even when inspired teachers manage to find and send out pedagogically effective files, the resources constitute an evanescent and idiosyncratic constellation, one that even the

same teacher may have trouble recalling when teaching a similar class at a later date, and one that has to be documented if it is to be made available for other teachers in the future. With the lesson/item structure LangLab uses, the resources are already assembled, and the organization is stored; the teacher or colleagues can easily inspect them later and will immediately grasp the logic inherent in the progression of a sequence of items. The repository of instructional ideas is always available and can be constantly enriched by a community of users.

- With pre-assembled lessons such as LangLab makes possible, students do not have to rely on a teacher to send out files and are not limited by a one-size-fits-all rhythm of learning. Unless the teacher chooses to have the class work in synchrony (as is sometimes necessary for testing), the students can work at their own pace, learning in a more natural manner, concentrating on things that give them greater difficulty. Since students have different learning styles, teachers can put together LangLab lessons that use a diversity of resources and approaches to mastering an aspect of language, and students will discover and use those resources and exercises most conducive to their own style of learning.
- The possibility of self-paced work, involving lessons selected from a drop-down menu of lessons, progressions of items that students can move around in by clicking, and instant, obvious availability of resources for all language skills, means that students can use LangLab on a drop-in basis in a lab. They do not always need a teacher to be there to supply instructional resources, as is the case with classroom-management software. Furthermore, since an institution can set up remote access to the server that holds LangLab lessons, teachers can have students use LangLab for homework, as cannot be done—obviously—with software designed for managing a class physically present. Students have the freedom to do this homework at a time when they are most receptive, rather than at a fixed time. Through such homework, teachers can actually increase the number of instructional hours students spend learning the language, and in particular the time they spend interacting with native speakers and culturally authentic materials.
- From the pedagogical standpoint, in which teacher-student interaction is vital to the learning experience, classroom-management solutions—and even very expensive language-lab solutions that similarly depend on a teacher sending files to students—suffer from a serious flaw. Finding files and dispatching them to students inevitably distracts the teacher from the fundamental role of monitoring what students are doing and intervening to help those who would most benefit from assistance. The teacher who uses such a system can be as busy as an air-traffic controller. Sometimes, to minimize the effort in being a human file server, the teacher can send out large blocks of material (e.g., film excerpts and audio broadcasts, longer text documents), dispatching files less frequently—but in this case the students have a largely passive experience of the language (an undesirable result). Alternatively, the teacher can send out files that are relatively short, with students constantly challenged to respond to the material—but in this case the teacher is spending considerable time simply seeing who is ready for new

material, finding it, and sending it out, and cannot concentrate on listening to students and helping them. Since LangLab does not use this “push” technology of file broadcast, but rather a “pull” technology of having students click to retrieve resources already put together in organized lessons, all of the teacher’s time can be devoted to the real-time targeted feedback that helps students learn faster and shows them that their teacher really cares about their progress.

- With LangLab, there is an inevitable initial investment of time to prepare lessons. With classroom-management software and other language-lab solutions that have similar multimedia file broadcast functionality, it is possible for a teacher who has not had time to prepare coherent lessons to grab hastily materials of some kind—Powerpoints, a DVD of a movie, CDs accompanying a textbook, perhaps—and send these materials to students. Normally, a text-chat feature of such software will at least let teachers ask students multiple-choice questions (made up on the spot) and collect their answers, to test their understanding. Normally, since such systems lack audio-recorder functionality, the student may be able to engage in speaking practice, but is not actually recording files that the teacher can assess.
 - Although there may be little initial effort involved in selecting materials and sending them out with classroom-management solutions, the effort has to be repeated every time the teacher wishes to teach a similar class using the same materials. A conscientious teacher will, indeed, think about which materials to use, and needs to find and bring them again each time. In contrast, with LangLab, the initial investment of time in preparing lessons pays off handsomely at the outset and year after year thereafter: the lessons can be more coherent, can integrate language skills and activities far more readily than when the teacher has to juggle disparate stand-alone materials, and the lesson, once prepared, never has to be prepared again.
 - Although LangLab lacks functionality for streaming whatever is playing on the teacher’s computer to students, and for sending students files not already associated with items of lessons, it does give the teacher some ability to improvise lessons. The teacher using the Monitor module has available a Call All function that allows the teacher to address the entire class. The teacher can use this function to speak to the students about materials that the teacher presents to the class outside LangLab. For instance, the teacher can introduce a film, show scenes using a projector and speakers, and ask questions about it or have the students practice sentences from it. The students’ responses can even be recorded in items of a quickly-created blank lesson—one that simply has a name and a certain number of items, without there being any content associated with the items. The teacher can either ask the students to go from item to item of this lesson or can take control of the module students are using (on all students’ computers) to proceed from item to item in a synchronized fashion. For each item, the teacher

