

Video in foreign language teaching:

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Much of the attention paid to video in foreign language teaching is focused upon a relatively small amount of commercially produced and distributed material. This paper briefly describes the development of this material in the EFL/ESL field; looks at some current issues and concerns, and considers future possibilities with particular reference to computer assisted interactive video.

Heelwat van die aandag wat video geniet as hulpmiddel by tweedetaalonderrig is toegespits op 'n relatief klein hoeveelheid kommersieel vervaardigde en verspreide materiaal. Hierdie artikel beskryf kortliks die ontwikkeling van bogenoemde materiaal waar dit Engels as tweede of vreemde taal betref. Verder word daar aandag gegee aan huidige tendense en toekomstige moontlikhede word oorweeg, met spesifieke verwysing na rekenaarondersteunde interaktiewe video.

1 Introduction

This paper is intended as a background note to the presentation of several video extracts. It is written from the point of view of a producer and publisher of commercially distributed video-based course materials for learners and teachers of English (EFL and ESL). Although language teaching by means of video, television and film is at least twenty-five years old, there is very little EFL/ESL material that can be considered as strictly commercial (that is, material that is made primarily to be sold to customers by producers and distributors who take risks in the expectation of revenue that will recover their original investment).

The very large body of non-commercial or public service video material in the field, such as the output of many television stations, has been excluded from this paper largely because its producers must usually disregard the opportunities open to the increasingly important non-broadcast market. In addition, while many public service organisations have provided essential co-sponsorship finance for commercial productions (e.g. German TV stations for several BBC projects, the British Council for BBC projects and for the recent *Video English* material), and some have begun to expect a fair proportion of their investment to be recov-

ered from sales, they do not *need* to sell video material in order to survive. On a smaller scale, video material that is produced strictly for limited local use (e.g. for a college, or even for the students in a single class) has also been excluded, not because it has no value – it is often immensely valuable – but because it is different from commercially produced material in too many respects for it to be treated fairly within the scope of this short paper.

2 Finance

Financial constraints, although they will receive little attention here, are a perpetual problem for the commercial EFL/ESL video producer, who has to work on very limited budgets since television and video sales do not make much money and certainly do not make money fast. In fact, if it was not for occasional co-sponsorship finance which does not have to be recovered (or can be recovered slowly), much of the video material mentioned below would never have been produced at all.

3 Early EFL/ESL video material

Most of the early EFL/ESL video material was intended for broadcast transmission, largely be-

cause it was commercially viable only as a loss leader for the sale of accompanying textbooks. Moreover, although it was usually shot on film, effective use in the classroom was limited by the problems encountered by teachers when handling film prints and film projection equipment.

This material was often popular (the BBC's *Walter and Connie* series was broadcast in seventy-five countries and is still in use more than twenty years after it was produced), and it achieved much that is supposedly unique to video – to extend the range of contexts in which language can be presented to the learner, to isolate and focus upon specific items or features of language and language use, to motivate learning and to make language memorable by means of vivid images and action. However, the material was inflexible and unresponsive. The programme length and the style of presentation had to fit the patterns and conventions of public broadcasting. Worse still, learners at home and teachers in class had no control over the material. They could not stop it or repeat it or re-schedule it to suit their own requirements. Partly as a result, the accompanying textbooks could achieve only limited objectives and could not be effectively integrated with the video material. There were no genuine multi-media courses, in fact.

The same deficiencies are still, to some extent, features of any video material which must allow for broadcast transmission. However, there have been enormous improvements over the past ten years.

4 Recent developments

First, the technology of production (e.g. in terms of video editing and caption generating) has changed in ways that can help the EFL/ESL video producer. More important, the video recorder/player now provides a means of recording and presenting material which has added a new dimension of flexibility and has increased the range of uses from which learners (at home, with a teacher in a classroom, or in a self-access system) can benefit. Moreover, video hardware and software are much less costly than film, and as the market for them has grown the cost of using video has decreased dramatically.

Gradually a methodology of video use has emerged and continues to develop. This develop-

ment is most obvious in classroom contexts. Whereas previously long stretches of film were projected in a darkened room, teachers now freeze the video picture, turn the sound down, play and repeat very short segments, and undertake activities with their students which make far more effective use of the video screentime available to them. These developments in technique and methodology are reflected in the types of materials now being produced in all media, and it now makes sense to refer to *multi-media* courses, with the material in each medium doing what is most appropriate.

5 Some current issues and concerns

One result of technological and methodological change has been the increasing concentration on certain issues and concerns on the part of course designers, writers, producers and, of course, their critics.

Authenticity

One of the main benefits often claimed for video is that it can show language in use in the real world. An objection to much EFL/ESL video material, from the very early days, has been that it is unnecessarily artificial, particularly in terms of dialogue and characterisation, and the newer uses of video have drawn even more attention to these features. It is widely felt that greater use of unscripted and untreated documentary interaction, and of material taken from existing television programmes not intended for language learning, can provide EFL/ESL material that is somehow more authentic.

