PROMOTING MULTIMEDIA PROJECTS AMONG UNIVERSITY LANGUAGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The project described here, a 'first-time' experiment for both authors, was integral to the objectives of the advanced language course, i.e. to expose students to a range of registers of contemporary French, from the formal to the vulgar. The computer-aided, multimedia format suited this type of course admirably, since it allowed a range of materials (audio-visual and textual) to be presented in an interactive fashion. Moreover students were free to explore the material in different ways, according to their needs and abilities. During the project teachers and students alike had to learn the rudiments of multimedia authoring. The papers describes the project, its outcomes, and assessment procedures.

KEY WORDS

Multimedia, interactivity, French language, registers of language, sociolinguistics, student-centred learning, authoring programs.

RESUMEN

Este proyecto multimedia es un experimento 'por primera vez' por los dos autores, y se integraba en un curso lingüístico de nivel avanzado, cuyos obje-

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tivos eran exponer a los estudiantes una gama de registros del francés contemporáneo, de lo formal a lo grosero. El formato informático multimedia convenía bien a esta materia, en cuanto permitía presentar una larga gama de material (audio-visual y textual), ofreciendo a los estudiantes la libertad de explorarlo interactivamente según sus exigencias y nivel de competencia. En el curso del proyecto, los profesores y los estudiantes han debido aprender los fundamentos de la creación multimedia. Este artículo describe el proyecto, sus resultados y los procedimientos de validación.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Multimedia, interactividad, la lengua francesa, los registros lingüísticos, sociolingüística, aprendizaje centrado en el estudiante, programas-autor.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce projet multimedia, un grand début pour les deux auteurs, s'intégrait à une année de langue dont l'objectif consistait à exposer les étudiants à divers registres de français contemporain allant du formel au vulgaire. Le format multimedia sur ordinateur convenait particulièrement bien à ce sujet car il permettait de présenter, de façon interactive, une vaste gamme de matériaux (audio-visuel et textuel), ainsi que de favoriser une exploration de ces matériaux selon les besoins et les compétences des apprenants. Au cours du projet, aussi bien les enseignants que les apprenants ont dû maîtriser les rudiments de la création multimedia. Cet article décrit la nature du projet, ses résultats et les procédes d'évaluation.

MOTS-CLÉ

Multimedia, interactivité, le français, registres de langue, socio-linguistique, apprentissage centré sur l'étudiant, programme-auteur.

1.   MULTIMEDIA AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

Interactive multimedia is ideal for teaching and learning languages. It allows us to deal with words, sounds and pictures in all sorts of combinations, and now with the increasing power of networking technology, we can access these materials at a distance. Multimedia is thus one of the most powerful means for realising the progression from the 'agentive' uses of technology, where the technology merely replicates traditional pedagogical methods, towards 'instrumental' uses, where technology serves new functions in new pedagogical contexts; one of the simplest uses of multimedia for the language teacher is as a repository or database of multiple resources, in other words assisting the

teacher to progress from 'linear teaching to multidimensional resources' (cf. Patrikis, 1997).

The paper describes how multimedia was used in an advanced course of French as a foreign language during 1997 and 1998. The purpose of this course is to familiarise third year students of French with various levels of language spoken in France. The objective is to bring them into contact with authentic colloquial, slang or even rude French, which is either hardly touched upon, or poorly taught, through conventional teaching deliveries (textbooks and tutorials). Multimedia is good for imparting and gaining both knowledge *of* the target language and knowledge *about* the target language. This paper reports on an experiment which covered both these aspects of language acquisition.

The use of multimedia in the course was symmetrical, in that both the teacher and the students were engaged in learning to use a multimedia authoring shell and in creating their own multimedia programs.

2.   Using an authoring shell – teachers and students

An authoring shell called StoryTime was developed within the Faculty of Arts Multimedia Centre (MMC) by a Programmer (Fardon) working in collaboration with the Academic Director of the MMC (Kinder) and with members of the teaching staff of the Arts Faculty (including Jaccomard). This model of collaboration and partnership (cf. Fardon & Kinder, 1997) produced a multimedia tool which is extremely user-friendly, requiring a minimal amount of training to learn and use to its full potential, and allowing for extremely economical, elegant delivery of teaching material.

StoryTime allows the integration of still images (and QVTR panoramas), audio-visual material (recordings, videos), text, links to websites, and more importantly and quite uniquely, various types of exercises (gap-filling, hang-man, hot spots, fact finding exercises, comprehension questions, recording exercises via a microphone). The non-linear structure of the finished program allows the viewer to navigate through the program in their own way, in a manner very similar to Websites conventions (active hypertext links are of different colour according to the nature of the link –text, visual, audio, web, exercises…). Modules created in StoryTime can be transformed into html format.

