Chapter II

Interactive Television as a Vehicle for Language Learning

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Abstract

Designers of technological support for learning have an ever-increasing selection of platforms and devices at their disposal, as desktop computers are joined by mobile phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), laptops, games consoles, and wearable devices. Digital television is a recent addition to this panoply of platforms and devices. Television has always had educational aims and effects, and it is natural for digital television to continue this tendency. In this chapter we examine the potential application of interactive digital television to the learning of languages. We explore the “fit” between the capabilities of the medium and the requirements of language learners. We then describe an application that combines the strengths of interactive digital television with those of the mobile phone to create a cross-platform learning application for informal language learners.1

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Introduction

New media technologies seem inevitably destined to be hailed as the breakthrough for language learning. In particular technologies that allow interactivity—language labs, audiocassettes, videodiscs of various formats, and the multiplicity of interactive applications hosted on the Web have all excited the interest of language learners and teachers. Currently, interactive mobile technologies are being harnessed to support many applications for learning—formal and informal; for children and adults; in classrooms and out on field trips; at home; and on the move. Broadcast technologies, that is, radio and television, have not been so central. Until comparatively recently, these were more difficult to integrate into the classroom experience, needing careful timing and recording. In addition the opportunities for interactive engagement with broadcast media are less obvious than for e-mail, chat, and so on. Moreover, television is overwhelmingly seen as a leisure technology. This has meant that compared with other media and platforms, television has been rather under-used in formal language teaching environments. In this chapter we discuss the potential of broadcast and interactive television (iTV) for language learning. We then describe an attempt to integrate support for language learning into broadcast television, with the additional support of a mobile phone application.

Television and Language Learning

Outside the classroom, conventional television is already a powerful learning tool for language learners. There is a wealth of anecdotal evidence of individuals learning other languages from exposure to televised soap operas, films, and sports reporting. Television offers a rich multimedia experience, where learners can immerse themselves in materials from the target language and culture. Nakhimovsky (1997), quoted in Underwood (2002) notes, perhaps “of all subjects, foreign language instruction can benefit from multimedia materials most obviously ... the most difficult task facing a language instructor is to show the deep semantic and cultural differences hidden behind dictionary equivalents ... the movie and its script makes that task much easier ... students can see the clash between their expectations and the realia of a different culture.” This material, unlike some of the stilted exchanges found in textbooks, tends to be worth watching in its own right, with up-to-date, ever-changing content displaying a range of speakers and contexts. In its non-interactive state it is an excellent medium for learners to practice comprehension skills and also to acquire background cultural knowledge (Sherington, 1973). Many television shows constitute important cultural events providing a shared reference for people sharing or aspiring to share a culture, and for many language learners,
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