
The Video Connection

Vital Statistics

Title: *The Video Connection: Integrating Video Into Language Teaching*

Author: Rick Altman

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin, One Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108

Copyright: 1989

No. of Page: 184

Supplemental Materials: A 30-minute tape with excerpts from many of the video sequences discussed in the book is available from: The Project for International Communications Studies, 266 International Center, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242. (A mail-in coupon for this demonstration tape is provided in the back of the book.)

Intended Users: Language teachers at all levels

Languages: Most discussions focus on French, with mention of Spanish and German. Some information could apply to other languages.

Level: High school or college

Cost: Book: \$8.07; videotape: \$5.00 for shipping & handling

Contrary to the subtitle, the author advocates a single-medium approach and focuses only on classroom activities. He commits three major errors which make the book unsuitable for the proposed audience. While it contains interesting ideas, this book is marred by poor style, inconsistencies, and lack of clarity which can confuse or mislead those inexperienced with video. Other than the list of distributors and titles listed toward the end, the book offers little for teachers experienced with video—particularly those wanting to support and supplement classroom activities via computer-controlled exercises in a learning center.

Organization of the Book

Advertised as a short, practical book on the use of video materials for teaching foreign language and culture, *The Video Connection* is divided into

three main parts: “General Principles,” “Teaching with Video,” and “Practical Considerations.” In the Preface the author states that he seeks to lay a theoretical foundation for a new video pedagogy, provide suggestions for the use of video at all levels, discuss legal and technical topics clearly, and provide current information about video programs. The Table of Contents promises an excellent framework within which to accomplish these tasks; it also promises to include an appendix of terms, an appendix listing distributors of video programs, and a selected bibliography.

Due to the use of different sizes of type, boldface, and indentations to bring out the organization and importance of items in the text, the book is visually appealing. Its illustrations relate closely to the material discussed. Almost all pictures appear in only one section, Chapter 4, but several helpful, easy-to-understand charts accompany the explanations in Chapter 10. The supplementary tape contains much of the video material that is suggested for classroom use; almost all the segments, however, are in French; a few are in Spanish or German.

Not an “Integrated Approach”

Although the subtitle leads one to believe that this will be a comprehensive overview of the use of video in language instruction, **the techniques discussed for teaching these segments center around the use of videotape in the classroom.** The author devotes only three pages to a topic of at least equal, if not greater importance, namely, strategies for teaching via videotape and discs in learning labs. Even though Altman says most previous writing on video pedagogy has concentrated on appropriate classroom activities and he, therefore, promises an “integrated approach to video” (p. 24), almost all of his book also focuses on developing classroom activities or obtaining materials for them. Moreover, Altman fails to present a substantial discussion of the advantages video has over other media, how students can use

video effectively outside of class, and practical examples of how to integrate video with coursework and testing.

While significant progress has been made at numerous universities, government organizations, and military centers to integrate interactive, computer-controlled video (IAV) into language teaching, the author does not address this timely topic; consequently, *The Video Connection* leaves us with interesting, but out-dated, ideas of how to use authentic, manually controlled video to enliven classroom instruction. The book offers no help for teachers interested in supplementing and supporting classroom activities with computer-controlled video, which students can control easily and rapidly, which gives them immediate guidance through feedback tailored to individual needs, and which helps focus their study efforts by providing scores.

Rather than advocating a multimedia approach, the author suggests that we make our courses center around video. Altman says "If this book could be reduced to one principle, it would be that of *integration*" (p. 42), but he does not seem to realize that by making this medium the focus of the course, he is not integrating it into an overall, more effective approach. The author implies that video should replace other media (books, computers, audiotapes, etc.); for example, he advocates the use of video for an "illustrated list," when pictures in a book can be just as effective yet less expensive. By using a medium inappropriately in this way, Altman fails to heed his own admonition: "Video is a powerful medium, but, like fire, it can do damage if it gets out of control" (p. 25). Carried to the extreme that he implies, the reader wonders why teachers should read this book. Shouldn't we be watching video instead?

