Colloquium

A brief experiment in distance teaching and learning of French

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Introduction

Over the last few years there has been increasing interest both in distance learning and in the application of new technologies to language teaching and learning. However, few experiments have been done by higher education institutions in the specific area of distance language provision using satellite transmissions. The experiment described below was carried out by two lecturers in French to evaluate the effectiveness of this mode of delivery.

The delivery context was a project called RATIO (Rural Area Training & Information Opportunities) operating in the South-West from the University of Plymouth and funded by the European Union. RATIO aims to deliver vocational courses in rural areas into centres equipped with satellite dish, receiver, printer and computers. A quick market survey in small businesses close to RATIO centres suggested that there was some interest in higher level French courses (post-A level or the equivalent). On the basis of this we prepared two advanced French broadcasts, to be followed by two videoconferencing sessions. The University of Plymouth has a TV studio and has experience of delivering courses at distance.

The satellite broadcasts

The audience at the RATIO centres were sent a dossier of material in advance incorporating an introduction to the programme, additional explanations, reading material and question sheets for the listening work. We considered this essential as a form of induction for the viewers and for follow-up work. The two satellite broadcasts lasted about 50 minutes each (see Table 1).

As we were addressing a potentially disparate market in terms of past language learning experience, needs and interests, we kept the topic material for the two pilot sessions relatively general ie, two short video extracts, the first relating to François Mitterrand’s life and career, and the second dealing with traffic problems in Paris. The big constraint, which severely limited the range of material we could use, was copyright; this ruled out, for example, any French songs we might have wanted to include. The quality of the
recording chosen was also crucial, as any flaw in the picture or sound in the original, however slight, risks being magnified when retransmitted.

A full script was needed for the broadcasting crew who had to synchronise video extracts, captions and other inserts. Providing this obliged us to focus in detail on the aims and objectives of the exercise. For the actual delivery of the programme we had access to an overhead camera (the transparency is projected on to a screen) which has the advantage of leaving the lecturer in control of the timing and allowing last minute preparation of transparencies. Alternatively, the PowerPoint software offers numerous possibilities (eg, preparation in advance of screens with bullet points or of captions which slide on to the screen at the click of a mouse, controlled by the presenter). This looks
much more polished, but takes far longer to set up in conjunction with the voice-over. The timing of the delivery of the screens is crucial, as it is all too easy to proceed at a cracking pace which leaves even motivated viewers with mental indigestion. Another alternative was to have captions moving on to the screen as we talked, which actually looked a little more lively than a plain coloured screen with bullet points. This had to be very carefully orchestrated with the TV engineer, as he and not the presenter controlled the arrival of the caption.

The two broadcasts did not follow the same technical pattern, as the first was live and the second pre-recorded except for a short introduction and the phone-in sessions.

The two live broadcasts were far more nerve-wracking for the presenters, but had the advantage of greater spontaneity. The rehearsals—inevitably—led to significant modification of the material, presentation and timing. Working from a script rather than an autocue meant that there was an additional pitfall to avoid, that of looking down too much of the time instead of looking at the camera. Speaking naturally when you cannot see your interlocutors was particularly difficult. Trying to imagine an audience helped, or, if the lighting allowed, speaking as if to the camera operator.

The video-conferencing follow-up sessions
These sessions were planned around a series of interactive exercises built on the material presented during the satellite broadcasts. The software provided by RATIO, PictureTel 200, provided a shared whiteboard facility. We prepared whiteboard documents on a word-processing programme—exercises on vocabulary and grammar—which the audience could also call up on their own screen and work on, writing in answers which we could see and comment on immediately. This at least was the theory. In practice, teething problems with the software and with the link-up with the centres prevented the sessions taking place as planned. As it turned out we only were able to talk with them and see each other on part of the screen. With regard to the sound quality, the delay which occurred between speech and reception made communication difficult, which in a foreign language session is a very serious drawback. Also, had we wished to work with several centres simultaneously, we would have had to pay for a video-conferencing bridge, an arrangement which allows contact to be established with a number of centres simultaneously, instead of just one. The potential of the video-conferencing software is considerable, but it is complex to use, and it is essential to have a technician on call, at least to begin with.

We did receive some positive feedback from the audience of the satellite broadcasts who had not been able to find a language course at this level elsewhere, and as a challenging learning experience for the staff involved, it was invaluable.

Conclusion
It would be precipitate to draw major conclusions from these two experimental broadcasts. Distance Learning is now marketable and satellite transmission is a crucial component. It does provide great opportunities for increasing the learner’s choice of courses

but is not a cheap alternative to traditional classes in terms of the cost of staff, secretarial time, TV studio team and equipment and satellite time. The TV team consisted of four people, and we had to have secretarial assistance for the preparation of documents.

The time required and the cost of the broadcasts can only be justified if they are part of a language programme which can be widely used. In the future, questions of monitoring progress and evaluation and the management of eventual course fees will need to be considered.