

## **VIDEO STUDIOS: THE LANGUAGE LABS FOR THE 1980's**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Changing listening and viewing habits of our age should be recognized and accommodated within our language learning programs. Audio lab classes are being rejected by increasing numbers of language students in favor of private, concentrated listening sessions. Students' increased interest in the visual medium, on the other hand, needs to be reflected in a greater use of this medium in our programs. This article suggests restructuring language programs to capitalize on the visual medium through the use of video-based second language instruction. The video-based language activities described in the final section of the article have been developed over four years of instruction with video tape at the World English Center, University of San Francisco. This article first appeared in *Cross Currents*, Vol. No. 1:45-48, and is reprinted with their permission.

### **COMPUTER STORAGE WORDS:**

#### **VIDEO LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION ESL/EFL CURRICULUM**

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#### **Students Are Showing an Increased Interest in Video-based Class Sessions**

When we begin using video-taped classroom instruction in our intensive program at the World English Center, University of San Francisco, in the Fall of 1976, we used the medium primarily as a means of capturing "culminating experiences" in our conversation classes (now called usage classes). We found that the chief value for using video in these classes was the playback/feedback capability of the video medium. Students were able to get feedback on their total language performance both verbal and nonverbal) while receiving the positive reinforcement of seeing themselves speak the target language. Finally, we saw the students become increasingly skilled at finding and correcting their errors during the playback session. They had become "their own best critics" (Griffin, 1976: 31-32).

Since 1976, video-taped classes with playback sessions have become a regular feature of all our usage classes at the World English Center.

Students now spend at least one hour per week in a video-recording session and an additional hour or more in playback/feedback sessions. We have noted over the past four years that the skepticism which we originally encountered among the students about the value of this procedure has disappeared. The "pep talk" which was given to the usage classes at the beginning of each semester about the value of video as a learning tool is no longer necessary. Students seem to take the video medium for granted as a valuable aid to language learning. Their increased interest in the video-based usage classes has been manifested through much better class attendance, increased participation and attentiveness to the playback sessions.

### **Many Students Are Bored in the Audio Language Laboratories**

A simultaneous development in student behavior at our Center has been an increased criticism of their language lab classes over the past two years. Attendance at these classes has been dropping off, despite the fact that we have improved the quantity as well as the quality of the tapes available and despite the fact that we have redefined our laboratory classes to include a wider range of activities (such as pronunciation practice and extended listening exercises). Rather than attend the classes, a number of students are using the lab on their own time for private listening sessions with the tapes on file. Still more are bringing in blank tapes to have copies made for listening sessions on cassette recorders of their own.

When we began introducing "canned" video tapes and films in the laboratory classes to give our students another means of refining their receptive language skills, students responded positively. Those who seemed bored by audio tapes in the lab (no matter what the content or length) were often entirely engaged by a video tape or film. Moreover, their listening comprehension (as tested by work-sheets and comprehension questions followed the presentations) appeared to be much better when watching a video tape or film than when listening to an audio tape whether or not the visuals directly supported the narration.

Professional reading (e.g., Taylor, 1979: 229-230) and discussions with instructors in other ESL/EFL programs lead me to believe that the changing behavior of our students towards the video and audio mediums is not unique. Moreover, an examination of the sociological and sociolinguistic causes for their changing attitudes towards these mediums leads us to some important considerations for the restructuring of our language learning programs.

### **Listening Has Become a More Sophisticated, Private Experience**

In days gone by, listening was a group experience for many people. We listened to radio programs, records, correspondence tapes from the family "back home," and to live music: rock concerts, pop concerts, jazz concerts, and symphony performances. We did not care that we were not hearing every tone and nuance; we expected and accepted a certain amount of outside interference noise. Moreover, we did not expect any visual spectaculars at live concerts. The music was enough.

With the advent of headphones and better stereo equipment, with the shift from phonograph records to highly sensitive recording tape, and with the introduction of more sophisticated recording equipment, we have become very critical listeners. We no longer tolerate interference noise; in fact, we use headphones to block it out. It is not surprising then that students are very critical of a group language lab class in which the volume, tone, and speed of the master tape is controlled by the teacher or lab monitor. Moreover, it is understandable that they are extremely intolerant (in fact; are quite resentful) of outside noise interference in their listening activities. Finally, their preference for private listening sessions with second language tapes is very much in keeping with their preference for private listening to music through headphones. In forcing them to attend group language lab sessions, we are asking them to retreat to a social listening mode which has not been part of American experience in recent years, nor has it maintained the same importance in other cultures that it once had.