In his attempt to address teachers at all levels, **the author has apparently reached for a common denominator, that is, manually controlled videotape played on a VCR**, and avoided what some teachers may not have: computers and video discs, plus the software and hardware required for their use. He does not mention that inexpensive materials, like CALIS, (free from Duke University, for running both computer-assisted instruction and computer-driven videotape) and SMART VCR (marketed

at a very reasonable price by SELECTRA Corporation for computer-controlled videotape) have been available for more than a year. Even more important, however, is the fact that **by opting to emphasize the use of video in the classroom where instruction is—for all practical purposes—unavoidably "lockstep" (with all students proceeding at about the same pace), Altman has NOT provided material that will let teachers take advantage of self-paced, individualized instruction through computer-driven video which can be used in the learning center to lighten the teacher's work and afford students more control over their own learning.**

The author's main pedagogical thrust in this book is toward fostering teacher-controlled video; this pedagogical emphasis is strangely incongruent with his statement that "In spite of popular assumptions, class time is best reserved as *the court of last resort* for video usage" (p. 35). It is also inconsistent with his own admission that "Access to a video lab, however modest ... permits the instructor to increase the students' exposure to contextualized authentic speech ... to vary the types of exercise ... [and] make it possible for individuals or small groups to work at their own speed" (p. 36). The book is replete with such contradictions.

Numerous Inconsistencies

Although the book seems well-organized at first blush, it is actually filled with confusing statements and apparent contradictions. For instance, Altman stresses the need for communicative exercises, yet advocates the testing of grammar rather than comprehension. After downplaying the importance of vocabulary, the author later says that it is important for comprehension. He also stresses the need for using authentic video because it presents the language in real-life contexts; he says that American-made programs often offer easy comprehension at the expense of authenticity, and states that successful video pedagogy depends in part on providing a mixture of teacher-guided material and student discovery via contextual aids. Yet, in spite of such insight, he, nevertheless, also recommends producing extremely simplified videotapes for beginning students so that they can isolate words

before they try to understand them.

After chapters of the book urge teachers to use authentic video, Altman discusses legal ramifications in a way that leaves instructors discouraged. Although Altman encourages teachers to write exercises and says they can legally keep video programs indefinitely, he later states that after ten days it is illegal to use off-the-air, recorded materials in the classroom.

Within the framework established in the Table of Contents, the author often belabors the obvious, mentions topics (e.g., small-group work) in several places rather than giving them the concentrated treatment they deserve, and fails to give cogent, substantiated arguments. Rather than pursuing a sustained discussion, he often jumps from topic to topic. For example, on page 42 he begins a new section by saying "If this book could be reduced to one principle, it would surely be that of *integration*." At this point, however, he immediately leaves the topic of integration and starts talking about "comprehension." Such *non sequiturs* appear even in the final chapter in which Altman states the following: "For the language teacher, unfortunately, the advantages of the videodisc and other recent innovations remain more a dream than a reality" (p. 167)—only to state on the next page: "There is nothing visionary in this assessment [what assessment is not clear], no high-tech interactive technology is required. The future envisioned here is the present in educational centers around the country" (p. 168).

Three Major Errors

The Video Connection is advertised for use in methods courses and as a reference book for language instructors; its value for such classes and for teachers lacking experience with video is, however, questionable. The first chapter, "Video and Language Acquisition Theory," is inadequate for laying the groundwork for a "sophisticated video-centered pedagogical approach," and the author does not clearly and convincingly show how the speculations he deals with relate to the following chapters. While Altman discusses acquisition and comprehension, he does not address improving retention and

facilitating recall—two areas of major importance in language study.