does something with the support material, pauses this resource, uses LangLab to say something using the Call All function, tells the students to record, then ends the call and clicks on Record to begin the recording for all students, stopping it whenever the teacher deems appropriate. Additionally, the teacher can use Let'sTalk modules of LangLab to have students work in pairs or groups, use Call All to ask questions or throw out a topic for discussion, then have the pairs or groups discuss the support material, recording the discussion if the teacher so directs. With individual or pair/group work, the teacher then has the same ability to review the students' work afterward and provide feedback that the teacher would have with a lesson for which files have been associated with items in advance. This limited improvisational capability possible with LangLab buys time for the teacher to think about and begin assembling richer, more effective lessons.

Since classroom-management solutions are not specifically designed for learning languages, they normally lack two fundamental components of language-lab solutions: audio comparative recording and the ability of the teacher to monitor students and listen discreetly to what are saying without disturbing them. For the student, simply repeating one hears on a CD is far less effective than being able to replay what one has recorded and compare it to a speaker's prompts. For the teacher, classroom-management solutions are more geared toward teacher-to-many work than to the many-to-teacher communication that characterizes supervision of language instruction. They facilitate general-purpose improvised demonstrations of various subjects to an entire class rather than more structured language practice, in which the teacher needs to be able to move quickly from student to student, listening to a bit of what each one is doing, in order to see who needs help and to intervene.

Classroom-management solutions may let teachers prepare surveys or quizzes on the fly and send them to students, and at least one new product lets the teacher record demonstrations in advance. Since these solutions are not designed specifically for language instruction, however, they lack the critical tools for preparing audio clips found in LangLab's Admin (authoring) module and give the teacher no editing ability on the audio files broadcasted. LangLab's authoring tools let teachers record their own audio, import audio clips, capture audio from video clips on the Web and from films on DVD, and use cut/copy/paste tools on the sound wave to arrange it or to move sound from one item or lesson to another one. They let teachers insert a recording pause of any length at a selected spot in the sound clip with one click, adjust the length of existing recording pauses (such as may be found in tracks of CDs that come with textbooks), put in shorter pauses not designed for recording but rather to give students time to think before responding, and control what is considered a recording pause, to avoid having a recording light come on during pauses put in simply for dramatic emphasis. The teacher can also adjust the volume of selected portions of a clip.

Since classroom-management products are, as their name implies, for directing a class present and working in the lab, they simply do not include functions that let a teacher assess students'

work and provide targeted feedback to them afterward—even from a computer elsewhere—such as are found in LangLab’s Teacher module. This feedback is particularly vital in language instruction—it is the school version of the constant feedback someone immersed in a foreign civilization receives from those in the surrounding environment, or that a baby receives in learning a native language from parents. Among the strengths of this module are the following:

