

# Video : venior, videor, vinco or the Rubicon before communicative language teaching and how to cross it

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**Video: venior, videor, vinco – or –  
The Rubicon before Communicative Language Teaching and  
How to Cross It.**

The purpose of this paper is to give foreign language teachers a better understanding of the hows and whys of using video in the classroom. By «video» is meant any film recording on video cassette: 1) pre-recorded didacticized commercially published for foreign language training; 2) off-air taping from television; or 3) «home-made productions» by learners or teachers. Although the three types of video admit of a huge range of material, they have in common that they can be broken down into comprehensible segments to aid and activate foreign language acquisition.

This breaking down process is necessary because one of the peculiar disadvantages of video is that it presents learners with a high information load – akin to reality – which can be transformed effectively if teachers have clear aims and assign specific tasks, i.e., *give learners a focus for viewing*. Up to now, the classroom situation with its media: teacher, books and audio cassettes, has been unable to offer a sufficient transition to the authentic situation and real communicative competence. In a nutshell, the normal classroom situation fragmented language too much (taking away the challenge of garnering meaning) and never bundled the pieces back together again. The break-down-build-up process is a golden contribution to holistic learning and language acquisition.

Using video in the language teaching classroom is not simply a result stemming from the advent of new technology. In fact, films, TV and video have been around in the teacher's arsenal for a long time. Its active exploitation arose as a concomitant to the Communicative Approach (and is reinforced by Krashen's Natural Approach) and both imply a critique of the normal classroom situation with regard to its capacity to wean learners from this cave and guide them out into the outside world of genuine language usage. Many teachers took the following apocryphal story as a compliment: A learner returns to the classroom after a stay in the target language country. «I'll never go back there again! They talked so fast, and mumbled all the time. They didn't have your educated accent and coherent thoughts. You always speak so clearly, you articulate and enunciate so well. Not like them. I'm going to stay forever with you. And by the way, I could never understand the cassette recorder – the sound was so bad; and please try not to have any more substitute teachers, they all have such funny dialects; and last but not least, please don't

let Herrmann talk so much in class, he makes so many mistakes – I think I'll get infected by him.»

A further critique of conventional media is cited from Susan Holden's book *Drama in Language Teaching* (LONGMAN, 1981):

«People in textbooks, it seems, are not allowed to tell long and unfunny jokes, to get irritable or to lose their temper, to gossip (especially about other people, to speak with their mouths full, to talk nonsense, or to swear (even mildly). They do not get all mixed up while they are speaking, forget what they wanted to say, hesitate, make grammatical mistakes, argue erratically or illogically, use words vaguely, get interrupted, talk at the same time, switch speech styles, manipulate the rules of language to suit themselves, or fail to understand. In a word, they are not *real*. Real people, as everyone knows, do all these things, and it is this which is part of the essence of informal conversation. The foreign learner will of course be quite conversant with these features from his native language already; it is part of our purpose to extend his feel for such matters in English.»

The failure to include such characteristic features of language in textbooks increases the learner's sense that what is being learned is beyond the realm of the real and distances the learner from the important notion of social adequacy.

«When we, as language teachers, claim we are teaching the spoken language, most of the time what we are teaching is spoken prose.»

«Some of these features of spoken language which make it different from 'spoken prose' are listed below. They include:

- 1 Non-standard intonation patterns
- 2 Variations in tempo
- 3 The use of pause
- 4 Stammers and errors in articulation
- 5 Incomplete sentences
- 6 Repetition
- 7 'Silence fillers' such as *well, you know, sort of, mm, er*
- 8 Silences which are filled by grimaces and gestures
- 9 Gestures which amplify the meaning of words.»