Even more important than the inconsistencies and omissions, however, is the fact that the book contains several errors. Impressionable methodology students and inexperienced teachers need sound guidance and facts that are stated unequivocally. Although some errors (such as the use on page 93 of the word "phoneme" where "allophone" is probably intended) are minor, the author makes three major errors that cannot be overlooked. The most serious mistake is his frequently confusing use of "method" and "medium." In repeated instances, he does not seem to realize the difference between the two.

Using a machine does not constitute a method. A method is an approach to teaching; for example, it can be the way a particular medium is employed and how its use is integrated with instruction to support and supplement the teacher's efforts. It is the method, rather than the medium, that determines how effective instruction will be. In spite of that fact, Altman personifies video and attributes to it qualities that only experienced human beings may have, that is, teachers, textbook writers, and software producers: "Another important contribution of video in the syntactic realm is the ability to distinguish between high-frequency structures and less important ones" (p. 15). Although teachers might use video machines, textbooks, and computer software to focus student attention on frequently occurring patterns and provide practice with them, the media are incapable of accomplishing such work by themselves. Nevertheless, Altman goes even so far as to say: "Video sets the standards and provides the methods for assuring a stable supply of comprehensible input" (p. 19).

The author advocates five activities (preliminary exercises, out-of-class viewing, in-class viewing, review assignments, and testing); yet in the book, he deals primarily with in-class viewing that is teacher-centered. Thus, any success which may be achieved by using the ideas expressed in this book might depend more on whether the teacher is experienced, innovative, out-going, and comfortable with using the

videotape machine rather than on the video itself. **Altman does not seem to realize how teacher-dependent his suggestions are.**

The second major error is also related to methodology. Not only does Altman confuse what we can expect from the machine and the various possibilities for its use in the hands of an experienced, innovative, and up-to-date teacher, but **he also holds out hope for new, “video-inspired” methodology, only to tell the reader later that, in essence, it does not exist.**

Many of the ideas presented in Chapter 1—“Video and Language Acquisition Theory”—are not new, but Altman gives the reader the impression that they are “video-inspired.” He subsequently fails to state decisively that video is not a panacea; he fails to enumerate the advantages and disadvantages of using it; and, he fails to provide practical ways in which video can most effectively be utilized in a comprehensive approach.

The author says that to discover video’s full potential, we have to break out of familiar molds and learn to see in video new opportunities and new solutions, rather than see just a continuation of familiar patterns; yet, about 50 pages later, he states that the guidelines for reviewing and testing with video differ little from those for more traditional situations. One of the most basic tenets of good teaching is “test as you teach”; the author’s premise seems to be “test in the way that is traditional.” Similarly, when referring to using video as a stimulus for compositions written by students, Altman says “In a way, all these examples are simply the video extension of the type of imagination teachers of composition have been exercising for years. Video expands the opportunities, but the principles remain the same.”

The author’s third major error is that he fails to distinguish opinions from facts. **In numerous instances, Altman states theories, speculations, and opinions as if they were certainties supported by hard evidence.** In general, when speaking about factual matters—such as the advantages of video over film, his practical experience with avoiding transcripts and video in class, how videotape recorders work, choosing

appropriate equipment, and language lab procedures—Altman is on solid ground and presents useful, easy-to-understand information. On the other hand, when dealing with pedagogy, he does not give a clear presentation, and many of his claims are not factually substantiated. Consider, for example, the following: “These exercises [in which students listen to the video segment’s sound track and do not see the picture] are particularly well suited for group work” (p. 93), and “Audiovisual reinforcement assures greater recall of cultural and linguistic facts” (p. 96). These are interesting opinions and might contain some truth, but the author does not provide any proof for his claims. Because of this lack of precision, the reader must attempt to sort fact from fiction. This situation is lamentable, especially in view of the fact that *The Video Connection* is intended, by and large, for the inexperienced—an audience that may not realize that many of the author’s statements are opinions and hopes, rather than truths substantiated by empirical evidence.

