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Self-Access Language Learning Materials at Sultan Qaboos University

Now in its second year of operation, Sultan Qaboos University has about 1100 freshman and sophomore Omani university students, both male and female. These students have typically had six years of secondary school English before coming to the university. In spite of their English language training, however, they need extensive preparation in coping with their university course lectures, most of which are delivered in English.

To help students enhance their communicative ability in English, the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos conducts English and English for Special Purposes (ESP) classes, according to the specific needs of the various colleges. For support of their English language classroom learning, students are encouraged to practice their English on a self-access basis in the Student Resource Centre (SRC)—an adjunct to the Language Centre—where materials are available to support the English language coursework.

The Student Resource Center

The SRC is housed in a suite of rooms. One room contains half a dozen video cassette players with headphones for private viewing. For large group viewing, a seventh video cassette recorder (VCR) is connected to two monitors. A second room contains 10 stand-alone IBM-PC/XT computers, each in its own carrel with two or three chairs at each to accommodate either small-group or individual study. A third room contains books and reference materials, and a

fourth room houses a traditional 35-position language laboratory.

Video and Computers

The most popular of these rooms are the video and computer rooms. The video technology at the SRC is used in innovative yet practical ways. For as long as Sultan Qaboos University has been in operation, science lectures have been systematically videotaped. As a result, there now exist in the SRC taped lectures on almost all topics covered in the foundation science courses. Student frequently view these tapes for purposes of gathering information; occasionally, they also use the tapes for language practice. When available for the purpose of language practice, the video tapes are accompanied by handouts developed with that objective in mind. Because all classrooms are equipped with VCR equipment, extracts from the taped lectures are often used as teaching material in class. Although the SRC provides commercial videos—including video language courses—these lack the immediacy and relevance of the taped lectures and are not, therefore, used as often by students.

In-house Computer Software Development

Much of the computer software in the Language Centre has been developed in-house. The author and Steve Millmore, instructional developers at the Sultan Qaboos Language Centre, have implemented a set of text reconstruction programs called *Text Tanglers*, consisting of a hangman game, cloze and cryptogram generators, sentence and paragraph jumbled, and a whole-text deletion game. (See *J.E.T.T. SPOTLIGHT* in this issue for a review

of *Text Tanglers*.) At Sultan Qaboos, the language puzzles of *Text Tanglers* have proven to be very popular. This popularity is due in part to the fact that these puzzles act as a database of over 200 texts extracted from materials the students are studying elsewhere in the university. In using *Text Tanglers*, students are able to bring a variety of perspectives to bear on the texts; furthermore, they are able to select perspectives according to their individual learning styles and transient moods. Learning is further enhanced by the cognitive processes involved in restoring meaning to the texts which have been permuted by the computer.

An authoring template for displaying timed readings followed by comprehension questions is also available for use by students and teachers at the Language Centre. Developed by Dave Poulton and called *Speed Read*, this template—unlike *Text Tanglers* which operates mechanically and in varied and sometimes random ways on the texts—is useful when guiding students through specific questions about a passage. Although progress through the program is the same each time and answer judging and branching are rather limited, the program has been a success because the template is simple enough to use by both teachers and students. As a result, an impressive body of material now exists for it. *Speed Read* owes its popularity with students primarily to the fact that it has direct relevance to their coursework.

Instructional developers at the Language Centre are also beginning to use the CALIS authoring system—developed and disseminated by Duke University in North Carolina—in creating a variety of instructional materials for the computer. CALIS is more versatile than *Speed Read*, hence more complicated and, therefore, less frequently used. This points to a dichotomy in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL): Whereas one would theoretically opt for maximum versatility and capability in selecting software tools, simplicity appears to be one of the most important factors in promoting development—and subsequent use—from the very outset.

Another Dave Poulton program, a concordance program, has helped both teachers and students improve language teaching and learning. For

example, the coordinators of various courses have been running concordances on items in their syllabi. The usefulness of a concordance is that it often confronts teachers with the fact that the intuition on which much course content is based does not accurately predict language items encountered by students in their actual academic environment. Once aware of the fact that course content does not address those language items encountered by students, teachers can improve their courses by developing printed vocabulary exercises which couch vocabulary items in real and relevant contexts.

Meanwhile, students can use the concordance program in conjunction with text files containing readings in their discipline. In their study of vocabulary on the computers, they are able to find all the contexts in their readings for difficult words on their vocabulary lists.

In addition to being useful to both teachers and students, the concordance program is being used in linguistic research at the Language Centre. Currently, research studies are being conducted on the issue of how the language of science lectures changes as the scientists attempt to adjust their delivery to the linguistic level of the students.

Commercial Software

The SRC has an extensive collection of commercial software. This software has thus far been of limited use, primarily because copyright law restricts the number of copies of a given software program available at any one time in the SRC. Furthermore, it is rarely, if ever, appropriate to use commercial software right off the shelf. There is almost always a need to edit and indicate how the materials should be used. Because copyright prohibits software editing for the most part, in-house production of software programs is not only compelling, but also a more effective way to make available to students and teachers teaching and learning materials that have a direct relevance to students.

Integration of Resources

Whenever possible, materials available to students and teachers at the Language Centre are

integrated with the resources available at the SRC. This permits the learning materials to be approached in a number of ways. For example, a book of readings or an adventure story can first be introduced in the Language Laboratory where audio passages with their accompanying exercises are drilled. Later, these passages might be brought up on *Text Tangles* and practiced in the various ways available with those programs. Or, the passages can appear in more traditional print media formats. No matter which medium students choose to begin their practice, they are able to shift to other media if they want wider and more varied practice with the material being studied.

The Student Resource Center at the Sultan Qaboos Language Centre is a facility where English may be studied and practiced on a self-access basis by students according to their individual proclivities and learning styles. As much as possible, materials developed at the SRC cater to the English courses offered at the Language Centre—courses ultimately designed

to meet the needs of students in the various colleges of the University. Therefore, emphasis is placed on materials which are directly relevant to the students. Not surprisingly, the materials most relevant to the courses are also the most popular with students. The most popular media with student users are computer and video-based materials.

J.E.T.T. Contributor Profile

Vance Stevens is an Instructional Developer in charge of self-access CALL materials in the Student Resource Centre at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. He is on the Editorial Advisory Board of the *TESOL Quarterly* and a contributing editor for the *CALL-Digest*. A founding member of CALL-IS in TESOL, he was the interest section's first appointed chair and remains active as chair of the IBM-PC Users' Group. He has headed numerous CALL implementations, co-authored commercial CALL software, published widely in the field, presented CALL-related topics at several international conferences, conducted CALL workshops and classes, and is involved in CALL research. Interested readers may write to him at the following address: Language Centre, Sultan Qaboos University, P.O. Box 32493 Al-Khod, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman.