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EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

The introduction of a new technology within one discipline

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Many technologies that find their way into classrooms were not originally designed to meet educational needs, and their full educational potential is often obscured by lack of appropriate software. This was certainly the case about ten years ago when videocassette players began to appear in institutions involved in the teaching of English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL or EFL).

This paper will address the theme *Technology and Educational Practice* through a description of a video materials development project with which I was associated, as producer, over a seven year period. It will also comment on the experience of making the transition from experimental materials development within one Language Centre to full-scale production for an international market.

The Video English Project

Video English, published in 1983-4, had its origins in one language teaching centre in 1977. This was the British Council's Language Teaching Centre in Tehran, which, as part of an expansion of its whole operation, installed video playback in fifty percent of its classrooms and at the same time acquired video production and editing systems.

The appearance of a new technology on the educational scene sets educators the task of defining the roles or functions it can most appropriately have within different disciplines. This task will involve consideration of the properties of the new hardware and the existing

software. At that time the only available video materials designed for English Language Teaching (ELT) were series originally produced for television broadcast. We made conscientious attempts to write these into the syllabus as one insurance against our new technology becoming no more than an advertising gimmick. But there were major problems: fifteen minute programs incorporating their own teaching slots did not fit easily into a syllabus designed on different principles and taught in fifty minute sessions; the programs followed a developing storyline, so it was difficult to dip into the series; teachers felt unsure about methodology with materials which dominated the lesson in a way their other supplementary materials did not; finally, some aspects of Britain in the sixties portrayed in one series we were using led to considerable embarrassment in classrooms in muslim Iran.

These difficulties eventually led us to produce our own video materials. We were able to do this because of the combination of people and production resources we had and the decision to produce a new language program for the British Council's five centres in Iran provided the opportunity to design a video component into it. The centres were well resourced and the new program incorporated a range of media. We defined video's role as providing the target for each unit: a short scene incorporated examples of the target language, spoken at normal speed in a natural context. It was suggested that teachers show this once at the beginning of a unit and then return to it at the end, when students should have the satisfaction of finding it much easier to understand. Production was done entirely in-house, using teachers as actors in short scenes of about one minute in length. The suggested method of using the sequences did not work very well in practice, but regardless of that our teachers were much more enthusiastic about this material for these reasons:

- it related directly to the syllabus and teachers therefore felt comfortable with it - it made sense to them to use it as part of their normal lessons;
- the sequences were very short and fitted in easily to a pattern of varied activity to which the teachers were accustomed: a dialogue on audio tape, examples in the text book, oral practice using cue cards and so on;
- both teachers and students enjoyed the fact that it was local material.

In short, with software designed to fit that particular learning environment, the technology began to be seen as a useful tool instead of an exotic alien. We were still fairly limited in our thinking about techniques with the machine but at least it was becoming part of our daily teaching lives. Sadly, circumstances intervened and the program only had a life of two years.

However, over the next two years I was able to develop this concept of video resource material through a pattern of London-based production combined with piloting of the results with and by teachers in British Council centres in a range of countries. This saw the emergence of techniques which were found to facilitate the use of video in communicative language work - a direction in which language teaching theory and methodology were moving. Perhaps the most interesting and innovative technique was silent viewing - a focus on the visual alone by turning the sound volume to zero. We also found that various listening comprehension techniques which are regularly used in conjunction with audio tapes adapted well to use with video.

These specifications for a set of video materials were the outcome of this period of experimentation with both production and classroom techniques:

- a. they should be conceptualised as a resource not a course, and would consist of a set of independent sequences;
- b. they should be short, to allow maximum flexibility of use;
- c. they should be realistic, with real settings and language spoken in a naturalistic way with a range of accents;
- d. they should provide examples of face to face communication; and
- e. they should have strong visual impact with maximum potential for use in the silent viewing mode.

Observation of classroom use of the experimental set prompted these observations on possible roles for video in the language learning context:

- a. its combination of visual and linguistic input can help learners develop the skills of "contextual inferencing", for example by using silent viewing techniques;
- b. it can be used in various ways to stimulate genuinely communicative activity within the classroom; and
- c. because much socio-cultural information is signalled visually, it can elicit learners' own preconceptions and questions about the society whose language they are learning.

With these guidelines, one hour of finished material was designed by a team of two people and produced professionally on an internal budget.

We now had a product to show and this was the point at which outside funding was sought by putting the project out to tender. A contract was signed with Macmillan Publishers and by 1984 we had completed production of four hours of material, published under the title *Video English*. It consists of a set of eight half-hour videocassettes, containing a total of 92 self standing sequences. They form a bank of video resource material which can be used to supplement different English language syllabuses and textbooks. The sequences vary in length from 15 seconds to twelve minutes and are grouped according to intended use with learners at different levels. All but two of the sequences consist of realistic simulations of people engaged in communication as they go about their daily lives. They are in fact mini 'dramas' which establish characters and storyline in a very short space of time.