- What is sometimes called “data management”: having a student’s work immediately retrievable without having to search for it in folders (as would be necessary for files collected by classroom-management solutions), simply by selecting the student’s name from a pull-down menu and by clicking to see item-by-item what oral and written responses the student has provided. (Alternatively, when grading tests, the teacher can go to one student’s work for an item and then go to each other student in turn, to see what each has done.) This capability makes it particularly easy to review the student’s progress over time, something far more difficult to do if the student’s work simply takes the form of files collected by classroom-management products, without an underlying organization.
- The basic sound-editing capability found in the Teacher module lets the teacher amplify selected portions of the student’s recording, thereby resolving the problem of the muffled responses that can result from inattentive students positioning the microphone poorly.
- The ability to insert comments and new recording pauses at any point in the student’s recording to help the student—probably the greatest strength of this module. The comment may be a summary evaluation with general suggestions that the teacher adds at the beginning or end, but more frequently it is something specific inserted right after a particular response in a series, perhaps drawing the student’s attention to a pronunciation problem and giving the student another model to imitate, followed by a new recording pause added for practice. The teacher can focus the student’s attention on what is problematic, cutting out portions of a recording that are already satisfactory. Students love and are motivated by this sort of individual attention.
- For the teacher, it is a much-appreciated luxury to be able to assess students’ work and provide asynchronous feedback in a comfortable setting outside the lab, at a time of the teacher’s convenience, when the teacher is not subjected to constant interruptions and assailed by students’ questions or demands.

This support for assessment and feedback in LangLab carries over into functionality for pair and group work. Most classroom-management solutions have some ability to organize students into groups, though the number of groups is usually limited—say, six at most—making them completely unsuitable (except for the rare extraordinarily small class) for the pair conversation and testing that is a fundamental activity of language instruction. The grouping capability of such products is designed primarily so that a teacher can send different files to different groups rather than for pair/group conversation. (With LangLab, one can easily have different pairs or groups—or even individual students—use different items or even different lessons, just by telling them

which lessons or items to use and without having to send out files in each case.) Most classroom-management products, even sophisticated ones, have no capability for group audio chat, only text chat. Even the rare new product that supports group audio chat lacks the capability for recording it so that the teacher can evaluate it and provide feedback afterward. Not only does LangLab have such a capability, it even records an individual version of the group conversation for each student, so that when a teacher does provide feedback to a student, it is for that specific student and is in the form of comments accessible only to that student. LangLab's Let'sT@lk Monitor module even lets the teacher carry group assignments over from one class to another or pre-assign students to groups (including from home), to save time during a class that will be devoted to pair or group testing.

Classroom-management solutions, of course, have a number of functions not present in LangLab. Such functions characteristically support the creation of lessons on the spot, or classes involving class discussion and demonstration for the whole class, as is appropriate for more abstract subjects, rather than the structured sequential learning and individual repetitive practice that facilitate acquiring a skill such as mastery of a language. Among such classroom-management functions are the following:

- Broadcast of the teacher's screen to the class, with possible on-screen annotation by the teacher. With LangLab, there is no way to broadcast the teacher's screen to students, but the materials the teacher would choose to present have already been organized in lessons available to the student, so there is little point to such a demonstration. If students experience difficulty with something that appears on the screen—say, a Web page they are supposed to bring up—the teacher can bring up the exact same resource and use the Call All function of the Monitor module to talk to students about it. To see the organization of the lesson and the resources students see on the screen, in the text window of LangLab's Client module or in a program launched by Client module's URL button, such as a Web page appearing in a browser, the teacher can simply run the Admin module or the Client module at the same time as the Monitor module and go to the item with which students are having a problem.
- Text chat. LangLab currently lacks such a capability, principally because of the availability of free instant-messaging software with this capability and the greater desirability of having students actually converse.
- Student demonstration to the rest of the class. With classroom-management products, a teacher can broadcast the screen of one student to the others and have the selected student demonstrate something. There is no such function in LangLab. However, as noted above, there is little use for such an on-the-fly demonstration, and it is possible for a teacher using LangLab to create a lesson that is actually a compilation of student presentations, one per item. The teacher can simply create a free-recording item a large text box and ask students to talk or write about something or both. If they are supposed to choose a Web page, image, or other instructional resource and talk about it, they simply e-mail the URL

for the resource to the teacher. The teacher can then import their sound files and text into an item of another lesson and link the URL button for the item to the indicated Web address or file location. Students can then go through this lesson, seeing and/or reading the presentation of each student—and, if the teacher desires, commenting on it orally, in a long recording pause, or in writing, in another text box the teacher adds to the text window. It can, however, occasionally be useful for a teacher to be able to call upon an individual student or a group to illustrate something in speech—what is often called the “model student” or “model group” function—and although LangLab currently lacks these functions (at the moment, only the teacher can address the entire class), it is likely that they will be added to LangLab in the future.

