

Saudi Arabia

Education Through Computer

— Patrick Werf

JEDDAH — In a classroom in the Eastern Province, a group of young Saudi trainees are hunched over computer terminals with grimaces on their faces. Totally absorbed, they punch words on their keyboards fighting their way to the next level of English exercises. They are the first students in a new computer educational system to teach English as a foreign language. Developed by the Computer Curriculum Corporation of Palo Alto, California, the system has been installed by Northrop Corporation in two Saudi projects one in Jubail at a petrochemical plant where future plant operators are being trained and the other in Dhahran for aircraft maintenance trainees.

The system is unique in the world, according to George S. Zarbokrisky, director of programme development at Northrop Aircraft Services Division in Riyadh. Students read and com-

plete exercises in reading and listening comprehension, grammar and vocabulary on the computer screen while a voice synthesizer lets them hear the English and gives directions in Arabic. If the student performs well, he advances to more sophisticated material. If he doesn't, the computer gives him exercises to strengthen him in the area where he needs help. Each student follows an independent path.

Initially, we have questions regarding the system, since it had never been used before in Saudi Arabia," said one instructor. But the Saudis love it. And the instructor can leave the room and come back 15 minutes later and the students won't even have noticed. They are completely absorbed. The system initially gives students instructions in Arabic but as they proceed through the programme, English takes over. The brightest students may get through the entire course in 250 hours while an additional 350 hours have been provided for slower students.

In one exercise, the student hears an Arabic word through his headphones and is asked to pick the English equivalent from a list on the screen. Others ask the student to complete sentences by choosing a word or rewriting a sentence to match a particular syntax. There are a total of 72,000 exercises from beginning to upper intermediate levels. At Northrop, the computer is used for two 25-minute sessions of the English language training programme which lasts for six hours per day. In each lesson, three to seven new vocabulary words are introduced and are reviewed after every five while a grammar point is presented every one or two lessons. Each day the student begins where he left off the day before, and

when he signs on in the morning, he is greeted by name. Individual and group records of the students' progress are kept, and at any point a teacher can call up a student's status and history on the computer screen. The system's hardware consists of a main-frame computer, a printer, a digital speech synthesizer, and a network of student terminals which can be expanded up to as many as 96. The digital speech synthesizer stores 13,000 digitized representations of recorded speech which are played through headphones to the student. Northrop said Zarbokrisky has been involved in training for many years, and has kept abreast of new developments in the field. The company has trained 2,000 Saudis in six programmes over the last 12 years in fields such as English vocational education and aircraft operations and maintenance. (Courtesy: Arab News)