An Interactive Video Program: TOPIC (Training for Oral Proficiency Interviewing Competence)

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses the development and production of the interactive video refresher training program "TOPIC" (Training for Oral Proficiency Interviewing Competence). The oral proficiency interview is a face-to-face test of a candidate's speaking proficiency. TOPIC teaches interviewing and evaluation skills to oral proficiency testers.

Under computer control, this interactive video program provides the user with videotaped sample interviews in German, simulation-type activities, and explanations for remedial purposes.

The program can be used as a prototype for the development of refresher training programs in other languages. Authoring was done in CDS/Genesis. TOPIC runs on the Sony View System.

KEYWORDS: oral proficiency interview, German, interactive video, Defense Language Institute, CDS/Genesis, Sony View System

Background

The Defense Language Institute (DLI) is a military language school in Monterey, California. Over 39 different foreign languages are taught in intensive training courses lasting from 24 to 56 weeks. The final examination at the end of a course includes language proficiency tests in three skill areas: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and speaking. Speaking is evaluated by two certified testers who conduct an interview in the target language with each candidate. The resulting speech sample is then rated on a scale of 0, for no practical ability to function in the target language, to 5, for ability equivalent to that of an educated native speaker. "Plus points" are given for ability which substantially surpasses the requirements for a given level but fails to sustain performance at the next higher level.

In a two week workshop, the testers are trained how to conduct an interview, and how to evaluate the resulting speech sample. Ideally, certified testers should receive refresher training at least once a year to ensure that in the course of time they don't deviate in their evaluation of a candidate's performance from the standard "DLI Proficiency Rating Scale." Testers who don't receive
refresher training once a year have a tendency to become too "generous" in their ratings. Being a certified tester myself, I realized that—because of a shortage of qualified personnel—DLI could not provide the testers with sufficient refresher training.

Another shortcoming is that the only model for interviewing techniques and evaluation in the traditional training workshops stems from videotapes with sample interviews conducted in English. Testers would benefit more from video programs in the target language. I realized that an interactive video program with sample interviews in the target language could be a solution to the described training needs.

I wrote a proposal to DLI to obtain funding for the production of a double-sided videodisc. In October of 1987, I received a letter from the Department of the Army, approving the production request.

Target Audience
The program was primarily developed for Certified Oral Proficiency Testers for German at the Defense Language Institute. However, it will be available to other government agencies where the oral proficiency interview is used for language assessment.

Why Interactive Video for this Project?
Interactive video exercises can simulate interpersonal communication without causing the trainee to suffer the real-life consequences of a mistake. An application of this idea for this project is the simulation of an oral proficiency interview which allows trainees (the testers) to experiment with different interview structures. As they progress through the program, they can see the results of their decisions, for good or for ill. At the end they are faced with the task of evaluating a ratable (or not so ratable) speech sample. What takes place here is a simulation of the consequences of decisions.

Cost Analysis
In my request for funding I estimated the total production cost for a double-sided disc at $25,000. It was possible to keep the production costs relatively low for the following reasons:
- There were no costs for talent because DLI faculty members and students volunteered their time and services as testers, candidates, and narrators.
- The cost analysis reflects production and post-production costs only. It does not include expenses for hardware and software because I could use existing interactive video stations and authoring software at DLI.

In comparison, Iuppa (1988) estimates the total cost for producing an interactive video program at $57,100. This figure refers to the production of a
Thus Iuppa’s estimate is about four times higher than the cost for this project.

Although interactive video initially seems to be a more expensive proposition in comparison with non-interactive media, it ends up to be a less costly solution than the real alternatives: centralized workshops and unmediated stand-up instruction. After a period of time the cost for automatically delivered instruction will be lower than the cost for instructor-led instruction. Although the use of computers or interactive video to deliver instruction causes higher development cost, computer-based instruction usually results in longer-term saving.

**Hardware and Software Selection**

The selection of hardware and software was limited to the systems supported by DLI.

**Hardware:** I developed this program for the Sony View System which consists of the SMC-2000 microcomputer, the LPD-2000 videodisc player and a monitor.