3. MULTIMEDIA AND TEACHING REGISTERS OF LANGUAGES

3.1. Teaching "Registers of language" and other embarrassing subjects

The study and description of various registers within the rich sociolinguistic universe of the French language is well advanced around the world (cf. Sanders, 1993; Ball, 1997; Duneton, 1998). The need to teach students to identify and recognise "Registers of language" at advanced level of language courses (but not necessarily use all of them!) has been raised in several quarters (cf. Leon & Yashinky, 1982), and teaching materials in this field have been appearing for over a decade (cf. Burston & Burston, 1999).

All good French teaching manuals do integrate here and there some colloquial language, sometimes slang (such as "verlan", a typical slang from French youth living in deprived suburbs) and, very rarely, taboo or vulgar language. The limitations of textbook delivery are manifold: "Registers of language" change all the time, moving up or down a notch on the formal/informal ladder, vocabulary evolves at a rapid pace, speakers' creations are ephemeral.

In terms of actual use of textbooks, tutor and students usually end up creating tables of equivalences and synonyms for vocabulary, gaining here and there some rules about grammatical and syntactic variations along registers. Most of the time tutorials lack interaction, mostly due to students' scarcity of knowledge. Students' motivation also seems to wane when faced, so far into their studies, with the Pandora's Box of vocabulary and grammatical rules being doubled, tripled, quadrupled in every register. Differential levels of knowledge also inhibit learner's absorption.

There is moreover a bigger obstacle to teaching "Registers of language" through conventional face-to-face classes. A certain embarrassment arises when introducing students (mostly female students in our case) to more colourful, graphic language. The tutor is tempted to censure their own teaching and never broach the rudest or spiciest levels of French language which is however widely used by native speakers.

3.2. Why multimedia?

Multimedia delivery does get over some of these obstacles and presents certain features that are valuable for this type of subject-matter.

For the teacher, a multimedia program presents more than lists of synonyms and syntactic rules, since the range of authentic material allows contextual and cultural comparisons to be made. More importantly, computer programs are evolutive by nature and may be updated to reflect new developments.

For the student, multimedia allows some aspects of learning to occur on an autonomous individual basis and gives great scope to individual creativity, which can be a major incentive to learning (Debski, 1997). Viewing the program created by the teacher allows students to learn at their own pace, starting from their own knowledge base. Even though "Registers of language" still deals with complex questions requiring a lot of learning and reflexion, the multimedia presentation is attractive, interactive, and uses tools that are perceived by students to be "cool" and "fun", which reduces the danger of discouragement. Also by presenting audio-visual material in digital format, the author can cue video to the relevant frames and avoid the tedious rewinding and forwarding which often occurs in tutorials when using a VCR machine. In their own projects, the students also learn in depth about the particular register they have chosen and are able to full vent to their creative musings.

It should also be said that the screen-student interface somewhat dissipates the embarrassment caused by the nature of the material offered for less formal registers of language.

The course in which multimedia was used for teaching registers of French, was an advanced level course, and the "registers" component was only one part, albeit a significant one, of the course. The multimedia component involved first the teacher and then the students as authors of multimedia material. The design process (cf. Levy, 1997; 1999) thus consisted of two phases: (1) the teacher became a student of multimedia and produced her own module, which was used as course material by the students, and (2) the students learned the same multimedia skills and produced their own modules.

The following two sections of the paper describe these two symmetrical halves of the experience.

4. THE TEACHER AS AUTHOR

4.1. The structure of the program

Jaccomard created a program "Registers of language", which includes three types of pedagogical material:

- explanations (written text files),
- illustrations (written, audio-visual resources),
- interaction/checking of knowledge (exercises, recordings).

"Registers of language" is written wholly in French, and illustrates twelve semantic fields for five registers, with a marked preference for less formal registers (colloquial, slang, vulgar). Some themes lend themselves better than others to development, subject to availability or simply the teacher/learner's interests. Therefore not all semantic fields are systematically illustrated for all registers. The objectives are to explore language realities poorly documented with classic means: baby talk and children's language, "verlan", "franglais" (fran-américain rather, or "américanismes").

5 REGISTERS					12 THEMES
Formal	Neutral	Colloquial	Slang	Vulgar/Verlan	Themes
x	x	x	x	x	Money
		x	x	x	Prison/Police
x		x	x		Leave-taking
				x	Insults
		x	x	x	Anger
	x	x			Work
	x	x		x	To Do
x	x	x			Introductions
			x	x	Fear
x			x		Mistakes
x		x	x		Men/Women
		x	x		Children

4.2. A view of the program

A detailed description of the program can be found at website of the UWA Teaching and Learning Centre: http://www.acs.uwa.edu.au/csd/tltr/jaccomard.html.

Here is how the program appears on opening:

The twelve themes appear in the top right hand window of the screen, and may be accessed by clicking on them, or from the text-based window, on the top left-hand corner. For each explanation or illustration exercises have been designed in order to test students' comprehension and further their understanding. Resources come from a variety of sources: radio interviews, newspaper articles, songs (Renaud, Cabrel, Paul Personne…), very short filmic scenes from "La Haine", "La Crise", "Les Visiteurs", teaching videos.

