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IN QUESTO NUMERO

Questo numero ruota sul tema tecnologico ma con un approccio diverso dal solito: dopo una sintesi introduttiva di Giovanni Minardi, infatti, si cerca di dare una risposta operativa: che cosa fare con queste "macchine infernali"? come usarle per l'insegnamento dell'italiano come lingua straniera (ma le idee valgono anche per le lingue straniere in Italia)?

Tra gli Strumenti, su richiesta di molte nuove sezioni e nuovi soci, trovate lo Statuto dell'ANILS così come è stato approvato a Rimini, su redazione di una commissione guidata da Ugo Tassoni (sezione di Padova).

NEL PROSSIMO NUMERO

La nuova frontiera dell'insegnamento delle lingue sta nel loro uso anche come strumento veicolare per altre materie. Ci sono esperienze in Europa e anche in oltre 100 scuole italiane. Il numero 5 sarà dedicato essenzialmente a questo tema.

What can I do with this infernal machine? Some practical suggestions for the use of the computer in teaching English

John Christopher Wade

When first considering the subject matter of this article, it occurred to me that some practical suggestions for the classroom use of this now ubiquitous medium might be useful for practising teachers wanting to exploit this technology in the classroom.

I should stress that I am not a computer expert, and the initial question in the title of the article expresses exactly what I felt before I started using this intimidating resource. In fact, experience has taught me that the effective use of the computer in teaching is not necessarily a question of technical expertise, although some basic know-how is useful, but how to identify the way in which this tool can be exploited effectively in the classroom for teaching purposes without wasting valuable classroom time. I should also add that I place emphasis on English teaching because that is the language I am directly involved with in my personal teaching context.

There is no reason why many of the principles I discuss in this article should not be applied in the teaching of other foreign languages.

Inevitably there are problems in the use of this medium, some of which I would like to deal with before discussing how the computer may be used in a specific classroom context.

■ In the first place, computer technology is making so many advances that by the time I have finished writing this article, what I have said will probably have been superseded. This is an important point in considering any publication which gives information about any aspect of computer use and technology. The same could be said of much of the teaching material available on the market. Before investing in expensive programmes, careful research into what is on the market and what is

necessary for your students is essential. I shall examine these points later.

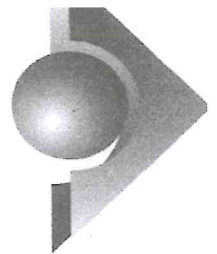
■ The second problem may be the kind of system available in the school or institution (individual computers or laboratories) and if there is technical staff available to give appropriate help when needed.

■ Thirdly, the teachers may fear a loss of authority (Dawson, 1999), since their students are often 'technologically' more expert than they are.

■ Finally, and possibly not least important, the cost of computer systems and teaching material could be added to this list, assuming that the school or institution even has the funds available for such an investment. This would also hold true for Internet access, as school administrations are rightly wary of giving large numbers of people (both students and teachers) access to the service, because there is always the danger of viruses, excessive phone bills and access to unsuitable information (Eastment, 1996b, p. 80). It is therefore important to bear in mind that individual teachers need to decide what teaching strategies to adopt on the basis of their particular teaching environment using the facilities which are really available and not those which simply exist on paper. The use of computers for teaching languages is often referred to as CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning). That is to say, the computer gives "assistance" or provides support for the teacher. It is not a surrogate (Jones and Fortescue, 1987, p. 5).

It is for this reason that I have chosen to provide suggestions of a generalisable nature, that is to say information which may be applicable in a variety of teaching contexts and using technology which will not necessarily have to be of the latest generation.

Most teachers would agree that a lesson should have an aim, either clearly stated or to be discovered subsequently. This approach can be seen in most modern text



books, with a standard presentation-practice-personalisation cycle. In this way the learner feels that he or she is acquiring knowledge not previously possessed. It is not particularly productive if a group of students leave the learning experience, i.e. the classroom, with the sensation of not having achieved something or attained a specific objective. Such concrete goals may include solving a problem proposed by the teacher, for example completing a questionnaire, where the linguistic content of the activity tends to be explicit and controlled. Alternatively it could be dealing with a practical situation, like downloading information from the Internet, where "hands-on" experience is used as a vehicle for exploiting the students' personal interests and thus providing motivation within a specific English using environment.

