FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN A MULTIMEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Lis Kornum, Christianshavns Gymnasium
Copenhagen, Denmark

ABSTRACT

This paper will describe my experiences and the subsequent evaluations of a number of case studies showing various applications of software and multimedia in the language classroom and in interdisciplinary projects.

One aim has been to integrate various types of courseware, such as dedicated packages and authoring programs, along with other electronic media like interactive video and audio, CD-ROM, electronic mail, databases, satellites etc. in the curriculum of secondary and further education.

Another aim has been to train both students and teachers in the organization of information retrieval and the exploitation of multimedia, and to evaluate the pros and cons of the new teaching and learning methodologies that emerge as a consequence of these strategies.

USING E-MAIL TO DEVELOP WRITING SKILLS

Many teachers have started using E-mail as a support and a supplement to educational exchanges. My starting point was to have my students use the word processor for their written work. This proved to be a highly useful learning tool, and a logical next step was to actually send some of this written work on to students in other countries — hoping to find people who were willing to exchange not just trivial everyday information, but thoughts, ideas and opinions on all kinds of subjects in the target language(s).
My classes have communicated with i.e. San Diego University, California, a school in Yorkshire, and at present with students from Ireland and France on a regular pen-pal basis.

With San Diego and Ireland the electronic links have functioned very well. Both sides have been extremely conscientious in replying to the letters from the other country with the result that the students' motivation increased steadily during the projects. Furthermore the regularity of the communication made it possible for me to carry out reasonably thorough evaluations of the teaching and learning strategies involved in the projects. For a detailed description of these evaluations see my article "Integrating NIT in Language Teaching for Stimulation rather than Simulation" Eurit Conference April 1990.

E-MAIL AS A TOOL FOR BOTH TEACHERS AND LEARNERS

The links with Yorkshire were not so successful. Technical, economic and curricular problems all contributed to making the contact very difficult for the British school, and my students got more and more frustrated as they didn’t receive any replies to their letters on which they had spent considerable time and energy.

The same thing has happened to certain schools participating in a major telecom-project between France and Denmark. The project was organized by the Danish Ministry of Education, and the first year, 89-90, we were 4 pilot schools in Denmark communicating with 4 French schools. In 90-91 there were 24 schools in each country, and in 91-92 88 schools all together in the two countries.

The project met with some difficulty because several of the French schools entered the project without realizing the conditions. Some did not possess the necessary technical equipment, the teachers have not received sufficient training, and the curriculum scares many from "wasting" time on such projects, if they do not get moral as well as financial support. As the Danish schools have been very motivated and well prepared for this project there was considerable frustration on the part of those who got little or no response from their French partners.
Fortunately we contacted M. Valette from the CIEP (Centre International d’Etudes Pédagogiques) in Sèvres, who is the animator of the international network SESAME. He helped us create our own user-group on the SESAME network, "La petite Sirène."

So the group of coordinators, to which I belong, has had to arrange and organize other activities on the network, such as teleconferences, newspaper days etc. in order to maintain the students’ and the teachers’ interest in the project.

Likewise we have established an in-service teacher training on the network. All the teachers participating in the project can write and ten about their problems, both technical and pedagogical. The members of the coordinating group will then try to solve these problems, and the other participants will join in, either with similar problems or suggestions to help.

Recently other teachers from the participating schools are beginning to write, asking all kinds of pedagogical questions in relation to subjects other than French, i.e. if anybody has a particular film or book, how you get into a chemical database, if we know any cheap places to stay in Copenhagen etc.

For the classes who don’t have a final exam at the end of that school year we have run alternative mini-projects instead of ordinary exams. Both teachers and students were enthusiastic, and several schools have made ambitious projects such as electronic feuilletons accompanied by video also made by the students, teleconferences on European issues etc. And I have been contacted by numerous teachers from other subjects who wish to do the same,

Besides our own user-group, "La petite Sirène," the schools participating in the French-Danish project have access to other parts of the SESAME network where international teleconferences are staged with regular intervals.
TELECONFERENCES CAN IMPROVE READING SKILLS

These teleconferences — or fora, agora etc. as they are also called — are a great success and in my opinion as valuable, if not more so, as the pen-pal communication. With my English classes I use mainly Campus 2000, but both Sesame and Campus offer teleconferences in several languages, and in fact any country is welcome to send their contribution in their mother tongue, preferably with a translation into one of the "big" languages.