Although research has been underway at numerous institutions for several years, the simple fact remains that a substantial body of information based on empirical investigations which tells us the best ways to display, practice, and test via video just does not exist yet. The book would be much stronger if the author admitted that and were careful to state that his statements are opinions, based on his personal classroom experiences or that they are supported by research evidence.

Suggestions for Improvements

The author should rewrite the manuscript to state his arguments more clearly, to strengthen the portions dealing with methodology, to avoid inconsistencies, to admit that much remains to be learned—through empirical studies—about what strategies are best when teaching with video, and to recognize that much also remains to be discovered about the best role for video in the overall language curriculum. **Above all, the author should avoid personifying machines and abstract ideas.** Also, if he were to omit the first chapter and revise or delete Chapter 6 (“Special-Purpose Language Courses”) and the Conclusion, the book would be more effective.

Rewriting is also needed in a number of other instances. In general, readers can easily gain the impression that this manuscript was rushed into print to capitalize on the widespread attention that video is currently attracting. This feeling is reinforced by the fact that basic changes should be made in the presentation of the text; for example, it is not clear why choosing equipment and lab procedures should be included in Chapter 10, "Demystifying the Video Recorder." Perhaps, the title of the chapter should be changed. Similarly, some of the terms in Appendix I (particularly "satellite reception," "videodisc," and "wireless remote control") are circular and of no use to those who need them (e.g., a "videodisc" is described as a "disc that carries video images readable by videodisc player"). The information in Appendix II, "Distributors of Video Programs Mentioned in the Text," is valuable, but incomplete. Strangely, the list is arranged by program name, rather than by distributor as suggested by the title of the appendix. Unfortunately, no mention is made of the fact that an annotated list named "Distributors of International Video Materials" (and arranged by distributors) appears in the chapter before the "Conclusion." Most of the material in it does not appear in Appendix II. The reader would be much better served if the information on distributors appeared as a separate appendix.

More than anything else, the lack of clarity, coherence, and emphasis found in *The Video Connection* may be due to the author's style. **In numerous instances, the text reads as if it were a first or second draft rather than a completed manuscript.** The author, for example, makes the following statement: "Understanding happens in pieces; in pieces it must be taught" (p. 43). After some reflection, the reader may be able to decipher what is intended. However, when the author indulges—as he often does—in personifying machines or concepts, the result is even more abstruse. Consider this explanatory passage: "In other words, aural video materials do not simply replicate in sound what the written word provides in script. Instead, they carry courses into new areas where the written word rarely ventures and the notion of translation has not been seen before" (pp. 94-95).

General Assessment

While *The Video Connection* contains some interesting and useful ideas, it is marred by poor style, contradictions, and lack of clarity. In addition, the innovative, yet unsubstantiated suggestions for teaching with video should be used with care. Rather than being considered perfected models as the author seems to imply, they should be looked upon as suggestions that may or may not work well and that are limited by the fact that they are actually designed only for in-class use with a VCR.

As *The Video Connection* stands now, the author promises more than he actually delivers. Altman neither presents cogent, substantiated arguments for the instructional effectiveness of video nor describes effective, self-paced communicative exercises that can be designed for study via computer-controlled video in a learning center. Such arguments and exercises are essential to promoting the widespread use of video and should have been included even in a short book. **In spite of the fact that this book does not clearly bring out the value and potential of interactive video in a truly comprehensive approach to language teaching, the usefulness of video remains undiminished.** Unfortunately, readers will have to turn to other sources for information before they can successfully enter the exciting, rapidly developing field of interactive video.

Unfortunately, *The Video Connection* can confuse or mislead methods students and teachers who are novices in the use of video; at the same time, it holds little interest for those who have extensive experience with video. Because the author did not achieve his stated purpose, I cannot recommend this book either for use in methodology classes or as a reference work.

J.E.T.T. Contributor Profile

Robert A. Quinn is at the United States Military Academy. Interested readers may write to him at the following address: U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY 10996-1696.