### **Television and Film Are Group Experiences Characterizing Our Age**

On the other hand, group visual experiences are very characteristic of our age. We watch television with our friends and families; we attend movies in enormous theatres; we even expect to be treated to visual phenomena at music concerts. Even symphony performances have begun including dancers, multi-media backdrops and "more colorful conductors." We literally experience much of our world, these days, through multi-media events in living color. Our sense of sight has perhaps become our dominant sense. We feel increasingly handicapped if we cannot see what is going on. We listen to programs and special events on the radio only if we cannot get to a television set.

### **Our Language Programs Should Reflect Changing Listening and Viewing Habits**

Since our students have been born into the age of television and into a world of increasingly sophisticated visuals, we cannot ignore the implications of this fact for our language programs. Since watching television is an authentic group experience for them and since the visual element is an increasingly important dimension of communication, it seems logical that this medium should become a prime means of language instruction. It makes good sense to have students reacting to a video tape which they have both seen and heard rather than to an audio tape which they have simply heard.

Why, then, shouldn't our group laboratory classes become video labs instead of audio labs? Why not capitalize on this medium through which our students have become accustomed to receiving and analyzing their information—particularly the information they usually absorb in a group setting. And why not, at the same time, convert our audio labs to private listening booths where students can listen at their own pace to the taped material of their choice?

Many Japanese language programs have acknowledged this trend toward the video medium by installing language laboratories equipped

with individual video screens. Most American programs, on the other hand, remain undecided about the value of the video medium as a tool of instruction. Some argue that video hardware is too expensive and therefore not a realistic alternative for them. Yet audio materials—in the form of updated hardware and an expanded range of software—continue to account for large percentages of the annual budgets. The fact is that most American program administrators regard video equipment as a sophisticated frill and have yet to be convinced of its value in language learning instruction.

For those fortunate enough to have video equipment available on a regular basis and for those believers in the medium who must justify the purchase of this equipment for a language program, it might be helpful to review the numerous language activities which capitalize on the video medium now being used at the University of San Francisco. It should be noted that we have developed these activities for the language classes with a very simple video setup. One of our classrooms is permanently equipped with a black and white VTR unit, a large monitor, a microphone on a stand, a single sun lamp, two black and white cameras on tripods and a special effects generator. While such a basic setup limits classroom production to simple recording and playback sessions, it is sufficiently uncomplicated to allow teachers to use it after a very few hours of orientation to the equipment. Consequently, all of the students in the program are able to benefit from this medium rather than just the few who have media-oriented instructors. Our in-house production of color tapes is done with the facilities and assistance of the University's Instructional Media Center.

The remainder of this article is a detailed description of the kinds of video-based language activities presently in use in our program and the rationale for their development. The activities discussed are divided into two groups: those which use the video medium primarily to improve students' verbal and nonverbal production skills and those which focus on improving the students' reception language skills. Neither use, of course, ignores or excludes the development of the complementary language skills.

### **Language Activities Which Stress the Production Skills in the Target Language**

**1. Informal reports to the class.** We ask the students to share with each other impressions of a television show, a weekend experience or reports of encounters with Americans in particular settings. Students can either sit in a chair at the front of the classroom and talk to the entire class or remain at their individual desks and share with a small group as they are taped. The emphasis in this taping session is on informality and naturalness. The camera acts almost as a patrolling eye catching candid language interaction in English. This is a very good activity to introduce the students to the presence of video cameras in the classes. During the playback session students often see themselves on television for the very first time. The teacher simply asks them to comment on how they feel when they see themselves speaking English.

2. **Impromptu speeches.** The teacher lists two or three topics on the board which are related to one of the lessons the students have studied during the week. Students are called in rapid succession and asked to speak for one to two minutes on one of the topics. Low level classes often perform better in this activity if the teacher encourages them to brainstorm for key vocabulary to be listed under each topic on the board before the speeches begin.

