

Part 1

Reading

Q1. Minitel is a creature of the 80s and now seems as dated as mullet hairdos and Bananarama. But France Telecom will not let Minitel die. Instead it insists that the system has a bright future: there are 7m Minitel-compatible terminals in France now, and 8.5m will be available to use the relaunched Minitel by 2003. This is thanks to new software that enables Minitel's services to be accessed on PCs and Macs. The result, perhaps inevitably, is called the i-Minitel.

Q2. But what exactly is Minitel? When it was first launched in 1982 a Minitel terminal consisted of a small monitor with a keyboard and a telephone link. These little "boxes", as they're still called, were distributed free with normal telephone service by France Telecom. At the time Minitel seemed like the last word in communications technology, and the French were properly proud of it. Minitel was first used as an online Yellow Pages.

Q3. In Francois Mitterrand's France of the 80s, Minitel was a symbol of the country's technological virility. As much as the then president's so-called *grands projects* - the Opera Bastille, La Defence, the Biblioteque Nationale and I M Pei's piramide at the Louvre - Minitel showed that France was a thoroughly modern place. It must have been pleasing for French patriots to look across the Channel and witness the failure of Prestel, Britain's long-defunct version of Minitel. You remember Prestel, don't you?

Q4. France has been slow to move into the world of the internet, and part of the reason for that is the success of Minitel and the huge investment of national pride in this defiantly French invention. Although the French had been the envy of their neighbours during the 80s because of Minitel, in the following decade for not keeping up with the communications revolution.

Q5. Indeed, that is one of the things that makes Minitel worth preserving. It is quicker at some things than the internet – booking train or airline tickets especially. But secure payment is Minitel's main advantage. All terminals have a chip to enable electronic payment, and France Telecom guarantees the safety of the network. As a result French people are used to buying goods on the Minitel. In 1998 e-commerce was worth 6bn francs (\$756m), but only 15m francs (\$1.9m) on the internet.

Q6. Sceptics suggest the Minitel's relaunch is little more than a stay of execution. But France Telecom isn't ready to pull the plug just yet: Minitel has 18m regular users in France compared with only 7m on the internet. And while it still makes France Telecom a great deal of money. Minitel with rattle on many years to come, derided and outdated, but beloved and very French, like that other unexpected survivor, the 2CV.

Part 3

Grammar

22. We use *be to* in formal English to talk about official arrangements.

(The President was to hold an official reception for the visitors.)

We can use *be due to* to talk about an event which forms part of a timetable. We usually use a time phrase with *be due to*.

(Carriageway repairs on this stretch of the motorway are due to start on 26th May.)