

CREATE A VIDEO LAB ON A SHOESTRING BUDGET

by Joan Dollard
Central Michigan University

THE ROAD TO PROFICIENCY

The audio lab, praised by some as a useful place where students of foreign languages and English as a second language can help themselves become proficient in listening comprehension, pronunciation, and in using various structures and intonations, yet maligned by others as inadequate to the aforementioned tasks, or just plain boring, has not disappeared from the second language learning scene nor is it likely to do so. It is, however, getting much competition from the video lab as the place to get practice in listening comprehension, pronunciation, and structural use. The video lab, though, has an added attraction — the visual — which makes it a nearly ideal place for students to get cultural input in the language(s) they are learning. The video lab, equipped with TV's or monitors and VCR's, equipment students use at home, is a very user friendly and enjoyable place to spend time on the road to language proficiency.

CREATING A VIDEO LAB

Creating a video lab does not have to be an exorbitant expenditure. You can create a video lab on a modest budget and in stages as we at Central Michigan University have done.

Phase 1: Remodeling the Space

At one time, CMU had two adjacent labs: one a 1984 forty carrel Sony open audio lab and the other a five-row nine-carrel non-

functioning junk-collecting audio class lab. We had the space to do something. Several years ago we began planning to renovate the non-functional but existing space to prepare the way for a video lab. In the summer of 1986, we removed the old console, student desks, and a blackboard. We relocated book shelves and had carpeting installed. We kept the student carrel configuration of five rows, nine stations per row in order to avoid new furniture costs.

One of the more significant changes we made was to replace the wall joining the two labs with four 4' X 4' windows. With that one grand change, the two labs, though remaining separate, were no longer isolated from each other. Given the large windows, one lab assistant could monitor both labs, thereby enabling a cost saving on student assistant staffing. The tall book cases that once occupied the now windowed wall were cut down to three foot ones, used now for storing audio cassettes and some video cassettes. All these changes cost less than \$3600.

Phase 2: Buying Equipment and Troubleshooting

Next it was a matter of equipping the physical space. Our original plan was to equip this lab with twenty color monitors and VCR's. We started by equipping five booths in the beginning of the academic year and added another five at the end of the year. We purchased relatively inexpensive 13 inch Totevision color monitors (ten for \$1840) and RCA VMT 385 and 389 VCR's (ten for \$3150).

Joan Dollard is Director of the Language Lab at Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan.

VCR's

The RCA VMT385 and 389 VCR's, which we bought from a local merchant, have given us good use. Not one has needed repair and we have the capability of off-air recording and adding channels that we would not have had with VCR's. Of course if you purchase TV's instead of monitors, you would also be able to add channels when needed.

TV Monitors

The picture quality on the television monitors is acceptable. If your budget allows, better quality monitors would be more enjoyable for the user.

One important way that we expanded the use of our ten carrels, which ordinarily would have just ten users, was to install two headset jacks per monitor. In that way we had a user capacity of twenty without having to buy ten more monitors and VCR's. As a spin-off, we increased user enjoyment. Many of our students enjoy watching a video with a classmate.

An important point to remember in having jacks installed in a monitor: make sure the sound comes out only through the headset. If the sound were not "deadened" in this manner, when a student pulled out the headset in order to return it to the lab assistant, if he or she did not turn off the monitor or turn down the volume before removing the headset jack, the sound would blast out for all to hear and obviously cause a disturbance.

Headsets

We also bought headsets from a local merchant. We were particularly sensitive to buying lightweight comfortable headsets, with a long cord since students might be wearing them for as long as a film might last. The long cord permits students to adjust their seat position to some distance from the monitor if that is where they are comfortable. We chose Radio Shack's Realistic Nova 55 at a cost of \$29.95 per headset.

Of course, they go on sale periodically and can be bought for much less. This headset has good sound quality and it has what we were looking for. Though we have not had any major problems, we have already had to replace one headset and have had minor repairs on two. The headsets are not as sturdy as those made specifically for school use or even other light weight models with a sponge earpiece. What we particularly like about the Nova 55, in addition to its being lightweight, comfortable, having a long cord and good sound is the wide earpiece which keeps the sound confined to the user — there is no bleeding sound that comes from the headsets.

