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Article

Features of the Ideal CD-ROM or Website for Developing Listening Skills

The euphoria about the vast potential of computer- and internet-based learning has recently given way to more cautious assessments and more realistic expectations. Learners, teachers and researchers alike have expressed their concerns about shortcomings in the pedagogical design of the majority of existing software products, which cause frustration instead of motivation among learners. This situation is particularly deplorable with regard to listening skills, because the development of aural comprehension is generally seen as an individualized process that can be supported more efficiently in self-access environments than in "traditional" classrooms. In a EUROCALL show and tell session, held at the conference in Vienna in September 2004, we attempted to answer the question of what an ideal CD-ROM for the development of listening skills should look like.

Members of the international group of experts "ELIAS" (Evaluation of Computer Software and Internet Materials for Language Learning) have developed sound pedagogical criteria for the evaluation of CD-ROMs. First of all, "ELIAS" members consider it necessary to establish to what degree a CD-ROM/website actually implements the methodological approaches it purports to follow and to what extent it fulfills the generally accepted principles of language learning that existed long before we knew the word "multimedia". Listening comprehension, for example, is viewed as being based on simultaneous top-down and bottom-up processes. In addition, learning scenarios and tasks for the development of listening skills are entirely different from listening tests. CD-ROMs that fail to take such considerations into account do not facilitate the development of listening comprehension.

The main focus of an evaluation of electronic materials for language learning, however, must be on the ways in which a particular product uses the specific opportunities afforded by electronic delivery that either do not exist in conventional products or that would be too costly and time-consuming to implement.

Thus, good multimedia material for the development of listening skills can go far beyond the limits which the use of a cassette recorder -or a video player- and a piece of paper imposes. Media-specific criteria that must be met by innovative and efficient products include:

- Adaptability
- Interactivity
- Motivating design and content
- Use of hyper-structuring versus linear structuring
- Closed exercises versus open-ended tasks
- Multimedia usage to assist intercultural and other content-related learning processes
- Provision of assistance at the points where the learner is most likely to need it
- Stimulation of cooperative learning activities
- Communication with other learners and/or with the "real" world
- Illustration of learner history and progress
- Provision of additional information according to the learner's needs or interests

Applying these criteria, several CD-ROMs and one website have been tested and reviewed by members of the "ELIAS" group. Complete evaluations of the three products will be made available on their website at http://www.elias-nc.org/ by the end of 2004.
Multilingua Movie Talk Series (Columbo - Murder by the Book, STAR TREK - The next Generation, other titles in the Movie Talk series), United Soft Media Verlag GmbH, 2001
The Movie Talk CD-ROMs were developed for lower advanced learners who would like to improve their command of everyday conversational American English by listening to scenes from original movies. They have a high motivation potential among the target group, young adult learners, and have a functional and user-friendly layout that makes it easy to work with the programs. Useful information about how to benefit most from the CD-ROM is included in the guided tour, and when they use the programs, learners can resort to different means of support so that comprehension is facilitated even for intermediate learners at all points. Moreover, the learner is in full control and can decide what he or she would like to concentrate on, for example general understanding (listening for fun), detailed understanding, vocabulary extension or pronunciation practice.

Randal’s Cyber Listening Lab: http://www.esl-lab.com/ (Web Site Author: Randall S. Davis, Download date: August 11, 2004)
This web site exploits one feature of the medium particularly well: it offers a choice to the learners concerning the level of difficulty and among a wide range of topics, along with almost complete ease of navigation. The sets of tasks that accompany the audios and videos take the learning process into account and do not just offer text and script, as many other listening sites do. Above all, learners are encouraged to develop appropriate listening strategies, especially top-down procedures with pre- and post-listening exercises. Cooperative learning as well as an active use of the language is stimulated in open-ended tasks, where the content of the listening material is used as a basis for follow-up speaking activities.

EASE: Listening to Lectures, The University of Warwick, 2001/2003 (http://www.ease.ac.uk/)
"Listening to Lectures", the first CD-ROM in the EASE (Essential Academic Skills in English) series, clearly defines its target audience and the learning objectives, it states exactly what the learners are supposed to learn in each unit and includes good advice on how to learn efficiently. As a result, the learners have a realistic chance of developing appropriate strategies by reflecting on the learning process. It concentrates on lecture-specific language such as structuring devices, the language of definitions and classification as well as the development of note-taking techniques. The language functions and the terminology to be learnt are reviewed and recycled in different contexts.

Although all three sample products are far from perfect - for further details, see the complete reviews on the "ELIAS" group's website - each of them contains features that the ideal multimedia material for developing listening skills should incorporate. Provided that the learners' interests and objectives overlap sufficiently with the stated aims of these products, they can be used efficiently and successfully. This has been demonstrated in evaluations by learners who worked in self-access environments at the University of Potsdam. Consequently, the CD-ROMs and the website can be recommended both to independent learners whose targets have been established and to teachers who wish to supplement their course materials. Considering that schools and universities are being equipped with more and more multimedia computers and that school administrators throughout Europe are increasing their efforts to train language teachers to use them, we look forward to the day when more products that meet the pedagogic standards will be made available.

Bibliography


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