

Digital VideoCorpus and an academic study of the English language

Lingonet VideoCorpus as teaching material

Who?	Lecturer (Lic. Phil.), two courses, 27 students in total
Where?	University of Helsinki, Language Centre
When?	Fall term 2006, periods 1 and 2
What?	English support course open to students from all faculties, 2 credits

The subject piqued the interest of the teacher because she had already researched the topic "Reading while listening" while completing her master's degree at the University of Birmingham.

How was the program integrated into the course?

Before the first period began, the VideoCorpus program was installed into the computer lab at the Language Centre, so that the students could work on it independently or with a partner. The entire class also watched the videos together.

Of the various activities in VideoCorpus, the videoclips, which contained conversations on different topics, were used the most. The corpus search tool was also used somewhat, but this target group experienced low interest and little need for it.

The course was 28 hours long over a six-week period. VideoCorpus was used in every lesson.

What were the students told at the beginning of the course (about the material and its role in the course)?

VideoCorpus was introduced to the students in the first lesson and they were told that it would be used during all contact lessons throughout the course. The largest portion of the course content was reading academic texts from different areas of science. The program was actually only one portion of the syllabus. An important part was also writing an essay in the students' own area of study.

The students worked with the program both in the classroom, led by the teacher, and independently in the computer lab.

What kinds of study methods were used?

Part of the teaching was teacher-led and part was independent work. At times, the whole group watched and listened to some topics and conversations. The students listened twice and after listening, they discussed the topic. Either the whole class discussed the topic as a group, or in small groups of two or three. Certain topics were discussed with the teacher.

The students worked independently in the computer lab. Thus each student was able to work independently with the topic he/she chose.

The students also wrote an essay on a topic they chose. The essay was a practice in expressing their own opinions. All the students wrote a reaction paper – an essay on the topic they had chosen. The students enjoyed it. They said they listened to the discussions more closely when they had to produce their own text.

How did the students work with the material?

They worked well. The students' attitudes toward the material was almost completely positive and even the independent computer lab work was without problems. The students felt working with authentic material very useful for learning pronunciation, vocabulary and idioms. There were things the students wished for, for example, the visual aspect of the material, the possibility to do extra exercises, the creation of a glossary and the ability to read the text.

Why was working with the VideoCorpus motivating for the students?

- The conversation topics were interesting.
- The combination of seeing the text, the speaker who's speaking and hearing the audio was good.
- It was easy to learn to pronounce the words and perhaps faster than usual to pick up new vocabulary.
- Interesting topics; a variety of ways to work with the material (listening while looking at the text or not); the people spoke "good" English; nice to see the speaker on the screen.
- You can listen to English without text. When watching television, I always follow the subtitles. The topics are interesting. The vocabulary about the topics is varied.
- You can go at your own pace and listen to the difficult passages again.
- Being able to see the text and hear the audio was especially good.
- You can focus on the important aspects and work at your own pace.
- Lots of topics and choices. I can also work at my own pace and choose to practice listening or reading comprehension, or both.
- It's good that you can first listen to the interviews and then, if necessary, add the text, gaining confidence in those things that were unclear. It's also good that there were many different speakers in the interviews, each of whom had his or her own pronunciation, etc. It's also more meaningful to listen to a variety of people's speaking. The topics are of general interest.
- Because VideoCorpus develops one's listening comprehension in English and develops pronunciation while listening with the help of the text.
- The topics are interesting.
- You really have to concentrate on listening and reading. The topics are interesting and it's nice when you notice that you understand them.
- In my opinion, it was motivating. The texts, however, could have been more challenging. The topics in my opinion were quite good.
- The simultaneous text and speaking.
- Because you could see the text and hear the speaking at the same time.
- The topics are interesting and they were discussed at length.
- It wasn't really motivating. I noticed the intro only after I had finished using the corpus. The intro could be placed first so that you notice it immediately and listening to the corpus would be meaningful when you know what they're talking about.