**Software:** CDS/Genesis, one of the authoring systems used at DLI, was well equipped to handle the specific design of "TOPIC." This software package combines a "High-Level" with a "Low-Level" authoring environment. Genesis, the high-level authoring system or template, is easier to use and generates lesson code faster. The author interacts with the system through menus. I found that Genesis made it relatively easy to create screen displays that are effective and are easy to read. The ease of use, however, is counterbalanced by a lack of flexibility. The low-level authoring system CDS requires some programming expertise. Generating lesson code is a much more time consuming task. However, the author has a great degree of control over the lesson presentation process.

The combination of CDS/Genesis provided me with the capability of using (1) the low-level environment of CDS to add computer routines that permit more sophisticated control tasks especially for answer analysis and conditional branching, and (2) the high-level environment of Genesis to design computer screen displays quickly and effectively.

Another very useful tool of CDS/Genesis is the structure editor which allows the author to generate on-screen or hard-copy flowcharts of the lesson structure. The program also offers text and graphics editors. Multiple fonts are available to emphasize certain words or phrases by differentiating them from the rest of the text.

**Instructional Setting**

TOPIC can be implemented in a variety of settings:
- as a supplement during refresher training workshops in a single-user mode.
- as a supplement during refresher training workshops in group settings.
- any time certified testers need to refresh their interviewing skills. Little assistance should be needed for the trainee to use the interactive videodisc workstation.

**Project Objectives**

A. The goal of TOPIC is to provide certified oral proficiency testers for German with remedial practice in learning:
   - how to conduct the oral proficiency interview.
   - how to evaluate a candidate’s language proficiency level in speaking.

B. The goals for producing this interactive videodisc training program were:
   - to develop a prototype for OPI interactive video refresher training.
   - to decrease the amount of time necessary for refresher training workshops.
   - to aid in the standardization of language proficiency assessment.
   - to provide oral proficiency testers with a training program in the target language.

**Program Structure**

TOPIC is primarily a tutorial, thus the program does not feature a pretest - posttest design to measure the trainee’s attainment of the learning objectives. Also, TOPIC is designed to be implemented as a supplement to refresher training workshops. Therefore, final mastery of the objectives can only be determined at the end of the workshop. The interactive video program does, however, provide the user with learning exercises to aid the trainee in mastering these objectives.

**User Orientation**

The program begins with an orientation for first-time users. The orientation includes the "housekeeping" segment with information on how the program is organized and what operational choices can be made, and a video segment illustrating the necessity of refresher training. Trainees who have used the program before can branch directly to the main menu.

**Segment Design, Questions, and Remedial Loops**

The program is divided into four modules:

1. Identification of incorrect tester behavior and interviewing strategies.
2. Identification of language tasks.
4. Structuring of a complete interview and rating of the candidate’s language level.
The design of the first three modules differs considerably from the design of the fourth module. Each of the first three modules consists of several segments to provide the user with ample practice opportunities. Each segment includes the following sequence: (See Figure 1.)

- Explanation of the task by the "Program Host" (motion video).
- Presentation of an interview segment (motion video); the user can choose between the English and the German soundtrack.
- Computer-generated display of practice questions. Module 1 and Module 2 feature multiple choice questions with multiple correct answers: The trainee has to identify all of the flaws in tester behavior in Module 1, or in Module 2, she has to name all of the tasks that were addressed in the last interview segment. This question format makes the task more difficult, but also more real. In Module 3, the trainee has to evaluate the language proficiency level at which the candidate performed the last task. Here, only one answer is correct. The trainee is always given the option to review the last segment if she feels she is not ready to answer yet.
- Computer-generated remedial feedback tailored to the specific response if the trainee gives a wrong or incomplete response on the first or second try. The program then offers the choice to either return to the question to answer again, or to go to the video segment that presents the right answers and explains why they are correct.
- Video feedback for the wrong answer on the third try. After the program host presents and explains the correct responses, the program branches to those short scenes (20 sec) from the last interview that contain clues to the correct answers. Computer text overlay points out the correct responses as they are illustrated on video.
- Video reinforcement of the right answer. Even when a trainee has selected the correct response, it is pedagogically effective to show why the answer is correct; after all, reinforcement is the reward for getting the correct answer!

At the end of each segment the trainee can either continue with another segment of the same module, review the last segment, or return to the main menu.