There is nothing wrong about enlisting the world of fantasy and imagination – there is much that speaks in its favor – however, some of the things mentioned are beyond the learner's capacity to imagine and fantasize. Textbooks and audio cassettes have attempted to circumvent these deficits of depiction. A convention of these media is to supply words for the missing visual clues. Two problems arise here: the describing words may be above the language level being taught and, more seriously, the words needed to «set the scene» tend to falsify spoken language. For example: In the clichéd dialogue between two bank robbers, in order to let the «listener-learner» in on what is happening, a line may read as follows,» Should I put the big bills in the yellow bag?» Whereas, the deictic usage, «Should I put these in there?» would be more natural since, normally, speakers do not assign words to objects both can see. A

good example of this «falsification of language» potential can be tried out using the first episode of BBC's *The Sadrina Project*. Showing the scene with a secretary seen offering to take someone's umbrella and briefcase (without the sound being turned on) will invariably produce the predicted sentence: «May I take your umbrella and briefcase?» In fact she says the natural form: «Let me take those.» There is, of course, nothing grammatically wrong with the former sentence. The latter is the more likely form our learners will hear in the outside world. Hence, video can be the closest thing to reality. And it even has a few advantages over reality because it can be structured and repeated. Additionally, when audio and video are used for pronunciation/intonation sensitization and practice they produce consistent language models. Teachers are in a poor position when it comes to intoning the same sentence ten times with the same voice pattern. Audio and video recorders have a capacity teachers do not possess: they cannot become bored with themselves. Recorders will repeat a sentence fifty times with the same excitement and good cheer contained in the sentence heard for the first time.

The matrix below is an attempt to put the use of video into a compact format giving an overview in terms of the

- roles of learners while watching
- the tasks assigned to them
- the skills being practised
- practical techniques & devices for classroom use
- putting the whole in the context of lesson plan phases.

At the same time, the matrix offers a paradigm for a three-phase exploitation of short video segments. Such segments for active viewing might last only one or two or three minutes. Segments lasting less than 30 seconds have the disadvantage that the lead-in time is almost too short to allow the learner's mind to tune in and focus on the situation.

The paradigm is a suggested model to be varied once the pattern has been practised and understood.

### *Learners:*

The term «counteractive» serves to point out that active viewing is much different from normal television viewing habits. Teachers will first have to counteract passive consumption typical of TV watching today. Frequently replicated studies have shown that the amount of information content retained after watching TV is woefully low – even after

INPUT  $\rightarrow$   $\rightarrow$  OUTPUT

PHASE 1	PHASE 2	PHASE 3
<p><b>LEARNERS:</b> <u>REACTIVE</u></p> <p>SPECTATORS/ OBSERVERS WITNESSES</p> <p>(COUNTERACTIVE)</p>	<p><u>ACTIVE</u></p> <p>(SITUATIVE ROLE) PARTICIPANTS/ ACTORS</p>	<p><b>COMMUNICATIVE</b></p> <p><u>INTERACTIVE</u></p> <p>(CREATIVE) REAL HUMAN BEINGS</p> <p>(CO-ACTIVE)</p>
<p><b>TASKS:</b> <u>GLOBAL</u></p> <p>WHAT SITUATION</p> <p>WHO WHERE GIST</p>	<p><u>SELECTIVE</u></p> <p>DETAILED INFO: WHEN, HOW NUMBER</p>	<p><u>CURSIVE</u></p> <p>WHY BACKGROUND</p>
<p><b>SKILLS:</b> <u>RECEPTIVE</u></p> <p>LISTENING READING</p>	<p><u>PRODUCTIVE</u></p> <p>SPEAKING WRITING</p>	<p><u>INTERPRETIVE</u></p> <p>REGISTER RHETORICAL DEVICES CHANGING THE SUBJECT PARA-LINGUISTIC ASPECTS</p>
<p><b>CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES + DEVICES:</b> <u>REPORTING</u></p> <p>GRIDS, CHARTS, TRUE/FALSE, MATCHING, TICKS, CROSSES, GRAMMAR RECOGNITION, LEXIS RECOGNITION, DISCOURSE MARKER RECOGNITION</p>	<p><u>DIALOGING</u></p> <p>ROLE PLAYS REPETITION SUMMARY TRANSPOSITION PREDICTING (MEMORY) DUBBING</p>	<p><u>ANALYSING</u></p> <p>STUDENT MADE QUESTIONS TRANSFER (RELEVANT LANGUAGE) GRAMMAR FUNCTION SPECULATION (INFERENCE) DISCOURSE MARKER MEANING</p>
<p><b>TEACHING PHASES:</b> <u>PRESENTATION</u></p> <p>CONTEXT UNFOLDS</p> <p>ACQUISITION</p>	<p><u>PRACTICE</u></p> <p>"CONTEXTUALIZED AGENDA"</p> <p>LEARNING (BY DOING)</p>	<p><u>CONSOLIDATION</u></p> <p>INTERNALIZED CONTEXT</p> <p>PRODUCTION</p>

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watching a two-minute weather forecast, viewers were unsure of the next day's weather conditions.