This line of argument unfortunately disregards the fact that reality has to be controlled even in the most raw-looking documentary programme (e.g. in the way it is selectively shot or edited, or in the way participants are treated at times when they are not actually in front of the cameras), while the control exercised in most regular television production does not reflect an approach to authenticity which is any less objectionable than the control exercised in most EFL/ESL video production, though the regular TV producer may have a bigger budget and so be able to control reality with more refinement. Moreover, any ideal of authenticity must take account of what goes on in the classroom or in the self-instructional context as well as what is presented on the screen, where the

newscast is logically the only programme format which can claim a kind of authenticity for *all* its contents.

Despite these reservations, the concern with authenticity has undoubtedly had a good effect on the way in which language is scripted and used in EFL/ESL video, and the extent to which stereotypes and other forms of conventional image are effectively exploited for language learning purposes.

Cultural concerns

The increasingly discriminating uses of video have substantially confirmed that cultural aspects of language and language use are often conveyed with considerable force on the screen. It is therefore natural that course designers and others should want video to be a powerful instrument in developing language learners' awareness of important features of culture and culture-specific language use.

Attempts to build EFL/ESL materials around cultural features, or to highlight selected cultural details within individual scenes or segments, have not always been successful. Making such features too obvious easily renders them unrealistic and even ridiculous, while the desire to ensure culturally appropriate behaviour by specifying in detail what that behaviour should be puts the wrong kind of strain on actors and other participants, who are used to expressing their cultural identity and articulating its features without detailed prompting. Generally it is better for video producers to be attuned to significant cultural features and to manipulate their material sensitively to allow these features to make a suitable impression without undue distortion. A check-list approach seems to be more effective than an attempt to specify requirements in advance.

Interactivity

Video is a powerful medium, and it is not surprising that people who use it to teach languages would like to see their students reacting and responding to what they see on the screen. In its most crude yet common manifestation, this technique involves making the student repeat what he/she hears or answer simple questions (with at least some relevance to what is shown on the

screen, if he/she is reasonably lucky). The technique works (i.e. most students will repeat phrases or answer questions which are put to them), but is it interactive? Indeed, what exactly is *interactive video*, particularly in the context of computer assisted learning and video-disc applications?

In computer assisted language learning *without video*, interactivity can be defined simply as the relationship between the learner, a computer programme, a display screen or monitor and a keyboard or other means of using the programme. The addition of video makes a significant difference to this relationship, especially when the video images can be frozen at the exact point required, stepped forward frame by frame, accessed and repeated out of sequence, and integrated with visual input from the computer programme concerned. Yet what claims to be interactive video is commonly limited to activating individual direct responses to stimuli on the screen, backed up by admittedly impressive branching options, and systems of course management, assessment, and so on. This approach fails to take full advantage of what can be achieved by using *all* the media available, and fails to take account of the contexts in which learning takes place. In fact, interactive video can (and should) embrace a variety of approaches and methods.

6 A wider view of interactive video

Developments in video technology and computer assisted learning mean that elements of interactivity can be integrated into various course materials and their associated activities, and not restricted to a single medium or course component. For instance, a group discussion which is derived from a computer assisted task may lead to a decision to select a particular video segment to provide essential material for completing the group assignment. A business course student in a self-access system may leave his videodisc workstation to complete a memorandum requested (on videodisc) by a senior colleague, and then go back to check the consequences on videodisc. A learner at home may need to return to a short video segment several times for assistance in solving a problem or successfully completing a stage in a language course when perhaps the video does not tell a story but provides some of the elements which the learner constructs a story of his/her own. These

are simple examples of ways in which a wider view of interactivity can be exploited.

7 Contexts of use

Careful consideration of the contexts in which materials might be used is essential for effective course design in interactive video. What are the constraints of the physical environment (in the learner's living room, in the classroom, and so on)? What is the relationship between the materials provided by the commercial producer or publisher and other materials or resources required (especially in terms of convenience and cost)? What difficult or unfamiliar demands are being put on the learner or teacher (taking into account that many teachers feel anxious or inadequate when confronted with even simple video material)? Indeed, interactive video material which may be acclaimed for its innovative approach may not be commercially viable or may turn out to be almost useless in the face of teacher intransigence or the high cost of additional resources directly associated with its use.

8 Current and future developments

It is not surprising that commercial producers and publishers move forward slowly and cautiously in the field of interactive video for EFL/ESL. Certainly BBC English by Television is taking a very gradual approach to interactivity, as the following examples show:

- Devising computer assisted extensions of existing EFL courses. Most of these are likely to be modest and will have no interactive video component.
- Planning for computer assisted material to be developed for new courses at some future date. This approach affects the way video material is scripted and produced, and has comparable effects on supporting materials too.
- Carrying out experimental work with existing EFL video material, both in linear and videodisc formats.
- Producing course material specifically designed for interactive video provided a market for it can be identified. So far this has resulted in a video-disc-based course for Japanese businessmen.

In the more distant future, there are many exciting possibilities, such as developing new uses of linear video material in association with computer technology, producing an EFL/ESL dictionary on videodisc (with compressed audio), constructing data banks directly associated with cultural aspects of language learning, using interactive video for testing and assessment, introducing speech recognition devices into language learning. All these possibilities depend, however, on building up a sufficiently large market.

Men have not proven themselves equal, because they have not been given equal opportunities.