On the basis of these observations, I would like to focus attention on four ways of exploiting the computer in the classroom:

- as a word processor,
- with specific teaching programmes,
- with reference material,
- with the Internet.

In the following sections the practicalities of computer use in the classroom are discussed and examples of computer based activities are provided in order to illustrate possible teaching applications of such activities.

The Word Processor

The PC has become an invaluable instrument in every aspect of modern life, for writing letters, keeping accounts, producing documents, storing data and many other more complex functions. We only have to go into any newsagents to look at the wealth of information available in more or less specialised magazines in this field to see how important it has become. However, in day to day life most people use the PC as a kind of highly flexible and efficient typewriter. In the real world such a skill can make the difference between finding a job and not. In these circumstances it is possible to structure

language learning activities in a real life context, where students not only practise their English, but also develop skills useful in other areas connected with the use of the computer, such as producing and formatting documents of various types.

Sample activity: Preparing a Curriculum Vitae

Level: Intermediate.

Aims: to prepare an imaginary Curriculum Vitae and formal letter of application and use the information in a job interview role-play.

Cultural content: differences between British/United States and Italian education systems.

Language focus: revision of tenses used to talk about personal and professional experiences.

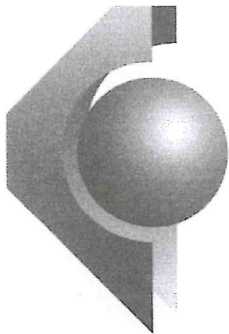
Materials: a job advertisement for a journalist, a brief letter of application, some flashcards with photographs of distinguished looking people, an example of a real CV, a blank example of a CV.

Worksheet: (adapted from *The Cambridge English Course 2*, Cambridge University Press, p. 48):

FINDING A JOB

<i>A national newspaper requires</i>
JOURNALIST
<i>To join a team of dynamic overseas correspondents.</i>
Excellent pay and conditions
Applicants must be between 30 and 45 and have relevant qualifications and experience.
Please send applications and CV to:
Ms Sue Ryder Personnel Officer ABC Publications Ltd 21, Wells Road London W2





Read the letter of application and fill in the gaps. You can choose from among the following words:

application experience faithfully candidate advertised foreign
look forward enclose sincerely apply qualifications

34, Wall Street
Huddersfield HD4 7SW

21 January 1999

Ms Sue Ryder
Personnel Officer
ABC Publications
21, Wells Road
London W2

Dear Ms Ryder,

I should like to (1) for the post of overseas correspondent (2) in The Times of 13 January. I have various specialised (3) and a wide (4) of reporting and travelling in (5) countries.
I (6) my CV with full details.
I (7) to hearing from you.

Yours (8) ,
Peter A. Smith
Peter A. Smith

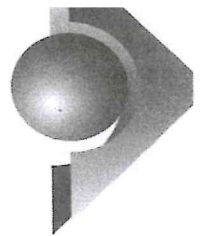
Procedure: the activity is divided into three stages:

1. In pairs or in groups students study an example of a job advertisement for a journalist (see worksheet). They discuss what qualities they think are necessary to make a good journalist in this context and make a list of questions that they would ask if they were interviewing a prospective candidate. Ideas are shared in a full class discussion. The teacher may then explain how a CV is written in Britain and the United States, focussing attention on the kinds of schools that are attended and the qualifications obtained, how these are different from Italian qualifications and how this information is presented both in the CV and a letter of application. This could be illustrated with a real example.