Critical Factors

When these materials appeared they were novel in two ways. The biggest novelty was the simplest fact - that each sequence is very short. This makes for great flexibility within a classroom lesson but it also of course requires the teacher to do more than play the sequence through and ask a few questions. To use them flexibly the machine has to be manipulated with confidence - and we know that machine phobia in teachers is often a stumbling block to the introduction of a new technology. Secondly, on the language teaching scene at the time most ELT video material was packaged into courses, intended for television broadcast as well as institutional use. The concept of a bank of resources made a lot of sense in a profession which uses 'supplementary material' a great deal, but it was a concept of which publishers were very wary. It has advantages in that it is left to the teacher to select what is appropriate to a given group at any stage. It has attendant problems too in that the rationale underlying the materials may not be readily apparent to all teachers. For this reason each of these sets is accompanied by extensive and detailed suggestions for teachers. However, as there is no overt instruction incorporated into the materials themselves, they could be used in ways quite different to those described in the teacher's guides.

The program of workshops on the use of video held in a range of British Council centres was extremely important in preparing the ground for the much more interactive use of video playback these materials demand. It is this last factor that becomes critical to the wider dissemination of the materials and with them a more informed use of the technology in language teaching.

The wider transfer of a new approach

We had explored new applications of this particular technology, videocassette, in one section of one discipline - the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language. The development of software in collaboration with teachers was central to the discovery of these applications. We were able

to transfer this new concept of the technology, through dissemination of the software combined with teacher training, from a single institution to a widespread network of over thirty British Council centres in as many countries. These centres were using different syllabuses and strongly unifying factors: all the teachers were native speakers and most centres provided training and other support; the majority of students were adults; most of the centres using our video materials were in an EFL situation; and, finally, British Council language centres tend to be innovative and provide an environment supportive of experimentation.

The transfer to publishing for an international market encompassing EFL and ESL, adults and children, state schools and private language centres marked the real move away from the experimental situation to widespread implementation of a new approach to the use of a new technology. I cannot comment on the approach to the use of a new technology. I cannot comment on the final outcome of this attempt as the full set of materials has been on the market only since early 1985 and I suspect that we need a period of at least five years as a basis for judging progress even in terms of sales. And of course it is the use that is made of the materials that is of importance. In that connection I was heartened to see a reference to research being carried out by a Malaysian student into the impact of the cultural context of the *Video English* series. Research of this kind is another important ingredient in the transfer of technology - and in this instance the research topic points up the cultural problem that lies within the dissemination of language teaching materials as well as news broadcasts.

Although I cannot comment on the final outcome of the project, I did experience the process of modification and compromise inherent in producing a series for a publisher and for a large organisation. Three forces applied pressures which eroded the initial concept in one way or another. First the publishing house had to be concerned with sales and had strong economic arguments for broadening the target market in the ways I have indicated. Perhaps the biggest of the publisher's constraints on production were imposed by the understandable desire to tap the Arab market which meant, for example, that all references to alcohol were banned. Then the organisation had to consider its public image and the image of Britain presented in these sequences. Some of our earlier intentions to portray reality, warts and all, fell by the wayside on this

issue. Both of these are fairly predictable sources of pressure and are familiar to most producers. Another and perhaps less expected hazard was the way things began to change when a sequence became the property of actors, director and cameraman - and later the editor. We know that all of these people contribute to a production and, if they're good, the end product is a much better one as a result. The problem in this particular case was that we were deliberately focussing on the little everyday encounters that are normally telescoped in the interests of moving the drama on. This posed problems of characterisation for director and actors and sometimes resulted in over-dramatic portrayal of an interaction. We also had occasional problems persuading the cameraman that details such as the handing over of change or the shot of the tomatoes on the market stall were important for classroom use, even though they seemed unnecessary to the action. Even with a language teaching specialist on location, it was difficult to hold to the original intent in the midst of the usual pressures of production. And this is of course why educational production so frequently fails to satisfy either producers or educationalists. However I think we could claim a success rate of about 75% on that front, because of the close involvement of ELT specialists all the way through the project and also because the whole production team established a good working relationship.

Conclusion

The biggest hurdle now facing the project is the dissemination of the ideas behind the materials. The series was initially conceived for a very specific use in a particular context which is very different from that of the new markets the publisher is under pressure to penetrate. This is a new approach to published video materials for ELT and the familiar signposts are not there. Salesmen have to be trained, teachers have to be encouraged to experiment - and to reject the unsuitable, because the material is certainly not suitable for all situations.

On the positive side, this project has helped disseminate in the ELT publishing world the message that the design of video material for use in the classroom needs to be different from broadcast television or film series. Other series have now begun to appear consisting of sets of short sequences, conceived of as resources not courses, to improve the choices open to the teacher trying to use the new technology. And I hope at some stage to see productions in other countries which translate the *Video English* concept to a different cultural context.

I have spoken solely of the classroom and the teacher within it, as that is still the reality in most institutions. But of course the newer technologies, videodisc and the microcomputer, put the software in the hands of the learner. And that is perhaps where the concept of a bank of short video

sequences comes into its own. The materials I have described from a database of examples of language in use. The next challenge is to find the best way of packaging and programming this for the individual learner.

References

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- Video English* is published by Macmillan Publishers Ltd in association with The British Council.

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