Multi-standard TV/VCR

Another important piece of equipment that we bought, though not really part of a shoestring budget, is highly desirable for foreign languages: a Toshiba multi-standard TV (289X4M) and a Hitachi multi-standard VCR (VT-168-EM). With this multi-standard system, we can use videos made on the PAL color system or videos on the SECAM system, and, of course all videos made on our NTSC system. Teachers can use the multi-standard equipment in their classroom or have outside of class lab assignments.

The multi-standard TV/VCR became a problem though. It had only one jack so only one student at a time could use it in the lab. Entire classes of fifteen or twenty or more had the same assigned video on PAL or SECAM to watch. In addition, teachers sometimes wanted the multi-standard equipment to use during the day in their classes. We arrived at several solutions to those particular problems and solved others at the same time:

1) We had made, not a little black box, but a little gray one, with four jacks that attach to the one jack in the multi-standard TV. Instead of just one student at a time being able to watch a video on the multi-standard TV during the day, four can now

do so. This box could have had six or eight jacks. Given the space we had available, we determined four to be an ideal number. An audio-splitter, of the kind we had made by our Technical Services Department is available commercially and actually can be more sophisticated with individual volume controls for each jack.

2) We extended our audio and video lab hours from 35 to 51 hours a week. We now keep the labs open four evenings a week until 9:00 P.M., allowing more time for students to have access to video as well as audio cassettes to do their assignments. We hire students on College Work Study for these additional hours to keep our staffing costs down.

3) We instituted a reserve system for all videos. If a teacher assigns a specific video to a class, students can reserve the tape for specified times. We have special forms for that purpose. If the video to be reserved is an NTSC one, there is one form and if it is on PAL or SECAM there is another form on which the student reserves the specific video along with the multi-standard equipment.

4) Of course, to keep things running smoothly with only one multi-standard TV/VCR set up, we had to have a reserve system for teachers' use of the equipment in the event they wanted to show a PAL or SECAM video in a class during the day. Faculty and students use the same reserve sheet to avoid conflicts. For other videos on NTSC a teacher might want to use in class, we have another portable unit available. That one too requires a reserve system: a sign-out sheet is attached to the VCR. A teacher simply signs his/her name, date, and times required.

5) We have showings in the evenings for groups or classes. Since we do not have a room in the video lab for group showings, and since all our classroom space is occupied during the day, we reserve a room adjacent to the lab for group viewing in the evening. The lab assistant sets up the TV and VCR and starts the video at a specified

time. When the video is over the lab assistant rewinds the tape and returns the equipment to the lab.

Whenever there is a group showing of a video, the video title, class for which it is assigned, time and place are written on a white board that is attached to the wall outside our Language Learning Center. It serves as a reminder to the students who have the assignment as well as an invitation to others who might want to view the video.

Software/videocassettes

Our foreign language department has purchased and continues to purchase videocassettes which are catalogued by the Language Learning Center. There are, however, many videos in our collection that have been purchased through the library, are catalogued by the library so that the entire university community has access to them, but are housed in the video lab. That arrangement was made with the library, though not without much negotiation, by the end of the first semester's use of the video lab.

Phase 3: Satellite TV and Trouble-shooting

Buying satellite antennas, earth station receivers, and a rack panel to house the accessories might seem to be a part of phase 2, Buying Equipment for the Video Lab. It was certainly a part of phase 2 in the planning stage of our video lab. Unfortunately, it was not easy to accomplish. We had to insist that funds in our departmental budget which were always allocated for other equipment be earmarked for satellite equipment and we had to convince administrative nay-sayers, who had reservations about the aesthetic appearance of our building with two satellite antennas on the roof, that the antennas would be unobtrusive.

Finally, during the summer of 1988, after six months of bureaucratic necessities (writing proposals, working out installation

details, getting bids, obtaining permission from satellite operators for the university to use satellite programming without charge for educational purposes, preparing purchase orders), phase 3 was launched. We were able to purchase and install our satellite TV system for just under \$4000.

The equipment consists of:

- 1) two R. L. Drake earth station receivers (ESR 324).
- 2) a rack panel for accessories.
- 3) two stationary Winegard satellite antennas.