Usually the themes of these conferences are announced well in advance, so the participants have time to gather relevant material. This can be novels, stories, articles, audio- and videotapes which we study in class and discuss like we do with any other material in the curriculum. Then the students are divided into groups, each with a particular aspect/topic to write about. They use the word processor and thus have time to structure as well language as contents, before I gather the finished letters into one file, open the line and send the whole file.

During the teleconference, which can last from one single day to several weeks, we can read the contributions from the other participants. This is of course exciting for the students, and my evaluations show a noticeable improvement in their reading skills deriving partly from the fact that they read the preparatory material very intensely, because they have to tell others about it, partly from reading a number of letters in the target language from the other participants.

And in their subsequent letters they will often start to use expressions and idioms, which they have picked up from the letters of the native speakers, resulting in a written language on a much higher level.

CAN COMPUTERS DAMAGE YOUR PROSE?

An article in Times Literary Supplement with the title "How computers can damage your prose" recently claimed that computers and word processors can damage your prose, no matter how useful a tool you find it. The users automatically restrict their language to suit the machine and the software, and the ease with which you can erase and change what you have written prevents you from comparing various thoughts and ideas you may have during the writing process.
The author claims that because the screen holds a limited number of words "the relation between the words you write now and the words you wrote earlier becomes even more tenuous, and the relation between the world within the screen and the world outside even more arbitrary." And he continues "The computer screen with its capacity of 300 words was invented for an age that prefers its art and arguments fragmented, deliberately implausible, and simultaneously startling and predictable."

I have copied the article to my students and discussed it with them. And although I do not agree with this very pessimistic view of the computer's influence I find it of the utmost importance as a teacher to draw my students' attention to the warnings expressed by people critical of new technology.

I myself have seen too many examples of what I would consider a wrong use of new technology, both as regards computers and video, not to take such warnings seriously.

**CD-ROM, LASERDISCS, AND INTERACTIVE VIDEO COMBINED WITH OTHER ELECTRONIC MEDIA**

Audio and videotapes have been popular elements in the language classrooms for many years now, in spite of the fact that they train mainly receptive skills thus risk encouraging a passive attitude in the students, if these media are not used with a clearly defined pedagogical methodology.

The introduction of various types of laserdiscs, with or without interface to a computer, has transferred much of the control of the media to the user resulting in a greater interactivity between learner and learning tool.

After having run several pilot projects with interactive video 1) I am now responsible for a project for the Danish Ministry of Education with the objective of combining the various electronic media and integrating them in the curriculum of modern languages, spreading to other subjects in the Danish "Gymnasium."
MULTIMEDIA PROJECT ON IRELAND

One theme has been Ireland, both the Republic and Northern Ireland. My class has exchanged E-mail with a boys’ school and a girls’ school in Dublin, where the teaching is done in Gaelic. At the same time my class has communicated with students from Queen’s University in Belfast.

The main issue has been "The Troubles,” but we have also read a number of historical and fictional texts treating other aspects of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The class has for instance read the novels "Cal" and "The Country Girls" and the seen the film versions, besides seeing a documentary on James Joyce’s life and the film based on his story "The Dead." This is mentioned merely to reassure skeptics who think that the new electronic media are in opposition to the good old intellectual traditions in education.

Together with the history teacher the class and I have been to Dublin to visit our electronic friends, and the students prepared the trip by searching for information in databases, working with satellite photographs in collaboration with our geography teacher, besides of course studying a lot of "ordinary" background material, such as documentaries, audiotapes, statistics etc.

The trip was a great success. After only a few hours at the two schools — they are situated next to each other and the boys and the girls have certain subjects together the last two years — the personal contact was established, because the students felt that they already knew each other from the letters.

We didn’t go to Belfast, because it was considered too dangerous, and that lead to an intense and excited correspondence between my class and the students at Queen’s University. One reply was from a Catholic and a Protestant girl who wrote that Dublin had a much higher crime rate than Belfast — true. Another reply said, "No danger in your coming to Belfast, we only kill each other..." Eventually I went to Belfast to give a talk at Queen’s after Dublin, and I was bombarded with questions from the class when I returned.

We have used the interactive video disc "Challenges" and "Spacewatch" both from Northern Ireland. Neither is made for language studies. "Challenges" is meant for social studies in Britain and deals with various issues like drugs, alcohol, school, parents etc. The disc is excellent for foreign students, both as counterpart to all the talk about "The..."
Troubles” and because it gives them a chance to listen to a dialect different from standard English. The centre that made "Challenges" is just finishing a new interactive video system for in-service training of teachers and headmasters, but from which students too could learn a lot. I saw it in Belfast and it looks extremely impressive — very flexible, yet easy to operate.