- As multimedia broadcast systems, classroom-management products often let the teacher record in digital form analogue material that is being broadcast. LangLab requires association of files with items of lessons—i.e., materials must already be digitized—but there are many extremely inexpensive stand-alone tools for digitization of analogue video, as well as free tools (including those that come with Windows) for video editing. Using such tools, a teacher can digitize a video cassette and extract clips for use with items of a LangLab lesson, or even more easily extract such clips from a DVD of a film.
- Spur-of-the-moment surveys and testing, often with automatic scoring, to let the teacher gauge how well a class is following something being presented. LangLab has no such functionality; with LangLab, all tests are prepared in advance, and are simply lessons kept hidden until the moment of use, revealed and made retrievable at that time, and hidden again afterward. On the other hand, such on-the-spot quizzes are more appropriate to the evolving presentation of more abstract material, where the teaching is often testing concepts, than to the more structured presentation of elements of a language and the individual practice required to master them. Since mastery of a language is more easily reducible to a natural sequence of steps than more abstract material, it is easier to plan the progression in advance and incorporate it in a lesson. Since the content of the test is more predictable, it, too, can be prepared in advance. When students experience problems, their difficulties will be apparent to the teacher listening to them using LangLab’s Monitor module (and the teacher can see if students seem to be progressing too slowly through items of a lesson, an indication of problems). The automatic-scoring feature would, nevertheless, be a convenience for harried teachers, even though language testing has to involve a combination of skills, and oral production, unlike true/false and multiple-choice questions, cannot easily be scored automatically with current technology. It is likely that functions of this type will be added to LangLab in the future, including, as technology evolves, for oral responses as well as simple written ones.

The core of classroom-management solutions, though, is as indicated in another name for them, classroom control. They enforce discipline in a classroom or lab and make sure that students are engaged in the activities assigned rather than extraneous ones. With such solutions, teachers can see what is actually on students’ screens at the moment—the resources for the task

assigned, or games the student is playing and irrelevant Youtube music video clips the student is watching. The teacher can watch thumbnails of all students' screens, rotate through groups of screens, or home in on a particular student's screen and even take screen shots of it to confront a student with the evidence. The teacher can blank the screen of an errant student to end a distraction, and can even take control of the mouse and keyboard or, in the most desperate cases, shut down the computer. To prevent students from surfing the Web rather than addressing the task at hand, the teacher can either set up a list of blocked sites or limit Web access to a list of approved sites.

LangLab does not let the teacher police student use of the computer in this manner. Although the teacher can take control of the Client module for all students, make it go to a particular item of a particular lesson, and can initiate and stop listening or recording, the teacher is not actually controlling the computer or preventing the student from engaging in other activity on it. (This feature has a different role: such synchronized work may be required by the rules of standardized tests, with timing restrictions on listening and recording.) Fortunately, such enforcement capabilities are rarely necessary for language instruction of the kind supported by LangLab. They are more useful for other kinds of teaching, when students are more likely to become bored and seek diversion outside the assignment. The danger of students becoming so distracted is far greater when the class is dealing with other subjects, and with more abstract material delivered in much larger blocks that take more time to traverse and do not provide a constant sense of progress. The properly-constructed LangLab lesson is already somewhat game-like: it is a sequence of small, incremental steps that move the student from highly-structured practice to less-structured individual expression, and completing a step is both manageable and rewarding. Like a game, the LangLab lesson elicits constant oral and written response from the student, keeping the student engaged with varied presentations and audio-visual stimuli, including images and video clips as well as colors and fonts used in the text window. Since a class can include both individual responses to speakers as well as pair and group activities, students can experience interaction with others without resorting to sending text messages to their friends.