2. This stage takes place in the computer

laboratory. At first the flashcards are displayed on the board. Each group has to choose one photograph as representing their candidate for the job advertised in the first stage. The blank CVs are handed out and each group is required to invent a Curriculum Vitae for the perfect journalist and write a formal letter of application using the PC. Care should be taken not only with the content, but also the formatting and presentation of the document. This should then be printed out.

3. Finally, the students are divided into groups of interviewers and candidates, who then role-play job interviews, using the information invented in the previous stage. To conclude the class may discuss who were the best candidates and why, and also compare the various CVs produced to decide on the best presentation.



CURRICULUM VITAE

PERSONAL DATA

Name:
 Address:
 Telephone Number:
 Date of Birth:
 Place of Birth:
 Marital Status:

EDUCATION

School
 University/College

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

FURTHER DETAILS

Computer/Languages/Hobbies

Example of a blank CV

The word processor is also useful for teachers themselves, in the production of visually appealing materials like worksheets (see examples above and below), exercises and examinations and storing this material for later use or adaptation. It is particularly easy to produce tables, use interesting fonts and produce authentic-looking material. The careful storage of this material is extremely important. Files should be clearly named and it is probably a good idea to keep different kinds of work on separate diskettes, which should be clearly labelled with activity types and date of production. It can be extremely frustrating not being able to find a brilliant worksheet which you prepared a year ago, because you failed to give it a comprehensible file name.

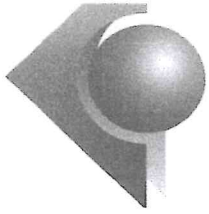
Specific teaching programs

There are large numbers of teaching programmes of varying quality on the market. Therefore, the first question to be raised is how material can be chosen for a given teaching context. Eastment (1996a, p. 71) identifies a number of aspects to be taken into consideration. Firstly, the

learning aim needs to be carefully considered, bearing in mind the students' level and what exactly is to be taught. Secondly, the programme should be easy to install and user friendly. The object of a teaching programme is to provide practice in language use, not puzzling out complex procedures for simple tasks. The visual design of the material is also of great importance, particularly with younger learners who will certainly have experienced exceptionally high quality graphics in many of the computer games they use at home, and a dull DOS-based programme will probably not provide much motivation. A further point is closely linked to motivational factors. The programme content should also be intrinsically interesting, since it can provide the student with the opportunity for self-directed study. What are termed "authoring programs" (Jones and Fortescue, 1987, p. 4) allow teachers to create their own texts, in this way tailoring materials to the specific needs and interests of their learners. Finally, the kind of equipment available in a school or institution will dictate what kind of options the teacher has. For most current CD-ROMs a minimum of Windows 95, a Soundblaster compatible audio card and loudspeakers, CD-ROM drive, microphone, colour monitor, mouse and adequate space on the hard disk. If there is a computer laboratory available it should also be possible to use network versions of the software, thereby allowing a class of students to work on the same material. It should be noted, however, that the licence for these programmes is considerably more expensive than the single user licence.

In order to find out about the programs available on the market it is probably best to contact the publishers directly. Most of the major publishers of EFL material have a Web site (Oxford University Press: <http://www.oup.uk/elt>; Longman: <http://www.awl-elt.com>; Cambridge University Press: <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk/>), and in view of the significant investment required in acquiring this material, it would be sensible to contact the local representative and ask for a demonstration, as only hands on experience provides a sure guide as to whether the material is really suitable or not.





One criticism that could be levelled at computer based materials is that the actual content of many programmes is quite conventional, providing the kinds of exercises which can be carried out in the classroom or for homework in an exercise book. Where the computer differs is in its immense flexibility, which will be discussed in the next section, and the fact that they are extremely "patient" (Dawson, 1999). Consequently, the student can work at his or her own pace receiving the instant gratification of knowing if answers are right or wrong and without being conditioned by time factors or teacher judgements. Motivation is provided by two factors. Firstly, activities often take the form of competitions with a scoring system. Secondly the learner can take responsibility for his or her learning. If students take responsibility for their own learning, they feel a greater sense of achievement on completing a task successfully and therefore feel more stimulated to improve (Littlejohn, 1999). Most conventional "multimedia" exercises consist of the following:

- putting words in the correct order,
- true/false options,
- spelling activities,
- gap-filling exercises,
- text reconstruction,
- listening and repeating,
- dialogue completion and listening,
- pronunciation,
- visual recognition based on static images,
- video clips used for comprehension exercises,
- writing.

