EXPERIENCES IN USING THE MICROCOMPUTER
IN TEACHING ENGLISH

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Microcomputers are magical but what is even more magical is the way we teachers use the microcomputer as a teaching tool. It is amazing the changes that will occur in your students when they are able to use the microcomputer to learn a language. Microcomputers will save us and our students time; exercises that used to be boring will come alive, mistakes which occurred again and again will disappear. Our students will be motivated to do much more than what was required of them as a norm.

Why do we say all this? We have been teaching English using microcomputers since 1981 at different levels and it is our experience that students are excited, motivated and show much better results at the end of each school year.

There are many ways in which to use the microcomputer in education. When we start we can ask ourselves, how am I going to use the microcomputer? The way we use it will depend on our goals and objectives.

Although the microcomputer is special, it will never take the teacher's place, but it is a fantastic teaching tool when used with a specific purpose. It is very important to use the appropriate programs containing courseware a teacher is teaching in her/his conventional classroom. We feel the microcomputer is a wonderful "box of surprises" for all of us to discover, to explore and to use to the best of our advantage in our classes.

A good way to teach a language is to introduce vocabulary, spelling, structures and situations and to keep on practicing what

what has been learned. Here is where the microcomputer can help, it can give our students the opportunity to improve their skills in these areas plus their reading and writing. We feel that in this way the students get practice, a real picture of a situation, and a better understanding of how the new language is used. The experiences our students "live" in the microcomputer room are meaningful and oral communicative language is stimulated.

PRACTICAL PROCEDURES WITH DIFFERENT TYPES OF SOFTWARE IN THE CLASS-ROOM

Software can stimulate the students to learn because it forces students to interact directly with their learning material. We feel it encourages students to ask more questions and to help each other. Some of the most potent uses of software are: to develop and improve critical thinking skills and to experience situations usually not available to the student. All this can be done through programs such as simulations, practice and drill, tutorials, problem solving and the word processor.

SIMULATIONS

Simulations can bring a whole new world to the classroom. If, for example, our class is reading about pioneers, we will prepare our students with the needed vocabulary, spelling and historical background in our normal classroom and then we will "live" the experience when using the microcomputer. The students can make their own decisions and the outcome of the simulation will depend on these decisions. An example of a simulation is "Oregon Trail" by MECC., the students become pioneers and will hunt for their food, fix their wagons and fight for their lives in difficult situations of pioneer's times. This is a good way to integrate computer programs into our curriculums. Their experiences with this type of simulation can be the foundation for class discussions.

PRACTICE AND DRILL

Let's talk about practice and drill, most of the time this is boring for the student and teacher, but you will be surprised how this activity can be changed into something exciting and enjoyable for our students with very good results in a short time. For example, if we want our students to practice "verbs", after the material has been taught in class, the students start the program,

follow directions written on the screen and practice with the material. The computer will prompt the students and will let them try a few times and then if the answer is incorrect, will give them the correct form with a short explanation. This gives the student practice and immediate feedback.

TUTORIALS

Tutorials act like teachers that guide the students through preprogrammed lessons. A good tutorial will meet the needs of different students. Some of the advantages of a tutorial are that students can work at their own pace, teachers will have more time to help other students and students can keep on doing the lesson until they understand the information. Programs can give the students immediate feedback and clues to help find the correct answer. Anoth advantage could be that if students already know part of the lesson they should be able to skip it. An example of a tutorial is "Trans-Alaskan Pipeline" (Scott, Foresman Co.). Students will never forget why, where and how the pipeline was constructed. All the information is learned in only 15 minutes. It is also amazing how well the students will be able to draw Alaska and the important points the following day. They learned while they were having fun.

PROBLEM SOLVING

Problem solving programs help our students develop the ability to analyse a given problem. We find these programs are one of the highest learning-teaching-experiences because the student is using a variety of skills. In "Moptown Parade" (The Learning Company) students use creatures called 'gribbits' and 'bibbits' with different characteristics, such as thin/fat, tall/short, red/blue with which a young student learns about differences, similarities, opposites and problem solving strategies. Even students difficult t motivate are motivated by the program and learn basic vocabulary while playing a game. We also have been using "Bumble Games" (The Learning Company). This program permits students to practice skills of spatial awareness. We are not only looking for these skills but we find it is very important for our student to learn to understand and follow instructions in English. Students will want to play the game and will have to read the instructions. It is our experience that students read the instructions with eagerness and discuss the correct procedures with their peers. In this way we

have found another "excuse" to stimulate oral English.