Module 4 focuses on sequencing skills: the trainee is asked to select tasks for an oral proficiency interview in the order in which they should be presented to a candidate in a given interview. As in a real interview, the trainee will see the task he selected being performed by the candidate. The last step, the correct evaluation of the candidate's speaking proficiency, will depend very much on how skillful the trainee was in selecting and sequencing the tasks for the interview.

There are several ways to get feedback in this simulation exercise:
**Introduction**

**Language?**

**Obj1 S1**
**Tester Behavior**
**German**

**Obj1 S1**
**Tester Behavior**
**English**

**Obj1 Q1**
[A] voiced own opinion
[B] filled pauses
[C] not task oriented
[D] evaluated performance
[V] video

**[V]**

**correct?**

**no**

**1st or 2nd try?**

**yes**

**Obj1 S1 FB5**
**Congratulations**

**Obj1 S1 FB6**
**Give Answer & Reason**

**SM 1.1**
**Menu**
[A] Segment 2
[B] Segment 1 again
[C] Main Menu

**[Legend]**

- **Computer Display**
- **Motion Sequence**
- **2 or more Motion Screens**
- **Decision**
- **2 or more Display Screens**

**Figure 1**
- Following the principle "You tell us the order of events - we will show you what will happen," the program illustrates the resulting consequences of doing things either in order or out of order.
- After selecting a task and viewing the respective interview segment, the trainee can ask for feedback on the language level at which the candidate performed the last task.
- At the end of this module, the program provides the trainee with feedback on his evaluation of the candidate's language level and with an analysis of the entire interview structure tailored to the specific selections of the trainee. (See Figure 2.)

Production

The contract for the video production was awarded to the lowest out of three bidders, a video company based in San Francisco. The contract included all production and post-production elements, disc mastering, the delivery of two validation discs and 25 replication copies.

Selection of Talent

For the part of the testers as well as the candidates, I selected DLI personnel to make sure they were well suited to the demographics of the target audience. The only professional talent for this project was the narrator. I was fortunate in having a colleague in the German Department of DLI's San Francisco Branch with an extensive background as a narrator for radio broadcasts. I selected five certified oral proficiency testers - all of whom were DLI employees and native speakers of German. Because the testers only worked from a partial script, it was essential that they could demonstrate good interviewing skills. Selecting the candidates for the interviews was not an easy task. I had to evaluate their speaking proficiency level in German weeks ahead of the actual shooting. I selected 11 DLI students of German whose speaking proficiency level matched the requirements of the script. I was faced with the "problem" that these students would continue to improve their German and that on production day their language level might be higher than what the script called for!

Before going into the studio, I met with the talent to do a "dry-run" of the interviews and the narration. We also recorded these rehearsals on 1/2 inch video. These recordings proved to be an effective way to give feedback to the talent.

Video Production

The actual videotaping required two 10-hour days. We shot at least two, sometimes three or four takes of each segment on 1" videotape until we were positive we had a good take. The narrator was able to read his lines on a teleprompter which greatly reduced retakes for flubbed lines.
Figure 2
Field Test Results

I conducted a field test with six certified oral proficiency testers for German. All six testers matched the profile of the target population. The testers worked with the program at their own pace in individual sessions. At the end of each session, I conducted a structured interview using a questionnaire I had prepared as a guideline. Following is a summary of the responses of the testers:
- Some testers felt uneasy using a keyboard. During the revision, I added a Help Screen which highlights the keys the user might have to press. This way, I hope to make the program more user friendly. A better solution, however, would have been to design the software with another input device in mind such as a touch screen or a pointing device like a mouse. I did not incorporate this option because there are not enough of these pointing devices for all Sony View workstations at DLI.
- With one exception, the testers felt that the program was highly effective as a teaching tool for refresher training. The dissenting tester had some reservations about the simulation (Module 4) because of the limited choice of tasks.

Conclusions and Recommendations

I believe TOPIC is a useful training tool for oral proficiency testers. I was fortunate to be able to contract the video production out to a professional company. A competent video team is a must for interactive videodisc productions. Today's viewers demand the high picture quality they are used to from broadcast television.

I was also fortunate to have my colleagues and students volunteer their time and talent to this production. For a training program like this an amateur cast is a cost-effective and satisfying solution. People can adequately act out in front of the camera situations they encounter every day in their jobs.

References


Author's Biodata

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