Examples of this approach would be *The Grammar ROM* by Longman, where the focus is on some 300 grammar based activities or Heinemann's *Flying Colours – Interactive Course of English*, which can be used as a free standing course or combined with the text book of the same title. In both cases the amount of material accessible on the CD ROM is extensive, and in the classroom context needs to be managed with a degree of care. It is not sufficient for students to go away from the lesson thinking that they have just used an entertaining programme in the computer laboratory, but they should also be aware

of what they have learned. In other words, the lesson needs an aim, which in this case should be clearly stated so that students know exactly what they have to do.

Alternatively, material may be employed for self-study. In this case students could be encouraged to use the computer laboratory in their own time in order to focus attention on areas in which they consider they have difficulties. This would need some organisation, as such sessions would need to be supervised, both for safety reasons and also to give advice or help when required.

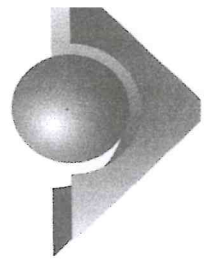
It would also be possible to classify many of the games and adventures available in this section. Most language games are based on vocabulary development or puzzles, including variations on "Hangman", crosswords or true/false options. Interactive adventures may provide more lasting appeal as the student is required to use different resources in order to solve a mystery or a crime.

For teachers, ready made materials and tests are available on software, for example with the "Headway" series published by Oxford University Press. These facilities can offer a huge time-saving factor in lesson and test preparation.

Reference

Access to reference material is aided greatly by the use of the computer. There are encyclopaedia and dictionaries available on the market, and they may be exploited in a variety of different ways. In the first place the encyclopaedia, for example Microsoft's *Encarta*, can be used for cross-curricular activities (Macri, 1999, p. 6). This is where the real flexibility of the computer comes into its own.

As Macri (ibid.) observes, the use of the computer for research is not a linear process dictated by a text in the traditional sense, but the process is guided by the curiosity and interest of the person carrying out the research. While the medium of communication may be English, the subject



matter for activities could range from geography to history or any number of different topics. Students could be provided with appropriate worksheets and allowed to work independently in finding the answers to questions, for instance in a history quiz or to really exploit the full potential of the programme, a general knowledge quiz similar to "Trivial Pursuits". A time limit for finding the information would introduce an element of competition. In more ambitious applications, this resource could be used for project work over a longer period of time, not only carrying out research but also producing the work with the computer, focussing attention on formatting and presentation.

Interactive dictionaries, like the *Longman Interactive English Dictionary* or the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* on CD ROM,

not only provide word definitions and pronunciation, but also general cultural information backed up by illustrations and maps, grammar references and exercises and games. This wealth of information can be exploited through the use of worksheets designed, for instance, to improve dictionary use skills, vocabulary knowledge, spelling and pronunciation.

Sample activity: Completing a word map

Level: Elementary to pre-intermediate.