"Spacewatch” is from the observatory in Armagh with an English commentator, which doesn’t bother the students in the least, according to our physics teachers who have become very fond of using this disc for astronomy lessons. Next year the geography teachers will join this multimedia project, particularly concerning satellite photographs and CD-ROMS.

The Danish Ministry has just made a video with me and the above-mentioned class where we discuss our Irish project and write letters to Dublin. During the filming the students also worked with "Challenges," besides actually managing to write the letters we were telling about. The answers that we have got from Dublin say that they are planning to visit us in Copenhagen in the autumn, so now it is our turn to find material on Denmark to send, some of it "snail mail," to our Irish friends.

ATTITUDES TO WAR

Another theme in our multimedia project has been "Attitudes to war" seen from a historical perspective.

My English students have read my own book on Laurence Olivier’s film version of Shakespeare’s "Henry V" and seen the film. We have compared Olivier’s film script to both Shakespeare’s text and Holinshed’s Chronicles, and the differences clearly show how the historical facts have been manipulated by the various authors. Just before the end of the year we managed to see Kenneth Branagh’s new version, which again show a new angle. The class then worked in groups with the CD-ROM containing Shakespeare’s complete works, as well as the CD-ROM about "Twelfth Night" which, besides the play itself, offers an impressive amount of interesting information on Elizabethan England and theatre, the Renaissance, history etc. Illustrated with texts, pictures and sound.
The same can be said about the CD-ROM "Desert Storm" about the Gulf war, developed by TIME Magazine. The students can see pictures of Bush and Saddam Hussein, hear their original speeches, read all kinds of texts, such as telegrams, newspaper extracts and many other things.

After a short introduction by me I let the students browse through the disc on their own, and each group then report back what they had got out of it. We only have one CD-ROM, so the rest of the class is working with me, for instance studying texts, or writing electronic — or ordinary — papers on the same subject.

There is no doubt that this diversified approach to a subject matter is highly motivating. And besides literature we have had lively debates on issues like media manipulation and censorship where the students really have been trained in expressing themselves accurately in the foreign language. This again means widening their vocabulary considerably and using more elaborate sentence structures to express their opinions.

OUT OF BATTLE

In this context we have also worked with "Out of Battle," an interactive video system that I have developed with two colleagues. The system consists of a videodisc with a 25 minutes semi-documentary showing England during World War I seen through the eyes of the British poets, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Besides the film we have put several hundred stills from the same period on the disc, and on sound track number two we have recorded a number of poems and commentaries on the period read by Alec Guinness.

The disc is run by a software package with historical, literary and bibliographical data, plus poems, a dictionary and exercises. The user has the full control of the system, and the students can choose to get a general overview of historical or literary facts or to work on more specific aspects.

Furthermore "Out of Battle" contains a number of poems from other periods right up to the latest pop groups, and the intention is to make the students aware of the differences and similarities in various authors’ and eras’ attitude to war, patriotism, democracy, class distinction etc.
Students often find poetry difficult, even in their own language. But when they are able to control the videodisc minutely and can watch the two poets discuss which word to use, the length of a line or the changing of a rhyme, besides seeing on the computer the various stages some of the poems have been through, they realize that poetry is a highly sophisticated means of communication. When we participated in a teleconference on the Gulf War some students asked if they could write a poem about the war instead of an article/essay. With excellent results.

**Videodisc on World War II and World Almanac**

The Danish National Museum has developed a videodisc based on material from the German occupation of Denmark during World War II. Originally it was only meant as an introduction to that part of the museum, designed for a touch screen. However the Danish Radio has now developed a bar code system in connection to the disc, and recently the Copenhagen Technology and Informatics Centre has started developing software in Guide. We have used this last unfinished version in some classes, and although the software part is not very impressive yet, the students say that they have profited a lot from watching all the authentic film sequences — the commentaries are in either Danish or English on the two sound tracks — plus studying the stills and the historical comments from the period.

Finally I have used the video disc plus the CD-ROM called World Almanac which contains a great deal of historical, geographical and cultural information. We have found pictures and film sequences about i.e. the Yalta conference, the Cuba crisis and Martin Luther King, so you can use the system either in connection to a specific theme, or you can let the students explore this huge system at their own speed and find the subjects that interest them.

**OPEN ACCESS**

This year our students have had open access to our two computer rooms where they can use the word processor and various courseware. This has been a great success and has definitely helped several of my projects to succeed. They have not yet had open access to the multimedia facilities, but next year we hope to be able to offer this to all students. I have no doubts that then their motivation and their autonomy will increase even further.
THE MULUMIEDIA LANGUAGE CLASSROOM ON THRESHOLD LEVEL

As mentioned above my French students are taking part in a telecommunication project with France with positive effects on as well their reading as their writing skills. Still as French is the third foreign language in Denmark the level is much lower than in English, so more and different support is needed to achieve a reasonable result.