Even without the classroom-management capability of seeing each student's screen display, the teacher monitoring a class using LangLab can quickly tell if students are indeed working and progressing through the lesson: the Monitor module tells the teacher at a glance which item of which lesson each student is using, and whether the student is simply listening, is recording, or has paused an item. Whenever this visual indication seems to be changing too slowly—an indication that the student may be trying to do something else at the same time—the teacher can eavesdrop on the student and intervene if necessary. On those occasions when it might indeed be useful to see the screen—for instance, to help a student with a Web page or document the student is using—the teacher can simply run the Admin or Client module at the same time as the Monitor module, navigate to the item the student is on, and bring up the same resource the student is using. The student can call the teacher and ask for help in a private conversation, or the

teacher, noting that the student's progress seems to have stopped, can initiate the conversation and ask if the student is experiencing a problem.

Since classroom-management products are much less expensive than language-lab solutions (there is even free open-source classroom-management software available), the language teacher thinking about whether to try to make do with a classroom-management product as opposed to implementing a solution like LangLab might do better to consider the complementarity of these products. It is possible to use the two together and combine their strengths. For instance, although LangLab currently lacks a model-student function, the teacher who has up on the screen LangLab's Monitor module and also (perhaps on a second monitor screen plugged into the computer) the command ribbon of a classroom-management product can use Monitor to listen to students and select one as a model, then use the classroom-management product to navigate to the recording the student has just made with LangLab and send it to the other students. Similarly, for student's responses in Client's text window, a teacher can use the classroom-management software to send one student's screen with the text window to others, then use the Call All function of Monitor to talk to the whole class about that student's responses. Classroom-management products can also help teachers improvise LangLab lessons when teachers simply haven't had time to prepare intended lessons in advance, and can do so in a somewhat richer way than when a film is projected or sound is played on speakers attached to the teacher's computer. When students' computers have software that allows for sound mixing, and this function is turned on (teachers using a classroom-management product can show students how to do it), LangLab's Client module can capture as a recording anything playing in the sound card, in addition to what the student is saying into the microphone. It may well be easier for the teacher to review the student's recording if it includes this prompt material, perhaps audio from a film or from CDs that come with a textbook, as well as the student's responses. As soon as the teacher finds the time, of course, this material can be incorporated directly into the LangLab lesson. Similarly, when students are engaged in a LangLab lesson, a problem a student encounters may spur the teacher to find an additional resource, a Web page or file not yet included in the lesson, and send it to the student with a classroom-management product.

Given the inevitable unpredictability of the flow of a class, it will certainly benefit teachers to have the greatest possible variety of tools available to them, so that they can respond to whatever occurs. The greater the spectrum of tools and resources on which the teacher can draw, the more varied and engaging the class will be for the student, and the easier it will be for the teacher and student together to cope with any difficulties in learning and find the resources and approaches that help each student learn fastest.

Functional and Pedagogical Summary

Function	LangLab	Classroom Management
Lesson planning tool	Yes	No
Structured lessons	Yes	No
	Student retrieval from	
How made available	menus	Teacher dispatch
Integration of skills	Yes	No
Lesson as durable resource	Yes	No
Synchrhonous work	Yes	Yes
Individualized work	Yes	Not easy
Unsupervised learning	Yes	No
Remote use for homework	Yes	No
Teacher role in class	Helper	Policeman
Lesson improvisation	Limited	Yes
Effort in choosing resources	Initial	Repeated
Audio comparative recording	Yes	No
Real-time audio monitoring	Yes	No (most)
Lesson authoring tools (incl audio)	Yes	No
Easy data management	Yes	No
Asynchronous feedback, incl audio	Yes	No
Assessment from home	Yes	No
Recorded pair/group conversation	Yes	No
Teacher screen broadcast	No	Yes
Student screen broadcast	No	Yes
Text chat	No	Yes
Digitization on the fly	No	Yes
Spur-of-the-moment surveys	No	Yes
Autoscoring	No	Yes
Video monitoring of student screens	No	Yes
Control of student computers	No	Yes
Teacher-student audio chat	Yes	No
Audio speech to class	Yes	No