
From French in Action to Travessia: The Integral Video Curriculum in Interactive Language Classrooms

Television is the most familiar and easily managed educational technology for the foreign language classroom. There is a need for research to determine which television/video materials are most effective in foreign language classrooms and whether they, indeed, enhance learning in all language skills areas. While many video materials are now available—ranging from realia to studio-produced lessons, there are few integral video-based foreign language curricula. An integral video curriculum is one that incorporates video with a text and workbook to deliver language and culture in the instructor-managed classroom. The author discusses how an integral video curriculum meets interactive and proficiency teaching goals. Using Travessia, a Portuguese language and culture program, the author compares it to other integral video programs and describes it in the context of theory and research on the applications of video technology in foreign language education.

Television Technology: Issues and Applications

Even an accessible and easily used technology as television presents some problems to the administrator and instructor in academic settings. Although the situation is improving, relatively few classrooms are equipped with TV monitors and VCR's. The ideal "mediatheque" classroom—with audio and video capabilities and computer hardware—is still a rare commodity. Therefore, to use technology—however simple—still in-

volves advanced planning, complex scheduling, and some physical effort on the part of the instructor to bring equipment, or have it brought, from a central location into the classroom or to schedule the class for the Language Learning Center. These logistical challenges are coupled with the time-consuming tasks of selecting appropriate materials and developing them for classroom use.

The second ACTFL volume on technology in foreign language education (Smith, 1989) stresses the growing role of television in foreign language classrooms. "Television, like the language laboratory, is here to stay," states the volume's editor in his opening essay. Smith goes on to caution that the "challenge is for the teacher to know the medium and its limitations and to use it intelligently (and legally)." It is important to use either well-prepared materials, or to prepare students carefully if authentic materials are employed. Teachers must, as Smith (1989) suggests, receive adequate training to use the media properly. Richardson and Scinicariello (1989), the authors of the chapter on television technology, enumerate the possible pitfalls of lack of preparation: "Even advanced students are frustrated in watching programs for which they have not been prepared."

The thrust of the Richardson-Scinicariello chapter is, however, on the benefits of television for foreign language learners. Citing research by Lee, Schultz, Beeching, Jensen, Venther, and Lynch, the authors list the arguments in favor of television. Alluding to the familiarity, Richardson and Scinicariello state, "Students of today are

truly a television generation, accustomed to gaining knowledge about the world from the TV screen instead of from newspapers and magazines." It would be hard to deny that video materials offer a ready source of language in its social context, spoken by a significant variety of native speakers, who register the daily nuance and change of language as well as paralinguistic codes such as body language (kinesics), distance (proxemics) and vocalization. Conversational skills are prompted when the content of the program stimulates discussion or role plays. All in all, television offers a wealth of information about the culture and people of target language countries.

The chapter by Richardson and Scinicariello gives a history of television technology in the foreign language repertoire, beginning with the "talking face" program in which a studio "teacher" delivered language lessons to a class while a classroom teacher "who frequently did not know the language" stood by in a passive role. Although they discuss television/video materials in various categories (commercial, broadcast, self-produced) and analyze them in terms of student interests as well as pedagogical goals (listening comprehension, vocabulary, speaking and writing, culture, professional applications), they do not specifically discuss the integral video curriculum. The program that has now become the prototype of the integral video genre, *French in Action*, is discussed under the category of funded projects.

The Integral Video Curriculum: Antecedents

French in Action, developed by Pierre Capretz of Yale University with an Annenberg Grant, has as its objective the presentation of the French language in the context of contemporary French culture. The original objectives of the project were to determine the best applications of video in the classroom and to teach language in the context of culture. The videos of *French in Action* chart the adventures and misadventures of Robert, an American student in Paris, and Mireille, a French student, with whom he becomes infatuated. Other characters include members and acquaintances of Mireille's family. A mime character appears occasionally to

illustrate certain language structures. The course includes a text, workbook, student manual, and 52 video lesson tapes. As such, this program spans a beginning, two-year language program. Distribution began in 1987, and the program is now widely used both in colleges and university classrooms and as a laboratory supplement. Because the program is also broadcast on public television, it is available to a wide audience. The planners designed *French in Action* so that it could be interactive.