DEMONSTRATIONS

Microcomputer graphics can help teachers demonstrate concepts where animation is helpful. We used "Stickybear Opposites" (Weekly Reader Family Software) with our 4 and 5 year olds in kindergarten. The kindergarten teacher had taught them some opposites presented in this program, we then presented the program with the computer and at the same time acted the concepts out with the children. We were amazed at their long attention span (35 minutes), and were even more so, when later we saw their drawings of the most difficult concepts such as: in front/behind, near/far, many/few, etc. The children had actually drawn a wall of logs and you could see the ball going in front and behind. It is our experience that children can acquire important skills, knowledge and self-confidence while using the microcomputer.

THE ELECTRONIC BLACKBOARD

Everyday we are able to find more programs with different objectives for different levels. Media Basic Courseware has made programs with which teachers can review with their students important books and plays. There is a program about one of Shakespeare's most famous historical tragedy plays, Julius Caesar. which is read by our 10th graders in school. The students do all the reading in their classes and when the material has been covered the teachers present this program. The program is well designed and covers very important material by asking questions and giving extensive answers. We find our students enjoy this experience and what they didn't know can be learned, and at the same time the students realize how much they did know. The teacher can stop the program any place to discuss or ask for opinions and ideas. Since everybody has read the play, most of the time very interesting discussions arise, another "excuse" to use oral English in our classes. We have found that these oral discussions serve as reinforcement of the reading process and provide feedback. The "electronic blackboard" system is very simple to organize, one just needs one computer with a big screen. The teacher or student may operate the keyboard and it will be very easy for the teacher or student to follow the program. It is our experience that the computer increases the student's understanding and enjoyment of Shakespeare's work.

THE WORD PROCESSOR

How marvelous that word processors exist!

It used to be a drag for all teachers to correct a composi-
tion and find the "bloody" page in the waste paper basket! This will
not happen again, now our students receive their corrected composi-
tion, go to the computer, insert their file diskette and make the
necessary corrections just by pressing a few keys. The word pro-
cessor will make it easier for you to improve your students writing.
They can add, erase, move sentences and paragraphs without having to
recopy their work, we have found non-writers to start writing because
it is so simple. Write anything you would normally type on a type-
writer. The results are neat, without erasures and look very pro-
fessional.

We think all teachers are worried about the writing capa-
bilities of their students. Here we have a new tool to help our
students improve their writing skills. We are using the Bank Street
Writer with the "Writing Practices" multi-activity lessons that
relate to specific writing skills. Now the teacher can choose from
these lessons and as the students work on the lessons, they will be
improving their writing skills. Teachers can also make their own
exercises for their students. It can be taken from their textbooks.
Using this system gives extra practice on curriculum material.

A teacher made exercise for the word processor:

Explain to students about the different meanings of words depend-
ing on how they are used in a sentence. Give the students a one
word-example "RUN", tell them to write sentences using the word
"RUN" in different ways.

            I run home.
            I run a business.
            My nose runs.
            He will run for President.

Then ask them to think of a word that means the same as "RUN" -
example "RACE" is a good one. Now tell them to replace "RUN" with
"RACE". Read the sentences using the word "RACE" and discuss the
suitability of each substitution. Students will experience an en-
lightening moment when they realize that the meanings are not all
the same.

Because the word processor eases the rewriting process we find that our students become more perfectionist in their writing habits; all this making them improve their writing and self-confidence.

WHY USE A COMPUTER AS A TEACHING TOOL?

It has been our experience that teachers and students are interested, enthusiastic and motivated to find more ways in which to teach and learn. As we said, there is something magical that "wakes" people up and opens a whole new world to explore and discover and learn in. The more we work with the microcomputer, the more we are convinced by its multiple advantages when used as a teaching tool.

RESEARCH

<u>From the Editors</u>: We would like to include in this issue a new section which will list research completed at various universities. This issue contains titles of theses completed at the Centro de Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (CELE/UNAM) and the University of the Americas, Mexico City. The CELE list represents theses completed for the Maestría en Lingüística Aplicada. The University of the Americas list represents those which have been completed from 1984 to the present in the Masters degree and Bachelors degree programs. We urge other universities to send us their lists that we might continue to represent in this section recent research in the areas of language learning.)

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