Besides using the word processor it is necessary to train in grammar, vocabulary and structure, and for this I mainly use my own courseware UN MENU FRANÇAIS, which is installed on the school network, so the students can access it at all times, both in connection with longer written work as for instance the telecom-letters, and in their spare time if they feel the need to train a particular problem.

The French CD-ROMs are still expensive, but I hope it won't take too long before I can buy for instance the dictionary "LeGrandRobert": 9 volumes in book-form = one CD-ROM containing 80,000 words; 160,000 quotations; a spelling check and interfacable with the current word processors. Likewise a CD-ROM with the encyclopedia "Zyzomys" contains 70,000 entries; a dictionary of synonyms and an atlas; and is of course interfacable with a word processor.

A useful tool in French teaching is the French Teletel databases. Using a minitel directly from abroad is easy, but expensive and not pedagogical, as the minitel has no memory. So I use our ordinary computer together with a modem and an emulation program, in order to download the information, print it out etc.

We have especially used the databases from the big newspapers like Le Monde and Libération, as well as Agence France Presse, for instance during the Gulf war, where they were updated several times a day, and where you can write letters to the editor, and perhaps get answers from other readers. Likewise the database SOSPROF and Orthotel offer much good information to as well French teachers as teachers of other subjects.

French videodiscs

In the last years I have let my French classes work with a number of French videodiscs in order to train their listening skills. And as there is no software for language teaching in connection to these discs, we have either operated them with the remote control or with the bar code reader. This year I have used the Louvre discs for listening
comprehension. The class had to listen to certain sequences that I had chosen — in French. If they didn't understand they could play the sequence again, either in French or they could choose the second sound track and hear the same commentaries in English — a very interesting experiment, as the students' English is quite good, so the English commentary served almost like written subtitles do, but with the focus on the listening skills.

Next year I will cooperate with the art teacher, and we will use the Louvre discs and the Musée d'Orsay disc with the software destined for art, which has been developed, but is not quite bug-free yet. Or we may use a small software that I am developing together with a Danish colleague interested in programming.

In connection with our telecom-project where we have among other things discussed the French educational system I have used the disc "Moi mon métier" which contains a number of interviews with young Frenchmen about various jobs and educations. Besides using the remote control, I am working with the bar code reader, where I am developing small programs to go with the disc. I plan to do the same with "Tu as dit région," a disc about the region of Poitiers which contains a lot of interesting material on French institutions and political life.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN THE MULTIMEDIA CLASSROOM

The most important thing about all these media is that they are authentic. The new technology helps to bring these authentic documents into the classroom. Then it is the teachers' job to elaborate a didactic design to the various tutoring materials.

One-way communication is out, and the role of the teacher changed from that of the authority to that of the consultant and the facilitator. Particularly in language teaching, where it is so important that the learner feels confident, I find this new role a great advantage. Many of our students are so familiar with the new media that we can "equalize the expertise," as a British TV-producer put it, to the benefit of all.
What now remains is for the educators to decide to what extent students should be allowed to use these facilities, for instance in connection with major written work and exams. Just by using the above-mentioned CD-ROMs a student can bring into his/her essay quotations, statistics, summaries etc. from a multitude of sources, perhaps unknown to the teacher, besides of course have the spelling checked at the end. Even now students are asking to use the word processor for their written exams, so they may also have access to dictionaries, grammars etc. The greatest danger, as I see it, is that there will not be the same conditions for all students. It is our duty as teachers to assure that this will not happen by taking an active part in the discussion about the introduction of new electronic media.

REFERENCE


AUTHOR’S BIODATA

Lektor cand. mag. Lis Kornum, teacher of English and French at Christianshavns Gymnasium, Copenhagen. Responsible for several projects on Information Technology and Interactive Media for the Danish Ministry of Education. Responsible for a Council of Europe workshop "New Style" with the title "Using information and communication technologies in modern language teaching/learning in Europe." Responsible for the project "Informatique et Pédagogie" for FIPF, the International Organizations of French Teachers, and coordinator of a LINGUA project on telematics.

AUTHOR'S ADDRESS

Christianshavns Gymnasium
Prinsessegade 35
1422 Copenhagen K., Denmark

Phone:+45 31545005 (office) / (home) +45 42245916
Fax: + 45 31958083