WS Vox Pop multimedia CD-ROM

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Operation and Interface

WS Vox Pop is a user-friendly language learning software, easy to install and to operate. It is presented under the form of a self-contained package including clear on-screen instructions as well as a HELP function, which makes it easily accessible even to the least experienced CD-ROM-users.

The design of the software is remarkably imaginative and variegated; some of the activities (e.g. the vocabulary exercises) are presented in quite an attractive format, of the 'drag-and-drop' type. The interface colour palette is generally good, excepting perhaps some of the 'jigsaws' where the bright red-and-yellow background puts some strain on the eye.

Generally speaking, the programme has flexibility of use: it gives the learners full control over the development of the learning experience by enabling them to move freely from one topic or activity to another, selecting, restarting and recapping those which they find relevant to their needs.

Contents of WS Vox Pop

The main menu of WS Vox Pop consists of five different areas/modules: People, Topics, Language, Reporting, and the Teacher's Zone. People and Topics provide the input: they include a collection of street interviews which serve as support for a variety of tasks. Content-wise, these two modules appear to be somewhat redundant: the opinions of different interviewees in People are then grouped by subject matter in Topics. On the basis of this input, the Language module supplies quite a number of activities and tasks which make use of various techniques among which matching and gap-filling are the most frequently used. Reporting puts forward a less controlled framework for the practice of constructions typically encountered in interactional language and finally, the Teacher's Zone includes features relating to the management of the programme, while also providing the transcripts of the interviews and suggesting further classroom activities.

Pedagogical considerations

Input. One of the main assets of WS Vox Pop is clearly the input: it consists of 48 authentic street interviews of reasonable length which allow for the learners' exposure to a variety of dialects (regional, social, individual). Each interview is backed up with a studio-recorded summary in Standard English, also available in the written mode; while allowing learners to check their level of listening comprehension, these summaries can serve as models of accurate linguistic behaviour to be emulated by the less confident learner.

Although of immediate relevance to the British context, the topics (e.g. Power of the Press, Homelessness, Equality for women, Prisons, Europe etc.) have general content validity, which makes them fully exploitable in any cultural context. Besides the linguistic support provided by the glossaries, each topic is adequately supplemented with background information on the more culture-specific issues hinted at by the different interviewees.

Skills

WS Vox Pop is meant to offer learners an incentive to communicate, to exchange ideas on highly topical matters. Therefore, the development of listening and speaking   is particularly aimed at; reading and writing are also involved to some extent, as support skills. The methodology used to develop and improve the oral/aural skills can be described as 'eclectic': it combines the more traditional, word-based approach with the communicative, function-oriented one. This is reflected in the various modules and activities where the shift from the linguistic competence to the more all-embracing concept of communicative competence becomes noticeable.

Tasks and activities.

The tasks suggested in the first two modules are gap filling exercises: they can be seen as opportunities to recap the message of each interview, allowing both the information and the language in which it is couched to 'sink in', while also highlighting words and phrases of particular linguistic interest. In Language, there is a symmetrical patterning of the five different tasks designed for each topic: the first four are vocabulary-related activities including matching, gap-filling, ranking and word-building, while task number five focuses on the pronunciation and intonation patterns of spoken English. Reporting takes a step forward in the direction of the communicative approach to language learning: using 'prompts' extracted form the authentic interviews available in the previous modules, the learner can practice language functions such as asking for/expressing opinion, agreeing, disagreeing, reporting, sequencing information, summarising.

The lead-in tasks are also worth mentioning here. I particularly liked the humanistic dimension present in those tasks which anticipate the topic by requiring the learner to interpret facts/issues from a personal point of view.

Interaction.

The software offers many opportunities for interaction at different levels. Firstly, the authentic material is highly stimulative of pair- and group-work (discussions, simulations, role-plays). Secondly, there is also a programme-learner interaction: as concerns the tasks based on individual work, the programme is designed in such a way as to enable the learner to ask for spelling prompts or
replays of different chunks of the recorded material; it also provides instant feedback by means of the confirmatory/error messages, as well as a real-time report on the learner's degree of completion of the built-in exercises.

Lastly, the MEMO-function available facilitates the learner's communication with the teacher, who can thus assess or comment upon the individual learner's performance in different areas of interest.

General

WS Vox Pop is a hands-on language learning software, operational both in group as well as in self-access mode. It is easy to build into any syllabus and has the advantage of 'open-endedness', in the sense that it lends itself to a wealth of useful follow-up activities. Furthermore, due to the breadth of its didactic scope, WS Vox Pop could be integrated into a wider educational paradigm: it would work equally well, say, with students of journalism.

The combination of sound and image is well-balanced, replicating quite successfully real-life situations, which makes the programme all the more attractive. Apart from being extremely helpful and instructive, the mix of written and spoken glosses and explanations provide variety to the course, enhancing its pedagogical effectiveness.

WS Vox Pop is a real help to teachers in search of authentic material, being a rich resource of linguistic samples; equally important is the fact that the different tasks and activities included here make a good contribution to the shaping up of the communicative competence of learners in a language other than their own.