We opted for stationary antennas because they were less expensive than rotating ones. We also chose perforated ones in order to decrease wind load. One ten foot satellite antenna operates on C Band and is now aimed at the satellite Satcom F3 (F3 131 degrees W), which has the Spanish station Univision, while the other eight foot satellite antenna operates on KU Band and is aimed at Anik C1 (107.3 degrees W) which receives programs from Québec on Radio Québec, Télévision Quatre Saisons, TV Ontario—la chaîne française, and Musique plus.

The reason for having two stationary antennas is similar to the reason for making two jacks per TV monitor for the video carrels and for making a little gray box with four jacks: to increase use. Our students can watch Spanish or French TV. We do not have to choose or share time for these two different languages as would be necessary with just one rotating satellite antenna.

Being without a rotating satellite antenna, however, has caused several problems. We find that although we have increased use with two stationary antennas, we have decreased flexibility. There can be frequent TV station changes. Univision and Galavision, two Spanish stations, for example, used to be on the same satellite. Univision moved from Galaxy 1 to Satcom F3. TV5, the International French Language Television station, which has programs from

a variety of francophone countries, moved from KU Band Anik C1 to C Band Anik D2.

In addition, if your school decides to subscribe to SCOLA (Satellite Communications for Learning) or the International Channel, you will need a rotating satellite antenna to pick up the signals or you will need to have a satellite antenna dedicated to the SCOLA or International Channel satellite.

Because we find that our options have been limited with the two stationary satellite antennas, we are now considering converting our C Band antenna to a rotating one. Selecting at least one rotating satellite antenna, therefore, can avoid complications associated with television station satellite changes as well as give desirable flexibility.

One other problem, though only a minor inconvenience, can occur with stationary satellite antennas. Heavy winds can cause the antenna to be misaligned, thus causing poor or no reception. Someone then has to go on the roof to realign it. This is a rare occurrence for us, but we can expect it at least once a winter and so can Telecommunications, the department which adjusts our antenna.

Program Adjustment/Reception

Once everything was in place we found one major problem. We could not adjust the receivers without going from the rack panel to a video carrel. Obviously, something was wrong. To solve that, we purchased a 12 inch color TV, set it in the rack panel, and attached it to the receivers, with the TV directly above the receivers, it is now easy to verify the adjustment of transponders for picture and sound.

Programming

Other problems arose, though not technical in nature. We could find no satellite guide which provided programming for the KU Band. Satellite publications such as *Satellite Orbit* or *On Sat* list the transponders and other technical information for the KU

Band but they totally ignore any program listing. By contacting individual stations, such as Radio Québec (Relations de Presse, 800 rue Fullum, Montréal, Québec H2k 3L7, 514-521-2424 ext. 3231), l'Éurotélé — TV 5, the International French Language Television station (1755 boulevard René Lévesque Est, bureau 101, Montreal, Québec H2K 4P6, 514-522-5322), Télévision Quatre Saisons (405 rue Ogilvy, Montréal, Québec H3N 2Y4, 514-271-3535), and TV Ontario — which requires a \$25.00 membership donation — (TV Ontario Membership, Box 2444, Stn. Q, Toronto, Ontario M4T 2Z4) we were able to resolve the French program guide quandary. These stations now send us their program guides and updates.

Though our subscription to *Satellite Orbit* was reliable for Spanish programming at one time, it no longer publishes programming for Univision, the Spanish station. Consequently, we now receive program guides for Univision. The address for Univision programming is 605 3rd Ave., 12th floor, New York, New York 10158 and the phone number is 212-455-5200.

Off-Air Recording

Perhaps the stickiest problem regarding satellite TV is off-air recording. We have distributed to department members copies of the Guidelines for Off-Air Recording of Broadcast Programming for Educational Purposes that appeared in the U.S. *Congressional Record*, October 14, 1981. Copies are also posted in the video lab. We follow and respect these guidelines since it is important not to violate copyright law.