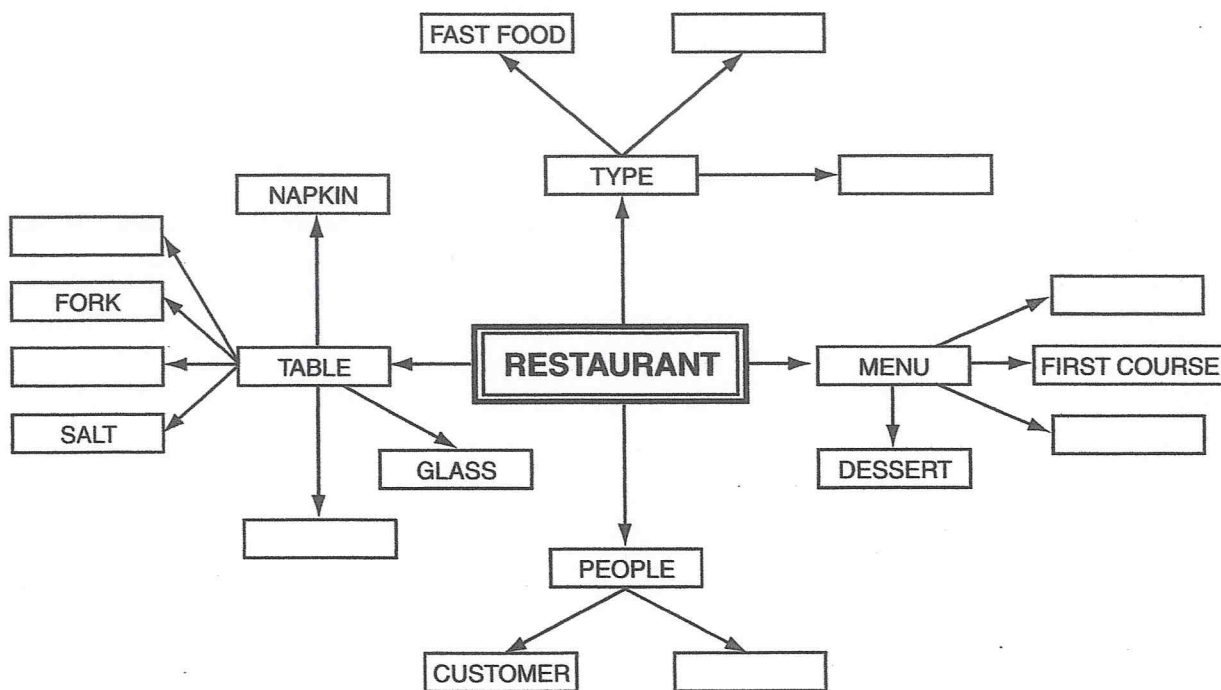
Aim: to focus attention on a specific lexical set (the restaurant) and pronunciation; dictionary skills.

Materials: worksheets with incomplete word maps.

Example of a possible worksheet (adapted from the *Oxford Study Dictionary Workbook*, Oxford University Press, p. 18):

WORD MAP WORKSHEET

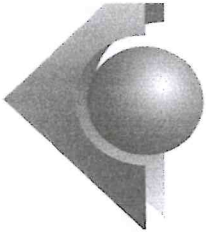
Use your dictionary and complete the restaurant word map. Remember to check the pronunciation of the words you find.



Procedure: The worksheets are handed out and students complete them checking the pronunciation of each item that they find. Further suggestion: As a follow up students could prepare menus using the computer,

in order to improve their presentation skills (see the above section on the computer as word processor). After this they could act out a restaurant role-play for the exploitation of the vocabulary introduced





in the word map-session and making use of their menus.

Students could also be asked to invent their own word maps. There are any number of topic areas that could be chosen, where words can be grouped in general and then more specific categories. Some examples are listed below:

- transport – air, land, sea
- the airport – people, places, actions
- food and drink – fruit, vegetables, alcoholic, non-alcoholic
- the house and home – rooms, furniture, household appliances
- town facilities – shops, services, entertainments
- holidays – abroad, at home, cheap, expensive
- free time – relaxing, sports
- shopping – shops
- animals – birds, fish, mammals, reptiles
- the weather – winter, spring, summer, autumn
- jobs – professional, manual, well-paid, badly-paid, dangerous

The Internet

This may be exploited in two different ways. It is firstly a vast source of information on the World Wide Web, of use both to the teacher and the student alike. As Blackie (1996, p. 18) points out, this resource is “something of a jungle”, but the use of a search engine, such as <http://www.yahoo.com> helps in seeking information under specific headings. Eastment (1996b, p. 64-65) identifies a number of areas, including newspapers, reference works, job services, student magazines, teaching material and finally general information about everything imaginable, all of which may be used in the school context.

