ON GETTING STARTED

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Now that the revolution in information technology no longer has a cachet of novelty and even the august Modern Language Association has acknowledged its presence, there is hope that computer-assisted instruction will in the immediate future assume its deserved role in foreign language instruction. One can also hope that CALICO may become the clearing house that has been so sorely lacking for the many experiments in the field over the last score of years.

Unfortunately, when it comes to foreign language instruction, one must still speak of hope, rather than certainty, in spite of the obvious invasion of computers into all conceivable (and a few inconceivable) aspects of our lives. The following remarks are yet another attempt to persuade colleagues that they may find the micro-computer revolution not only fun, But also rewarding.

I suppose that I should begin by admitting that my remarks are probably most appropriate to my own well-greyed generation which, given the less than desirable stagnation of the academic market in recent years, is better represented than one might wish. There is among our group a general leeriness of technological innovation per se, which probably stems from our having been burned by our experiences with the conventional language lab. Whether or not we deserved everything we got back then is ultimately irrelevant; the question at hand remains if and how we can put the new technology to good use in foreign language teaching.

In candor I would also have to admit that my thoughts are also probably most appropriate for my own level of teaching, i.e., that of the colleges. I think it very easy to support the argument that FL teaching in higher education has been hurt by computers, albeit accidentally or even incidentally. The commitment of very significant resources to mainframes in higher education inescapably led to a pronounced reluctance to accept the microcomputer and its many implications for learning. Secondary education was scarcely burdened by such commitments and consequently has usually been the leader (at least in my — Long Island — neck of the woods). To have educational innovation bubbling up instead of trickling down is welcome indeed. Obviously, we need to apply more heat to speed the process up.

Before developing my several exhortations, I would like to make it clear that my goal is minimalist and that my remarks in no way concern higher or highest tech. Much as I admire and covet BYU's "Montevidisco" and other commendable experiments in putting state-of-the-art technology to use, my interest remains focused on what seems readily achievable in the here and now, i.e., putting the microcomputer — already a commonplace in our lives — to work for us.

What Can CAI Do?

Why should we turn to (yet another) machine to help us with that most human of activities, language? For anyone who has been exposed to CAI, there is little doubt that it can do much to take over one of our more tedious roles, that of drillmaster. This was what we had hoped for from the conventional language lab but had seldom realized, since — with very few exceptions — the materials prepared for it were completely non-interactive. What value the conventional language lab had lay in its potential for convincing the dubious that not only the teacher spoke funny or — horrors! — that the teacher didn't speak language X the way native speakers did. But these are lessons which the student with a 'good ear,' i.e., capable of self-correction, had probably made for himself long since. As for the others, the subtleties of most materials fell on still deaf ears.

The beauty of the machine is that it is just that, a machine. It will wait for as long as we want it to wait and then do whatever we are clever enough to have it do for us. In the field of foreign language teaching, we should be having microcomputers doing all or most all of the instruction in reading and writing during the first year or for as long as the student's knowledge of structures and the lexicon of language X is sufficiently limited to keep him from feeling that he is being artificially restricted in his developing use of X. With memory having become so
inexpensive and micros so accessible, we can also use them to give all or almost all grammar explanations, if we so desire. This, of course, calls for great self-discipline and major rethinking from most of us who often have become very skilled at as well as fond of finding clever analogies which make various linguistic phenomena understandable. The point here is that such clever instruction can also be imparted by the computer, leaving the teacher all or almost all of the classroom time free for exercise in understanding and using the target language. It is here where the human teacher is and will remain indispensable. The true challenge posed by the computer to the language teacher is simply that of making the best possible use of classroom time.

How To Get Started

How you were supposed to get into the wonderful world of computing was a valid question until quite recently; now one can only wonder how you have stayed out until now. In your own defense, you can assert that the problem of foreign characters and diacritics has been and in good part remains a problem unless one is teaching English, Nederlands, Afrikaans, or Latin without the macrons. But this is a problem we will return to later.

If we posit the hardly believable circumstance that no one of your family and no neighbor is into computing, the simplest thing for you as teacher to do is just poll any of your classes; it is a safe bet that you will be surprised and perhaps astonished at the numbers able and happy to help you get your feet wet. The one thing to look out for here is an over-enthusiasm which fails to take into account your ignorance of the arcane jargon which computer buffs tend to wallow in. Also be leery of the math freak who may well be concerned with problems and computer capabilities that are of little concern to those who would manipulate language and not numbers.