A variation of this activity is Mark Rittenberg's Pro/con exercise (Rittenberg, 1980: text forthcoming). A controversial topic like "Smoking" is written on the board. Under the "Pro" column, the teacher records students' points in favor of the topic. Under the "Con" column, the teacher lists all the points against the topic. Students are then called in succession to begin speaking in favor of the topic. After 15-20 seconds, the teacher gives a handicap. At this point, the speaker switches to a "Co" position on the topic. This procedure is repeated two or three times with the student switching position at each handicap. After a minute or two the student sits down and the next student is called. Students speak in rapid succession until all class members have spoken. When the tape is played back, the teacher notes how smoothly the students were able to make the transition from "Pro" to "Con" and back to "Pro". Students are encouraged to perfect this activity until they can switch mid-sentence without the aid of such transition words as "but" and without starting new sentences.

3. **Prepared speeches.** These can range from two minute self-introduction speeches to twenty minute lectures on topics that the students have researched. If shorter speeches are assigned, give the students a choice of two or three topics plus about five questions per topic which they must answer in the course of their speeches. The questions help the students structure their remarks as well as give the listeners a common basis for evaluating the content of the speeches. If the students are to give lectures, they should turn in their topics and brief outlines a week ahead of time.

Students should know in advance how their speeches will be evaluated. They should also know the minimum and maximum length of the speeches assigned and whether or not they will be able to use written notes to help remember what they intend to say. A check list such as the one below is used to evaluate the speeches:

#### LISTENER EVALUATION CHECKLIST

- |                                              |                          |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| a. Did the speaker use notes too much?       | ( ) Yes ( ) No           |
| b. Was the speaker well prepared?            | ( ) Yes ( ) No           |
| c. How would you grade the following points? |                          |
| — Pronunciation                              | Excellent Good Fair Poor |
| — Grammar                                    | Excellent Good Fair Poor |
| — Gestures                                   | Excellent Good Fair Poor |
| — Posture/Appearance                         | Excellent Good Fair Poor |
| — Facial Expressions                         | Excellent Good Fair Poor |
| — Eye Contact                                | Excellent Good Fair Poor |
| — Your comments on this speech:              |                          |

Checklists are handed to all members of the class at the beginning of the class session. Students are called to speak in rapid succession. After each speaker there is a short pause during which class members as well as the teacher mark their checklists and give them to the speaker. Each speaker is encouraged to review the evaluations of his/her classmates before the playback session so that he/she can focus on specific points while viewing his/her performance.

After all the speeches have been given, the video tape is played back. The tape is stopped after each speech so that the speaker, other members of the class, and the teacher can comment on the presentation. The teacher focuses on a single area of the checklist when offering suggestions for improvement, thus giving the speaker a realistic objective for the next round of speeches.

**4. Dramatic readings and memorized cuttings from plays.** This activity is appropriate only to advanced intermediate and advanced level students. The teacher brings in a selection of play cuttings in modern English from which students select the monologues or scenes they wish to work on (**More American Scenes for Student Actors** by Handman, (Bantam Books), and **The Spoon River Anthology** by Edgar Masters have proved to be good source books for this activity). Students should confer with the teacher after making their individual selections about the length and difficulty of the pieces.

At least two class periods should be devoted to small group work on the dramatic selections before they are delivered. In these class periods, students work on pronunciation, stress, intonation and rhythm under the guidance of the teacher. Students should mark their selections for stress word-by-word and should determine the places in each line where pauses and changes in intonation should be marked.

The selections are first presented as dramatic readings, with each performer being evaluated by classmates through the checklist procedure described under speeches. During the playback sessions, individual presenters are asked to offer suggestions for how they might alter their presentations when they perform the same work from memory. The teacher helps with these suggestions by offering comments on eye contact, gestures, facial expression and total body language that would support the dramatic "message" of the work.

In the second round of presentations, the same works are presented without the aid of a written text. Student evaluations and playback session comments focus on how well the performers communicated the meaning of their dramatic pieces through nonverbal as well as verbal means.