In a first «reactive» phase learners may be likened to an audience looking in from the outside onto a stage. For some watching video in this first stage will be like chancing upon a street happening whereby the first task will be to figure out «What the hell is going on here!?» In this tuning in phase, *what* is said will receive less attention than the mind trying to set the scene, feeling out the tenor of events and persons. Attention to the details of language, at this stage, interrupts the natural phases of perception.

In the second «active» phase learners are more ready and willing to participate in role plays: to re-enact what they have watched. With a clear model in mind, they are better able to imitate more than just the words of a dialogue.

Having moved from their front-row seats onto the stage, they are like actors at a first rehearsal – they know the story, they have «seen» the lines and now will speak the lines, either as a reading or improvisation.

In the third «interactive» phase – between learners and machines – learners launch into that stage of being human, whereby what is watched is internalized, no longer acted out, and actually lived. Language is not just practised, it is used. «Co-active» – among learners – means the skeleton of words and grammar can now be fleshed out with all that which accompanies language and turns it into communication: emotions, meaningful expressions on faces, perhaps even humor, etc., etc.

### *Tasks*

Here we are talking about three stages or levels of comprehension applicable to any type of text (print, audio & video included) that we can assign to aid understanding.

By not pre-assigning tasks before viewing, or by not differentiating the task levels, we can interfere, or at best confuse, learners' comprehension. Certainly the answers to shotgun questions will end up being spotty or garbled, and the next viewing is likely to be in a nervous atmosphere. Global comprehension tasks – tuning into the general situation – of finding out where we are and who is talking to whom is significant for our «frame of expectations» about what we anticipate will be said. As native speakers we do this all the time and it helps us to concentrate on what we expect to be «important» and what we expect is less important and can be filtered out. The difficulty for the non-native is knowing what is

gloss and what is essential to the conversation. How to do that is part of the meat and potatoes of language teaching, especially giving learners training in the idea that filtering means not paying attention to detail all the time. It may help them if they are made consciously aware of the difference between skimming and scanning texts, two distinct forms of getting information quickly depending on the learner's purpose at the moment. (Remember that the Communicative Approach promises economic language learning because it focuses on realistic problem solving tasks. Most of us outside the classroom do not tackle texts with the purpose of totally comprehending them in terms of lexis, grammar and meaning. Consider the difference in tasks between reading a newspaper at breakfast, finding a number in the phone book and checking the heating bill.) A cursive task might be to ask about the periphery of a video segment: why is this happening, what was the probable background to this situation? In a sense, we are asking our learners here to feed back the segment embedded in a context. Cursive tasks could be completed in the native language.

### *Skills:*

The division of the four skills and integrated skills into the «receptive» and «productive» areas is probably familiar to most teachers. Problems arise when any of us try to equate the levels of these skills. We all know the experienced learner who discovers: «I can understand much more than I can speak!» To which I always reply: «Yes, you can read Thomas Mann quite well, but you probably don't expect you can write as well as he does.»

This truism is nonetheless ignored again when teachers say, «I don't want to present students with language they haven't already had explained before.» In German this is called «Textvorentlastung,» and possibly can be rendered in English as «pre-taught lexis.» A danger of this, as I see it, is two-fold: 1) the focus shifts from the whole to the particular vocabulary; 2) learners are robbed of the chance of making educated guesses about meaning, inferring from context, collocation and syntactical clues.

Moving from the skill of listening to writing might occur when a telephone conversation is heard and seen and then learners are asked to take a message (cf. Transposition, below). Since video is so memorable, narrative recall written or spoken, is a suitable activity.

Interpretive skills such as recognizing register and then replying in kind with an appropriate response – matching in level and cline the ut-

terance of the first speaker – are better exploited using video than any other medium. Register, of course, is a question of how speakers see each other, their roles in a particular situation.

