SCHOOL DAZE

Educational computer software aimed at those sitting General Certificate of Education examinations is becoming more and more common. Almost invariably it is based on the question-and-answer method, and is constrained to the simplest kind of questions – those with absolutely definite unambiguous answers.

There are now numerous revision packages on the market and few make demands on the programmer. The task is a simple one of text presentation and monitoring a response from the user. Once this procedure is established the same structure can be used to accommodate a wide variety of subject texts and question-and-answer routines, with the object of supplementing or supplanting the text book. Though such programs are effective — and certainly cost-effective — it must be admitted that they can be rather dull. However, future generations of examination revision software will undoubtedly make use of the colour and graphics facilities now available on the majority of home computers to display visual material to illustrate the text.

Foreign Languages

The languages most commmonly taught to GCE standard are well supplied with revision software for a variety of machines, including those established in schools, such as the BBC Microcomputer and the ZX Spectrum, and those more commonly used as vehicles for games software, such as the Atari range.

One such group is available from Kosmos Software for both the Spectrum and BBC Model B on cassette. The French Mistress, the German Master and the Spanish Tutor are similar in their operating method, and all three come in two levels. Level A is composed of lists of words or short phrases (up to 59 characters long) in English and the subject language, in categories such as 'Family', 'Food', 'Living Creatures' and the like; while the Level B cassette progresses to adjectives and adverbs, and verb conjugations and tenses.

The user has the option of working from the foreign language into English, or vice versa, and also creating word lists of his own, which may be saved on cassette for later reference. The cassettes are split into 16 'lessons' each, the maximum length of any one of which is 250 entries. This limit also applies to user-created lists. The user can choose between the learning mode, in which a foreign word and then its English equivalent are displayed; a self-test, in which only one of the languages is displayed; and a timed accuracy test.

English Language

Teaching the native tongue is quite different from teaching a foreign language. The objective here is to teach one how to use the language to best effect. Here the computer can be useful insofar as rules of grammar can be applied. But the skills of writing précis, paraphrases, essays and compositions are matters of judgement rather than rule-based exercises and so do not readily lend themselves to computer-assisted revision.

Commodore's English Language is available on cassette and is based on material supplied by International Correspondence Schools. It forms part of a larger series for expanded Vic-20s, and concentrates on grammar and the use of words. The main menu offers a choice between Composition (which is in fact a mixture of exercises in word definitions and usage in the form of a multiple choice approach), spelling, grammar and comprehension.

The package is supported by a manual which explains the operating method with adequate examples but also provides text for the summarising and comprehension exercises.