- The topics were that interesting to me so it wasn't so motivating. If the VideoCorpus could be used over the Internet at home, I could have concentrated better.
- Don't ask questions like that ...
- You can listen to colloquial language at your own pace.
- The topics were to a large extent interesting and current. The speakers' opinions were well founded and based on expertise.
- Text and speech at the same time were good for comparison.
- You can study at your own pace. It wasn't very useful in class – a waste of time. It is suitable for self-study.
- Following the text makes listening comprehension practice easier (especially when studying at the prep-course level).
- It gives a lot of new information.

What did the students think about the language in the videoclips?

- The talking was at times difficult to understand. The text made comprehension a lot easier.
- The language was clear. It was just strange that all the small sounds were transcribed as well. Some people spoke fairly quickly but I understood it quite well anyway.
- It was pretty good. It could include some American English or dialects as well.
- Good British English.
- From a learning perspective, it was suitably academic.
- Good British English.
- The language and pronunciation were good but from time to time, it had too much mumbling "err, umm." It seemed a little amusing when the main point doesn't come out. For example, in the animal rights videoclip, "Since then, since this, er, since, er, this, erm, conce ... concerted effort er Er, I and, erm, Joan regularly visits the port."
- Great language. Sometimes it was hard to follow when the person stuttered and broke off his sentences, but that's what happens in spontaneous conversation.
- On the one hand, it's good to use "spoken language" but all the "erms" etc. were distracting in the texts.
- One kind of English – of course, this is good to know for its vocabulary.
- Some variety in spoken language. Some people spoke too fast and unclearly.
- Good language; the text made comprehension easier. The extra bits in the text, like "erm" "mmm" "ummh" etc. were however slightly distracting. It would have been a lot more pleasant to follow without a transcription of every small stutter and pause
- Clear British English.
- It was difficult to follow the spoken language. More clear standard English would be better, at least for graduate students.
- Most speakers had good, clear language
- Very good
- The speakers spoke clearly so they were easy to understand.
- In my opinion, it was very good. There was in some texts and conversations a lot of repeated "hm, hm" which made following it more difficult. But, on the other hand, that's how it usually is in real language.
- In my opinion, very fine and good language. It's just annoying to read when all the "erm" and "mm" are transcribed.
- "Traditional" British English, some speakers were easier to understand than others. The style of speaking varied (which is positive).
- The language is clear. British English, despite the accent, was clear and the pace of the speech was suitable.
- Fairly clear.
- A variety of levels as some speakers spoke quickly and others more slowly and clearly.
- It's good to be able to listen to real, proper English.

- The language seemed difficult at first as it also included the “human factor,” that is, things that come up in normal speech which were hard to understand at first. A suitable challenge to learn extra tidbits that come with real language.
- It was clear enough, but still awkward and stilted. It was easy to understand but it sounded like an authentic native speaker.
- The language was good. I especially liked the reverend’s speech. The speech by older people was sometimes a little unclear.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of this kind of material?

The strengths of VideoCorpus are the interesting topics, and a varied, good-level of the English language. The parallel use of speech and text is good as it supports learning.

Video conversations are welcome for support courses where there’s a need to strengthen language skills. In topic-specific teaching, however, this is difficult to integrate.

The corpus search tool is something that doesn’t necessarily interest everyone. Its benefit to the Language Centre’s general language courses is small.

What kind of marks did the students get?

There was no final exam in this course. Some of the students dropped out anyway. By completing all the assignments in the course, the students received a mark of completion.

Did the course need a lot of preparation?

Not really. Of course, any new course material needs some effort and familiarization, but for this conversation-based support course, there was no need to make any extra material to support the video. The videos themselves contained enough basic material. Some students, however, wanted some extra activities to support the video.

Did the teacher’s role change at all?

My role has changed before. I have taught computer-aided courses for almost 10 years. The teacher’s role changes into a facilitator and a coach. There’s been a lot of discussion about this in the past few years. Digital media like VideoCorpus lightens a teacher’s load.

Are you going to use the same model in the future?

I would imagine so. It depends on what kind of courses I will teach, as VideoCorpus doesn’t suit the university’s faculty and subject-specific language courses, which I teach a lot of in the faculty of sciences. I would recommend its use to teachers who will be teaching support courses in the Language Centre next year.