Over-formality or over-friendliness strike an equally dissonant chord as would hip slang on the non-hip scene. Video's advantage is that now the learner can be sensitized to the context by seeing what makes up the context. Follow-up exercises might be in the form of multiple-choice responses, whereby learners could be asked why several grammatically correct utterances might nonetheless be «socially inadequate.»

Rhetorical devices include non-verbal aspects as well as discrete coughs or (in Germany) a loud intake of breath to indicate that one is ready to say something as soon as the speaker has finished. All cultures have subtle ways of expressing that we sometimes do not want to talk about something, that we would like to change the subject of the conversation or end it. Usually this intention is not made explicit but relies on euphemisms or blocking or misunderstanding on purpose or the downward glance of the eyes. Failure to recognize these signals leaves the delicate non-native open to the charge of being insensitive, which he is not – he has simply not gotten the message, i.e., communication has broken down and may as a result never get mended.

Paralinguistic features of a language also include proxemics, a term used to describe the distances maintained between speakers during conversation and physical contact, if any. The Mediterranean «warmth» versus the Northern European «coolness» has partly to do with proximity and touching. Americans keep a good yard apart from anyone while standing in line, while the Germans find this an «ungemütliche» distance. Upholding the «rightness» of this or that distance leads to irritation or even fist-fights – and certainly the sense that the other is uncouth. To shake hands or not, to look the other person in the eye while talking, a variety of hand gestures, all are not universal or inborn as the non-cosmopolitan may believe. These areas are the bread and butter of cross-cultural communication and not recognizing or misreading these signals has led to far greater misunderstanding than any grammatical error ever contributed.

### *Classroom techniques + devices*

Whether viewing video in the classroom or also watching target-language broadcasts at home, viewing guides in the form of grids, charts, true/false, matching, ticks and crosses, sentence completion or multiple-choice questions can all give learners a feeling of having watched success-



fully. The focus of viewing guides diminishes the information overload by aiding the filtering process and gently pointing out whatever pedagogical intention the teacher has in mind. This should not (and probably cannot) take away from the entertainment value, motivation and implicit background information on the target-language country. One should take care that viewing guides are short: we want learners to watch the screen and not a piece of paper.

The viewing guides p.79 are examples of supportive activities that can be used for the first or second viewing of a video segment and also demonstrate that once the typology is understood, teachers and even learners can make them up themselves. In the case of learners, one group may be assigned a certain theme, construct questions and then offer them to others in the class to be answered. Too many questions suppress interest and motivation.

Using video segments for grammar, lexis and discourse marker recognition derives from the problem that some learners have difficulty even *hearing* gerunds or third conditionals or long words. A viewing assignment might be to write down or raise hands when assigned words are heard. In a later phase, their meaning or function can be discussed. Discourse markers, e.g., the word «although,» are important in the training of filtering language. «Although» is a word that indicates that the first part of the sentence probably contains well-known information, whereas the second clause will contain the new, and probably opposing, evidence. Native speakers hearing an «although» reserve their attention for the second clause, and that is the efficiency of their listening energy.

From the «Reporting» phase, whereby the spectator describes simply what is seen and heard, we move to the «Dialoging» phase of actually using the language after intake, and concentrating our attention on whole sentences and exchanges. Role plays, in my experience, are much more successful after learners have a model in mind, where they have seen the exchange before their very eyes (and ears). Someone once compared language learners to carpenter's apprentices: because of conventional methodology they would know a lot about the names of the tools and how these tools are used in theory but will never have seen carpenters at work using the tools. Since it is usually impractical to have two native speakers interacting in the classroom (aside from the fact that they would probably not act very naturally, but adopt typical caretaker, over-enunciated speech patterns typical of parents with small children as well as language teachers with their learners), video is probably the best and most feasible opportunity to take learners closest to the reality of native speaker conversation.

Example of video viewing guide taken from:

Living in Washington: Language by Video by Frank G. STEELE  
(Nelson Filmscan, 1984)

**Exercise 15** Below are some idiomatic expressions used in the episode with alternative meanings listed beneath each. Decide which of the alternatives does *not* fit the expression in the context it is used in.