**5. Role play situations to practice "survival English."** Beginning and intermediate level students who need opportunities to practice English in controlled contexts are given role play situations to act out before they are asked to improvise or move into free conversation. After being introduced to the vocabulary necessary for handling situations such as a banking transaction, a predictable social exchange (such as responding to an invi-

tation to a party), or a direction getting/giving situation, students are given model dialogues (written by the teacher) to study and practice reading aloud. The following class hour, they are given situations similar to (but not identical to) the ones covered in the dialogues. They role play these situations on video tape. During the playback session, they analyze the "naturalness" of their responses in terms of appropriate language and nonverbal behavior. The teacher also notes instances where students did not respond appropriately because they didn't understand the other speaker(s).

If "'in-house" video tapes on survival situations are available, students can compare their own role play interpretation of these rather predictable interchanges in American culture with the manner in which the situations are portrayed by native speakers. Such culturally specific nonverbal behavior as speaking distance, tone of voice and manner of greeting can be isolated and compared.

**6. Improvisations on crisis situations in human relationships.** These situations differ from those identified for role play in that the responses of the participants is only generally predictable and their behavior is more related to the relationship of the speakers than to the situation. These situations have resulted in successful improvisations for our students: parent/child conflict over a parent rule threat that is regarded as unreasonable; a landlord/tenant quarrel over the rent; and a husband/wife quarrel over the in-law who has caused friction in the household.

The playback sessions of the improvisations allow the teacher to introduce information about the target culture which might not otherwise be discussed in class. Students can also contrast appropriate behavior in American in a particular relationship with the behavior they have learned in their own cultures. To emphasize the importance of nonverbal behavior in communication, the teacher can play back the improvisations the first time without the audio track. Students can try to determine how the actors feel and what they might be saying.

A variation on improvisation is Rittenberg's Two Scenes exercise. The classroom is divided in half, with an improvisation taking place on each side. At a signal from the teacher, improvisation A continues in silence, with the actors being forced to mime their interaction. Improvisation B continues, meanwhile, with both verbal and nonverbal interaction. A second signal from the teacher frees the verbal interaction in improvisation A while silencing improvisation B. During the playback session, students should note an increase in energy and nonverbal activity in the silent sessions of the improvisations. They should then decide whether the scenes were more powerful and the communication better when the scenes were silent or when there was verbal interaction.

**7. Paired interviews.** Students can practice for job interviews or admissions interviews by dividing into two groups and making lists of questions that they expect the interviewers to ask (Group A) and the applicants to ask (Group B). The students can then pair up and role play the interviews.

More interesting interviews and more natural speech result, however, when students act as investigative reporters and interview each other on assigned subjects on camera. In general, the interviews are most interesting when the topics chosen are very controversial among the class members.

The playback session comments can focus upon the appropriateness of speaking distance and manner of the speakers for that situation as well as whether or not there was good communication between the interviewer and the person being interviewed. Viewers should be encouraged to cite specific verbal and nonverbal incidents to support their viewpoints.

A variation on the paired interview is a group panel discussion. Here the relationship of the individual speakers to the group should be analyzed during the playback session.

**8. Group drama exercises.** Single camera video taping is usually not very successful if more than four people are moving around the "stage area." However, we have found that a few of Mark Rittenberg's **English Through Drama** group exercises lend themselves very well to "pan shots" with the camera. Some of these are Circle of Feeling, The Bus Stop, Progressive Improvisation and Shapes (Variation II with phrases). All of these exercises require that students coordinate some body movement with their verbal message. The playback sessions give students an opportunity to check their progress in their ability to do something active while speaking the target language.

### **Language Activities Which Stress Reception Skills in the Target Language**

The use of video tapes to improve receptive skills has proved most successful with our advanced level students. Our intermediate level students are able to benefit from some of the "in-house" tapes on campus services and survival situations while the beginning students find nearly all of the tapes beyond their listening comprehension ability. The types of video tapes which we use regularly in our advanced and high intermediate classes include the following:

**1. Lectures on video tape.** Our students attend a live lecture in conjunction with a topic studied in their classes nearly every week. We have video taped some of these lectures so that the students can review them in conjunction with an analysis of their notes from the live lecture. Video tape lectures are also available from the general tape bank kept in the Instructional Media Department. The lectures in various discipline areas give the students exposure to various lecture styles as well as to vocabulary of specific university disciplines. The teacher is able to work on the note-taking problems of the students in a systematic manner through the use of a series of taped lectures.