Satellite TV Use

Satellite TV is used mostly by our intermediate and advanced students though, on occasion, beginning students will watch a program for a short while. The reactions from both students and teachers are very positive, indeed enthusiastic. Students express delight at being able to watch and comprehend programs ranging from the news and talk shows to rerun dubbed

French versions of *The Flying Nun*. The effect of videos and satellite TV on student progress in the learning of language and culture and the types of assignments given is the subject of an article in and of itself. Suffice it to say here that teachers are making satellite TV assignments, such as requiring students to write or give oral resumes, log vocabulary learned, and indicate observed cultural patterns, gestures, attitudes, etc. Both students and teachers find it an effective, helpful, and enjoyable way to approach certain cultural aspects of language learning as well as listening comprehension and vocabulary building — another assist to students who want to achieve proficiency. Of all the different lab assignments recently completed by my fourth semester French class, they enjoyed most the one half hour TV programs they chose.

Live broadcasts or current TV programs give immediacy to cultural and political happenings and they provide stimuli for conversation and discussion in class.

Video Lab Use

During the first several months of operation, video lab use was sporadic but, as teachers became engrossed with the learning possibilities in using videos and as they became imaginative in integrating videos into their courses, use became heavy. In the fall of 1988 we had 286 users, excluding group showings, and, one year later, in the fall of 1989 we had 682 users, again, excluding group showings. By the end of the winter 1990 semester, we had over 1,400 individual users. Fall 1990 saw a slight decline in individual users, 1,078, but a major increase, 100%, in group showings. We averaged two group showings a week during the Fall 1990 semester while only averaging one a week during the preceding semester.

Recent Developments

During the summer of 1989, in order to meet student demands for cable TV, the University installed a campus-wide cable

network. Cable hookups were installed in all student and faculty university housing units, dorms, and apartments. Two channels on the system were reserved for foreign language programs. One satellite on the university's satellite farm is receiving Galavision and another is receiving programs from Radio-Canada Television. The latter can be changed to TV 5, for example, since the antenna used for the French station is a rotating one.

For a minimal start-up cost of \$600 plus a \$12 a month cable fee, our video lab was wired to the campus cable system. That means we can now receive two Spanish stations simultaneously, Galavision from campus cable and Univision from satellite, as well as two French stations simultaneously, Radio-Canada Television from the campus system and another of our choosing, Radio Québec, for example, from our KU Band satellite antenna. Our students will have a greater selection of programs to choose from now and students in the dorms or campus apartments can view one of the same programs that is in our lab. In addition, the campus system runs 24 hours a day which expands foreign language viewing time.

Programming for Radio-Canada Television can be obtained by writing to La Maison de Radio-Canada, 1400 boulevard René Lévesque est, Montréal Québec H2L 2M2, Canada and programming for Galavision can be obtained from Galavision, 2121 Avenue of the Stars, Suite 2300, Los Angeles, California 90067.

The Future

We would like to add at least two multi-standard monitors and VCR's for carrel use and several interactive video stations.

A major project is to convince the university administration to subscribe to SCOLA and broadcast it over the campus cable system. We feel that SCOLA not only will enhance our foreign language offerings by supporting our German, Japanese,

and Russian courses but will provide a service that can enrich and expand cultural, international, and interdisciplinary opportunities and programs on campus.

CONCLUSION

In a relatively short period of time, with a relatively modest budget, we modernized and created a video lab with satellite TV. No longer were we the 40 station language lab with its small departmental library and shortwave radio; we became the Language Learning Center.

Unless funds are available, creating a video lab with satellite TV is not something that can be done overnight. It can be a several year and on-going project as it was and is at CMU. It can be accomplished in phases to spread out some of the costs when budgets and other financial considerations and constraints do not permit a *coup de laboratoire*. It does not have to have an exorbitant price tag. At CMU, the approximate costs were:

\$1800	—	color monitors
3150	—	10 VCR's
600	—	headsets
4000	—	satellite antennas, receivers, installation
0	—	rack panel (donated)
150	—	color TV
\$9740	—	TOTAL

This total does not include the \$3600 we had to pay to renovate our old lab nor the \$600 cost to connect to our campus cable system.

The proliferation of equipment has obviously increased the Language Learning Center (LLC) director's responsibilities and has made more demands on our LLC assistants. They need more training and supervision. Quality control of equipment must become routine. We need to review policies constantly and respond attentively, understandingly, and quickly to conflicts and problems that arise so that the video lab is a hassle free, friendly place for students and teachers.