EXAMPLE let you down (Scene 2)

- break a promise
- disappoint
- stop seeing you

1 lose touch (Scene 3)

- get out of contact
- stop seeing or corresponding
- get cold

2 look him up (Scene 3)

- visit him
- go see him
- observe him

3 going out (Scene 4)

- jogging
- dating
- seeing each other

4 that's the way it goes (Scene 4)

- it's running
- that's life
- that's fate

5 day off (Scene 5)

- not at night
- day not working
- holiday

6 sign up (Scene 5)

- register
- volunteer
- write a check

7 mad (Scene 6)

- crazy
- angry
- very irritated

8 show up (Scene 6)

- appear
- turn up
- put on make-up

**Exercise 16** Many different kinds of numbers – cardinals (1, 2, etc.), ordinals (first, second, etc.) and times, for example – occur in this episode. Match the numbers on the left with their connections A to H.

- 1 120
- 2 8.30
- 3 four or five
- 4 500
- 5 three or four
- 6 second
- 7 two
- 8 four o'clock

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| A | pages not read for geography                          |
| B | 'Would the _____ of you care for a drink?'            |
| C | Tom's appointment at the recording center             |
| D | Craig's _____ year living at the fraternity house     |
| E | the number of girls in a sorority house               |
| F | times per week Diane tries to get out jogging         |
| G | hours per week Nanette spends at the recording center |
| H | time the fraternity party starts                      |

Pure repetition for pronunciation/intonation practice is probably better accomplished by sticking to the audio recording. At this point, where one wants to concentrate on phonological patterns, the visual will stand in the way of some learners. This is one reason why many multimedia courses include audio cassettes with nothing more than the audio track from the video.

Summaries can take the form of mini-dialogues, marking the route on a map where characters have travelled, or the more traditional written description.

Transposition is an exercise in integrated skills: e.g., taking a message from a telephone conversation, writing a telex as a result of an order given, shortening a letter to a telegram (perhaps, because we forgot to send the letter), taking the minutes of a meeting, or writing instructions how to use a machine like a photocopier. If learners see one side of a telephone conversation, they might be asked to speak or write what they think the other half was like. Predicting from memory involves taking learners through a video sequence up to a certain point, pressing the pause button to freeze the picture and then asking: what are they going to say now (or: what did they say?), e.g., in a restaurant, head waiter approaches customer just entering – what will they say to each other? Or if the sequence was shown before with sound off, learners can speculate about what was probably said. With sound on, learners will be keenly interested in finding out if what they speculated conforms to what is now actually said. The correction is «mild» and now the video «corrects» and the class can discuss any discrepancies between their answers and the video.

Dubbing is a sophisticated exercise, however that is not to say it is only for advanced learners. Dubbing involves having learners speak in synchronization with the characters on the screen. Perhaps using slow-motion and sound off at first, then normal speed with sound off (either in target language or as an interpreter exercise in the mother-tongue) or with sound on to practise simultaneous translations.

The analytical phase involves techniques which train learners in getting behind the language or in between the lines. Learners might be asked to interview characters they have seen and identified with – asking about personal information or inquiring about why something was done or said in a certain way. These fictional interviews can also be answered by other learners adopting a role.

If the authority of video can be used to convince learners about the «realness» of grammar or lexis usage (because it was seen on TV, or the BBC produced this video, or those are real native speakers – not disem-

bodied as on audio cassettes) we may sometimes want to cut through such «authority» by having learners compare their lives with what are sometimes acknowledged as clichés or stereotypes presented on the screen. Another transfer activity is to ask learners whether they would react (emotionally or physically) as the characters on the video; would they say the same things or would they be more polite or less angry; do they believe the characters or are they overacting; is the situation contrived or subject to the scriptwriter's or the director's bias or ideology? In other words, there may be times when we want to cut through the suspension of disbelief to make learners more critical or simply to have another point of discussion.