Material taken directly from the Web can be an invaluable resource for teaching purposes. The advantage of this material is that it is authentic, up-to-date and, if chosen carefully, of relevance to the students. It is even possible to find ready made exercises which can be downloaded to a PC for classroom use. See the Cambridge University Press site at <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk/elt/>.

Furthermore, useful information about teaching can be found with the opportunity to exchange ideas or discuss specific problems. See, for instance, ANILS on line at <http://anils.abramo.it>.

Students may already be familiar with the Web and will possibly have started exploring some of its potential at home. In a teaching context, however, they should perhaps be encouraged towards directed browsing of the Net, rather than the kind of random browsing that they are used to (Newton, 1999). This means setting specific tasks, where information is required to solve a problem, for example. These types of activity can also be placed in a wider teaching context, by carrying out pre-computer activities and subsequently follow up activities which make use of information found through the Internet (Teeler and Gray, 1999).

Sample activity: Organising a holiday in London

Level: Intermediate.

Aim: to train students how to search for information on the Internet in order to organise a holiday.

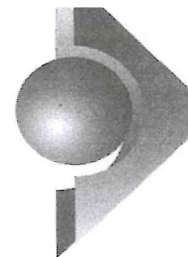
Materials: questionnaire to help students in their search.

Example of an activity sheet/questionnaire:

A Trip to London

You are going to London on a short holiday. You arrive at Heathrow Airport at 11.50 on Tuesday morning and you will leave from the same airport at 17.30 on Sunday. How are you going to spend your time there?

1. Where are you going to visit?
2. What are you going to do in the evenings?
3. How are you going to get from Heathrow Airport to your hotel?
4. Where are you going to stay? How much does it cost?
5. How are you going to travel around London? Is public transport expensive?
6. Where are you going to eat? Where is the cheapest place?
7. What is the exchange rate?
8. What time do museums open? How much do they cost?



Procedure: The activity can be divided into three stages.

1. In the first stage the class could be introduced to London, through a reading text or video. In this way they can have some idea of where they can visit and what they can do. They are told that they will have the opportunity to spend a few days in London together. Students can work in groups and decide what they want to visit there.

2. The next stage takes place in the computer laboratory. The questionnaire is handed out and the students are required to find as much information as possible within a given time limit using the Internet. The teacher could give key words to help students in their search, for example "London Transport" or "The British Tourist Board". Alternatively, the teacher could provide addresses for specific sites. A problem which may be encountered here, is the fact that sometimes certain pages may disappear from one day to the next. Also, if there is a lot of traffic, it may be difficult to visualise the page wanted. These are everyday problems with the use of the Internet, and students can benefit from experiencing these difficulties as part of a wider learning process. Would it be possible to find the information from another source? Is the information really essential?

3. The follow up would include a feedback session where the information found is exchanged or problems discussed.

A second use for the Internet would be for communication. Eastment (1996b, p. 60) uses the term "keypals" to substitute that of pen pals. Students would be able to communicate directly, cheaply and quickly with other students all over the world by e-mail. Irvine (1993) takes this idea further by developing the concept of "electronic mail learning circles" in order to establish contacts with schools in the rest of the world and maintain a constant exchange of ideas and opinions. Eastment (op. cit., p. 68) makes reference to the "Intercultural E-mail Classroom Connections project" (IECC) set up by St. Olaf's University at <http://www.stolaf.edu/network/iecc>. This type of contact gives students and teachers the opportunity to exchange ideas or even set up projects on an international level.

Perhaps this is an appropriate point for conclusions. The computer represents a multi-faceted tool. We have only scratched the surface of its real potential, but we should also be aware of considering it a solution to all our problems. It provides a practical resource for the teacher, which should be exploited according to the specific needs of the learning context and, on a more idealistic note, regarding the final example given above, can provide an opportunity for real international understanding and co-operation among the younger generations.

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