**2. Documentary films and information tapes.** These tapes increase the students' vocabulary range, expand their understanding of specific topic areas, and teach them how to use the visual medium to fill the gaps where their aural comprehension fails. The teacher should prepare the students for these tapes with a list of key vocabulary and either a set



of comprehension questions or an outline of the material that will be presented. Our students have responded particularly well to documentaries on sociological problems in America, particularly the problems of minority groups - Blacks, Chicanos, and Native American Indians.

**3. Dramatic Productions.** These tapes are obtained by taping live productions of our university student performances or by getting permission from the local educational television stations to tape copies of their dramatic productions for television. In general, foreign language students cannot be expected to understand a full length production in one sitting. By having the plays on video tape, we can show them a scene at a time and check their comprehension before proceeding to the next scene. Beyond the obvious value to the students in expanding their vocabulary, their understanding of the target culture, and their appreciation for the role of nonverbal behavior in communication, viewing dramatic productions in the target language gives them an appreciation of the use of that language in an artistic form. Moreover, students who have given dramatic readings and short memorized scenes or monologues for the class bring to these viewing sessions a deeper appreciation of the dramatic process. The ultimate reinforcement of this activity is having the students attend a live production of a play they have seen on video tape.

**4. In-House survival English tapes.** If facilities are available to produce "model tapes" using native speakers of the target language, teachers can use the tapes in much the same way that they use audio tapes in the traditional language laboratory setting. They can study the tapes for appropriate cultural behavior patterns, nonverbal cues, language registers and idioms specific to the situations portrayed. They can then compare their performances in role play situations to these tapes.

Our present bank of in-house tapes include orientation to campus services such as the student health clinic, the university library, and the public safety office. We have also made model tapes of native speakers using services close to the campus such as the supermarket, a delicatessen, the California Department of Motor Vehicles and a series of banking transactions. We attempt to show these tapes early in the semester so that students feel more confident when they are using these services on their own.

**5. Cultural assimilators and cultural capsules.** We have shown students only a few tapes in this genre. The tapes feature foreign students making behavior errors in specific situations in the target culture, an explanation of what cultural misunderstanding took place, and a replay of the foreign student behaving appropriately in the same situation. While such tapes are received well by intermediate level students, our more advanced students react negatively to them. Having the cultural misunderstandings presented so blatantly on video tape seems to offend them particularly when live, native-speaking teachers are available to explain the same information to them in the classroom. Such tapes might be received better, however, in a foreign culture where a native speaker of the target language is not readily available.

Below is a checklist that might be used in guiding the analysis of video tapes featuring native speakers. Since classes cannot be expected to attend to all of the items at once, the teachers choose two or three items from the list for the students to focus on in each viewing session.

#### **A CHECKLIST FOR ANALYSIS OF NATIVE SPEAKER PERFORMANCE**

##### **SPEECH PRODUCTION**

1. Articulation of sounds
2. Rhythm, stress, and intonation patterns
3. Grammatical patterns
4. Idiomatic expressions
5. Language register

##### **NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR**

1. Eye contact
2. Gestures
3. Body movement
4. Physical distance between speakers
5. Facial expression
6. Nonverbal cues and responses
7. Apparent relationship between the speakers
8. General behavior patterns which seem culturally different from those of the viewers

##### **CONTENT**

1. Situation or environment of the speakers
2. Type of information being presented
3. Organization of material presented
4. Manner of presentation

Through the video-based activities just described, the instructors at WEC/USF have been able to expand our students' 'linguistic competence in English by allowing them to use all of their perceptive capacity to master both the verbal and nonverbal aspects of language use. The students' scores in both the Ilyin Oral Interview and the Michigan Listening Test reinforce our conviction that the increased role of the video tape medium in our program has been beneficial to their language learning process. Aside from the test scores, however, we feel very strongly that it would be a great disservice to our students to ignore the development of their nonverbal communicative skills in this age of television and frequent communication across cultural boundaries. We hope that more traditional language educators will soon recognize the necessity of developing the total communicative competence of their students and capitalize on the many uses of the video medium to achieve this end.

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