One way of teaching grammar is by relating it to function and context, showing how it works in action and then even adding intonation as a determiner of meaning. For example: learners might be presented with an isolated utterance in the first conditional – «If you don't hurry we'll be late.» Out of context and without intonation markers, it is impossible to understand the function intended. Is it a statement of fact? a threat? a warning? an expression of anxiety of the speaker or for the receiver? could it be a promise? or is it simply a way of telling someone what time it is? The first conditional has a basic form (if + present simple + future) but that form is used to express a variety of intentions. Surely the speaker did not first consider: «I want to say something in the first conditional using the form . . .» Yet that is how a lot of language is taught.

In English, the ambiguity of this conditional form is the subject of a common joke. Someone might say: «If you're nice to me, next time I'll bring my wife.» To which we would often hear: «Is that a promise or a threat!» Video can be seen as a contextualized grammar, whereby form is always related to meaning and context via a variety of devices such as emphases, expressions, roles and situations.

Speculation or inferring lexis from an upcoming context might involve stating the title of a video episode and then asking learners to guess about what they will hear, or see, or even smell (!). Like prediction, learners find the answer on the TV, i.e., the task has been set and now the solution will arise from watching.

Discourse marker meaning requires the same approach as was described in grammar function above.

## *Teaching phases*

The various phases are here related to lesson-plan phases constructed by textbook writers or teachers. In the first video viewing the language is introduced, then, in the second phase, reproduced, and finally reviewed. In the first phase, video is genuinely like reality and unlike a printed text. Learners cannot see how long the segment will be, they cannot stop and linger where they need to, they do not set the pace of the dialogue, skipping around to see if an unknown word appears again and thus can be understood because of redundancy, they cannot put their finger on anything because it is all up in the air – literally! The context unfolds before them, independently and seemingly unaware that there is someone out there trying to get the picture. Hence, teachers will want to heed the same rules that apply to listening comprehension texts, namely:

before turning on video, tell learners

- how long the segment will be
- how many times you will play it for them
- exactly what you want them to look for
- if sound will be on or off
- if they will need any materials while watching.

In some ways, this phase must be what S. Krashen means by «acquisition,» though I am not sure he would agree with the techniques presented as learning by doing and production phases.

The second phase, practice (and extension), finds learners with a contextualized agenda embedded, making drills and vocabulary exercises more meaningful. Learners have a tether and an outline on which they can base what they are doing. Many peripheral clues to understanding meaning are strung together for easier assimilation.