Should student help for any reason prove unsatisfactory, there is always the ever-friendly computer salesman. The major lookout here is that he may be devoted to big sales which to him means business and spreadsheet programming. If he proves unsatisfactory, have him refer you to the nearest user's group (not to be confused with a shooting gallery). Unless you've settled on one of the more exotic brands of micros — and growth in this field has given new meaning to the concept of mushrooming — there should be within a reasonable area such a group in which you will find all levels and most varieties of expertise along with an attitude of cheerful helpfulness.

Programming

The degree of trouble or work posed by programming really depends on the degree to which you become enamored of the possibilities increase as manufacturers respond to competition and offer more and more for less and less. The truism still holds that simple programming is simple while complex programming is complex. You will find it quite easy to create instructive diversions for a class, but the work compounds as you move into self-instruction where looping and branching offer you a dizzying number of possibilities for guiding the student's progress into the target language. If you think graphics are a plus in your programs, you can move from simplest stick figures to animation in color — assuming you've spent the money for this capability. The same applies for sound, of course.

Is it possible to buy programs ready-made and avoid all the fuss of learning programming? Yes and no. There are a number of items available for the more popular languages ranging from collections of simple drills to what amounts to the new equivalent of elementary courses. The choice is still quite limited, and one can only hope that in the area of foreign languages we will soon see the significant improvement in quantity and quality of programs which has characterized those in more popular and thus more profitable areas in recent months.

In the meantime, we are witnessing the welcome appearance of what are known as 'template' programs, which can be indeed 'user friendly.' An excellent example of such is Jim Pusack's "Dasher," which offers the author-teacher a broad choice of options for constructing substitution-transformation drills and for having the computer guide the student through them. Since we all tend to be less than totally happy with any specific textbook, it seems probable that we will all be heading for such template programs with open arms.

Foreign Character Sets

Unfortunately, the availability of programs or of pre-programming is not the sole source of our problems, as was suggested before in our mention of graphics. Computer manufacturers seem to be becoming aware of the demand for foreign character sets as can be seen from the IBM PC and the TRS 80 Model III, both of which have built-in availability of the characters necessary for the most common languages of the Western world — French, German and Spanish in addition the English, of course, the language of the wonderful realm of computerdom.

No matter how such developments may help most of us, they do little to aid the teacher of more exotic languages such as Danish or Czech. Anyone so concerned may be able to find — unless quite lucky usually after a considerably search — a ready-made graphics chip or program which will fill the bill. If this proves impossible, then he will want to look for a micro such as the CBM 64 which offers 'user definable graphics.' Anyone compelled in this direction should be urged to have the ever-friendly salesman demonstrate how easy such a change of the graphics set is and how it affects the response time of the computer, a matter of considerable concern even with our TV-happy clientele.
A related concern is getting the desired character set not only on the micro's monitor but also on paper, a consideration even where the manufacturer's choice of characters available for the screen is adequate for you needs. You may be able to survive happily with a very inexpensive printer since it doesn't matter much to you that a dollar sign really means an n-tilde, and you will have no trouble in making the adaptation necessary for debugging your programs with the help of the printed page. NO, the hooker here comes from the fact that you will very soon become aware of the beauties of word processing and want to have it not only for English, but also for work in your foreign language(s). For the foreign language teacher, the search for the right printer should be conducted just as deliberately as that for the right micro; even if you think you are interested in micros solely for the classroom, you should expose yourself to word processing before making a decision concerning micros and printers.

We Need to Be Involved

Perhaps you've concluded that things are proceeding at a more than reasonable pace and that you might as well sit it out a bit more until enough of the hardware and software problems have been ironed out to make it simple for anyone to use the new tool effortlessly. This may prove to be the case since the rapid evolution of the computer world continues to surprise most everyone, but it may not be such a sure thing in our small little corner of the world. The publishing enterprises continue to have great difficulty in getting a hold on the immense changes we are experiencing in information technology. Although computer-assisted instruction seems established beyond doubt, the publishing enterprises have only rarely shown that they know what to do with it, i.e., how to make it marketable, profitable and copyrightable. They will surely continue in their search to find happy answers to their problems, but given their rather dismal performance with old-fashioned books, it seems at best idle to hold our breath while they not only successfully tackle the many problems but also work their way down the profitability scale to the beleaguered foreign language teacher. All of which point to a need for the foreign language teacher to be involved in the production of CAI materials. If not directly, then certainly as a whole-hearted squire to the Don Quixotes who will take on and lay waste to our favorite windmills.