A different type of integral video is *Survival Spanish*, a commercial video language course produced by Miami-Dade Community College. This program has now been made interactive by the University of Idaho with a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The Idaho project has its own chapter in the Smith (1989) volume under the rubric "SSI Interactive" by Alfred W. Jensen and Mary Ann Lyman. Originally produced in 1984, *Survival Spanish* now includes 36 video and audio cassettes, a text-workbook for students, and a teacher's manual. The series is designed to reflect functional/notional concepts and offers topics in retail sales, food, medical and travel services, domestic needs, and personal associations. Grammar content of *Survival Spanish* is equivalent to a first-year program.

The Integral Video Curriculum: Travessia

Travessia (Tolman, Paiva, Jensen, Parsons, 1988) is a program of instructional materials designed to teach the Portuguese language in the context of Luso-Brazilian culture. The project is directed by Jon Tolman of the University of New Mexico and Ricardo Paiva of Georgetown University. Nivea Parsons of the University of Arizona and John Jensen of Florida International University are co-authors. Funding for *Travessia* comes from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Rede Globo Television of Brazil, and the Roberto Marinho Foundation in Rio de Janeiro. The videos were produced in Brazil by the authors in collaboration with a production team from the Roberto Marinho Foundation. Regular television programming footage from commercial television was provided from the archives of TV Globo.

Presently, the *Travessia* curriculum consists of 12 videotapes corresponding to 12 lessons, a textbook, student workbook, and teacher's manual. *Travessia I* is a twelve-unit series corresponding to a beginning to intermediate language course (which can take three to four semesters to complete). *Travessia II*, the advanced version of this program is currently in preparation. Furthermore, research is in progress to make the program interactive.

The videotapes of *Travessia* are an integral component of the curriculum and are used to deliver new materials in the context of Brazilian and Portuguese culture. The emphasis is on Brazilian culture. The theme of the program is captured in the title which translates as "crossing" or "journey." The epigraph reads: "Aprender uma língua e estudar uma cultura é atravessar um mundo de imensos horizontes, e, no processo, encontrar-se, ao descobrir o outro." (To learn a language and to study a culture is to cross a world of immense horizons, and in the process, to find yourself, as you discover the other.)

Unlike *French in Action*, the video segments of *Travessia* are short and do not have a common storyline. Two studio instructors introduce language material. The dramatic episodes are varied and will occasionally have flashbacks to previous scenes; characters and situations vary. The video segments corresponding to the lesson units are approximately 30-minutes in duration. Moreover, the video unit is broken down into short "capsules" punctuated by "stop" signs. These mini-segments are the catalyst to interactive classroom activities.

The role of the trained teacher is central to the *Travessia* concept: The curriculum is designed to be manipulated by an instructor for maximum effect on the student. The instructor must develop daily lesson plans in which the video takes an integral part; it is not, however, the **only** teaching tool. Herein lies the difference in the concept guiding *Travessia* as opposed to the one guiding *French in Action* and *Survival Spanish*.

The video segments of *French in Action* are long and complete narrative units. They can be used in the classroom or in the lab. In the classroom, the instructor will usually play the

entire video before initiating interactive classroom discourse. *Survival Spanish*, as a commercial course designed for home use or TV broadcast can also be used without an instructor, as a classroom supplement, or in the laboratory.

***Travessia* in the Interactive Classroom**

The theoretical and methodological supports of the *Travessia* program are explicitly grounded in the principles of interactive teaching and learning. The preface of the first book states that *Travessia* is designed to "equip the learner with both a language 'recognition' capacity and a 'production' capability in a communicative setting" (Tolman, et al., 1988) The use of current, authentic (natural) language of modern Brazil is stressed. Exercises are contextualized and personalized. In his article entitled, "Culture in the Language Class: Videos to Bridge the Gap," Ricardo Paiva (1989) cites Wilga Rivers as preface to his discussion of the benefits of an integral video classroom program: "The students achieve facility in using a language when their attention is focused on conveying and receiving authentic messages (that is, messages which contain information of interest to the speaker and listener in a situation of importance to both). This is interaction."

Successful interaction in the classroom requires a skillful teacher. The *Travessia* materials can be successful only to the degree that the teacher uses them knowledgeably and with good control and timing. The advantage to the teacher is that the program offers many helpful props for interactive discourse; the advantage to the student is manifold.

What advantages can the student derive from *Travessia*? Paiva (1989) summarizes: "Videos restore the illusion of reality to visual form, entertain, feed the imagination, and renew the interest in the subject matter. They create scenarios in which students actually see native speakers interacting among themselves, surrounded by cultural trappings that can be shown only through visual images. When the students either imitate or recreate those scenarios or imagine new ones, the original cultural clues provided by the visual images should always work as a point of reference."