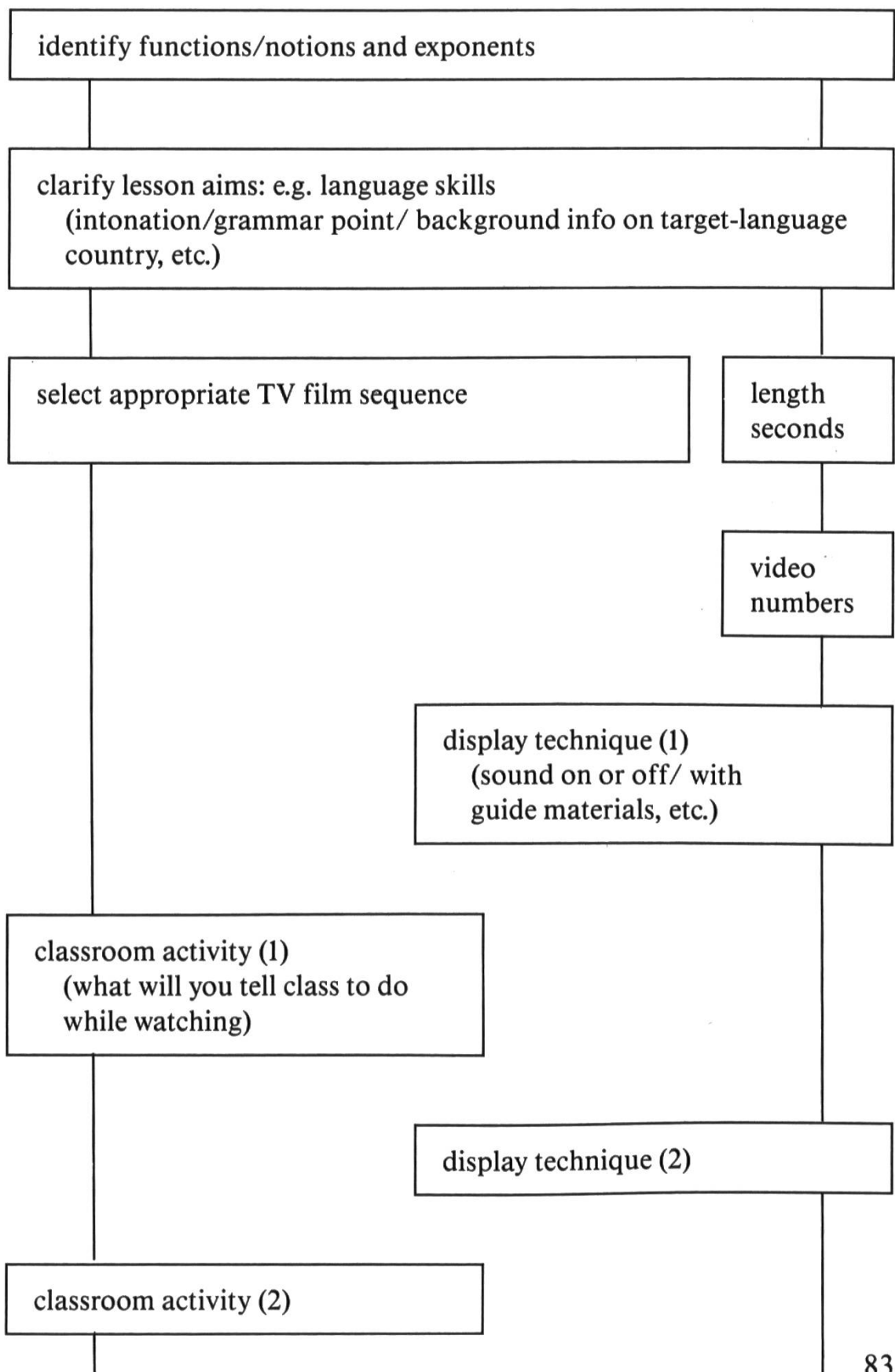
The final consolidation phase is the turning point when comprehended input becomes an internalized context, a data base within, from which real interaction can spring.

The lesson-plan chart p. 83 was constructed to aid teachers planning a lesson, to use while teaching and for filing the information for later use. (It is also considered fair by learners to ask the same question after viewing that you said you were going to ask before viewing!)

**Lesson Plan Chart:**

unit/phase \_\_\_\_\_

*Teachers guide to selecting television sequences for use in class*



In sum, video offers a shotgun approach to the various learning channels – aural, oral and visual – which we can access via video. The teacher remains as the essential inter-mediary, the conductor necessary to exploit video's potential.

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## **Appendix**

### *Maintenance Tips*

One way of approaching this topic is to begin with a description of the laser video disc: impervious to heat, magnetic forces, humidity, fingers; capable of holding in the pause (freeze frame) mode for as long as wanted; shows no signs of wear and tear after 10,000 hours of testing; etc. etc. On the other hand, magnetic tapes are sensitive to humidity and dust (*use the dust covers!*), heat and magnets (hence, do not store them in the VCR or on TVs since both are sources of heat and magnetic waves!); for longer periods of storage, cassettes should be wound back to the beginning and stacked vertically (to prevent tape from slipping on the spools). After long periods of storage it sometimes is useful to run them quickly fast forward/rewind all the way through to «unstick» them.

Use the pause button judiciously. Most VCRs are equipped with automatic shut-offs when pause mode is held longer than about two minutes. This shut-off was built on to protect VCR heads and to prevent weak spots on the tape. Magnetic heads and tape are best kept in running contact, not held together for longer periods.

Dust and dirt accumulated in a cassette also spew into the VCR and the magnetic heads are especially tender. Cleaning VCR heads is not like audio recorders where alcohol and cotton swabs will do the trick. Often the VCR must be taken into the shop for cleaning and that is expensive. Most manufacturers/technicians are not yet happy with head cleaning tapes. The above recommendations affect long-term quality of video use.

(Adjustment of sound, color, brightness, tone, contrast and other features usually done on the TV, are not normally adjusted via the video recorder.)