Citing Krashen and Terrell, Paiva (1989) describes the movement in video from comprehension to production which is the process of communication in life situations. The authors of *Travessia* have sought to expose the student to the widest possible range of modern day Brazilian Portuguese—a language Paiva describes as the “language of different social classes, individual and regional accents, pronunciation, intonation, body language and mannerism.” This rich mix of video language complements the textbook language which strives for accuracy and correctness. In time, the authors maintain, the student will “identify the level of language spoken in a variety of social situations by native speakers of different cultural levels.”

Paiva, furthermore, notes that a great deal of cultural data is given so that students begin to acquire enough information to see the difference between stereotypes and relevant cultural reality. All aspects of culture, even some which may be contrary to the students’ value systems, are shown and analyzed in context. Thus, the student is able to come to informed cultural opinions and to make more identifications of similarity and differences between his or her cultural experience and that of the target culture.

The *Travessia* model for presentation of diverse linguistic and cultural information is contained in the video culture capsules. These consist of shorts from TV miniseries, and soap operas, as well as realia such as footage of interviews, songs, dance, folklore, legend, popular festivities, national celebrations, religion and popular culture. Much of the material is humorous and artistic and has the “mark of being authentically Brazilian.” (Paiva, 1989)

Paiva (1989) points out that students will learn that “reading a text and reading an image on the screen do not demand the same tools.” With the aid of the teacher, the student learns to negotiate between the text and the video to engage in activities that will facilitate using the learned language, such as problem solving, role play, imitation, debate of a topic, and singing. Use of video segments can vary according to their content. The instructor’s notes suggest that instructors may want to “play the tape cold” the first time, with books closed, so students will be

listening attentively. After that, students can read through the scripts in the text, contained in boxes marked “Video” and “Pare” (Stop) to discuss meaning before a second or third viewing of the material. Playing back earlier material is a good review and refreshes the students’ visual recall of the lesson.

The videos present grammar in a simple manner to highlight the important points. The grammar videos are intended for graphic and visual reinforcement, replacing—in part—the blackboard. Grammar use always precedes grammar presentation which is given in English in the text. The authors explain that this is to assure efficient understanding and to free the instructor from having to use spoken English in the classroom.

The video dramatizations usually illustrate some point of structure or vocabulary. This material can be directed in a number of ways: The teacher can emphasize grammar, listening comprehension, body language, pronunciation, or learning linguistic material not in the text. A typical suggested follow-up activity is for the students to create a dramatic situation similar to the one on the video and present it to the class. The students’ performance can be videotaped and compared with the original video.

Follow-up activities in the text are included in the sections titled “Observe e Responda” (Observe and Answer), “Voce Entendeu?” (Did you understand?), “Vamos Praticar” (Let’s Practice), “Vamos nos Comunicar” (Let’s Communicate), and “Ponto de Encontro” (Meeting Place). All of these sections offer the instructor a great deal of flexibility and encourage the creation of interactive situations in the classroom. The instructor can pick, choose and mix activities as appropriate. Every unit of *Travessia* also presents one or more video clips with popular Brazilian songs. Many students enjoy singing along with the video and will often be encouraged to bring their own favorite Brazilian music to class. It is well known that the Brazilian view is eloquently expressed in its music; the songs in the video come from a variety of regions and historical periods and offer both a background and counterpoint to the other cultural information presented.

A workbook supplements the text and video to give students the opportunities to practice writing skills. Printed examples of cultural materials, such as advertisements and newspaper articles, are used to encourage the continuity of contextualized language and cultural learning.

Conclusion

The video-based language instruction programs like *French in Action*, *Survival Spanish*, and *Travessia* are still new and relatively untested. There is little empirical data available with which to formally evaluate these programs. Yet, in spite of the “untested” nature of these foreign language teaching and learning tools, each has its devotees and critics.

Whether devotee or critic, those of us in foreign language classrooms must continue to create an environment in which students listen, learn, and then use target languages in meaningful ways. As we try to keep pace with the existing and emerging practices and technological products for today’s language learning, we must come to terms with integral video: Does it truly carry students

across the language and cultural barriers that have for so long kept so many in the solitary confinement of linguistic prisons?

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