On pages 46 and 47 are two sample "pages" from the program.

"Registers of language" may be used with teacher's supervision or not. In fact it is a stand-alone program and (pen and paper based) tests and quizzes are used to test learning outside the computer laboratory.
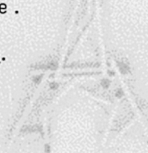
"Registers of language" is an ambitious program. If a fairly advanced student were to read all the explanations, listened to all the resources, did all the exercises, explored all Websites indicated… they would probably take more than forty hours. No course with two contact hours

per week over a thirteen-week semester unit could match this level of interaction.

4.3. Evaluation

We anticipated that learning with this resource would more active, more autonomous, more fun and effective, more exhaustive and up-to-date than conventional means. In order to assess our hunch, a questionnaire was administered (in English) to the students two weeks after they had begun using the program and at the same time as the program was being refined and added to. This formative evaluation (cf. Laurillard, 1994) showed:

• Students enjoyed using the program which 13 rated as "very useful" and "very enjoyable" whilst the remainder 3 rated it as "useful" and "enjoyable".

• All students, except one, would consider spending more time on the program, mostly on their own, which showed that "Registers of
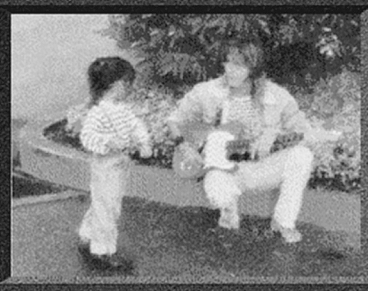
Language" met its objectives as a self-paced, independent and autonomous learning tool. They actually needed very little supervision during the session.

• Although they were assessed after only one session most of the students realised that this program was mainly directed at teaching them levels of language they were not otherwise taught (i.e. colloquial, slang, and vulgar). One student commented:

> *"Throughout the 7 years I've learnt French at school and uni no-one has ever explained the registers and absolutely everyone has shied away from the 'vulgaire' when it's such an important part".*

• On a scale of 1 to 5 all of them indicated 5 in reply to whether this program was an easier method of learning about "Registers of language" than conventional means.

• As to its comparative effectiveness, the overall response was 4 (on a scale from 1 to 5). They all felt they knew more about the topic, with responses spread over 3, 4 and 5 on the scale.

• Students mostly enjoyed watching film clips: *"interesting video clips", "plein d'argot"* (full of slang), *"scenes from movie-made exercises seem more relevant"*.

• They also enjoyed doing exercises: *"the ease to understand the intention behind each exercise"*, in particular "Hangman" exercises were often cited as the most entertaining and instructive.

• Four students had some comments on "which aspects of the program, if any, did you *dislike*?":

> *"A bit confusing to follow"* [but the student said he was not very familiar with computers]
> *"Often hard to know what to do; we need more instructions"*
> *"Not enough exercises"* [two students who in fact used up the session by exploring other resources.]

• This last comment was reflected in another question regarding the amount and variety of material included: eleven indicated they found there were "not enough" "text-based material" (songs, articles, interviews) and "exercises". No-one felt that there was "too much" of any of the program's components (explanatory screens, film, clips, text-based material, exercises, themes). Even allowing for the fact they had no time to explore all the resources and did not assess the range offered, it is clear that students expect a great deal from this multimedia program.

5. STUDENTS AS AUTHORS

5.1. The structure of the programs

We then implemented stage 2 of our course outline, training our students to become authors of StoryTime themselves.

The group attended two one-hour workshops (conducted, in English, by Fardon) to learn the basic functions of the multimedia authoring shell. They were also introduced to how to scan pictures and digitise audio or video material.

Their task was to create any "story" on a subject of their choice as long as it had a clear objective and made good use of multimedia (text, audio-visual), and avoided anything of a purely anecdotal nature. They also had to keep in mind that the end-result would be a public document, shown to the other students and kept at the Multimedia Centre as examples of students' creations. They were given an open choice of

themes, and chose a wide range of topics: Haute Couture, Fencing, the World Cup, French Female Singers, Greek mythology, the story of an Australian (a student's grandfather) who fought in France during WWI, French slang, role playing.

"Students' productions can be viewed at the following site:

http://www.artsmmc.uwa.edu.au/student_projects/1998/French20830 8/start.htm

5.2. *Evaluation*

In view of the quality of the their creations we in fact made a CD-ROM containing the programs of all students (who gave their consent) in html format for viewing in a Web browser. The students could buy this and show it to potential employers. In fact one student showed the cd-rom during a job interview and was hired on the strength of her remarkable achievement.

Jaccomard monitored closely the students' work during the period of the project. It emerged that the students were engaged in a wider variety of activities than first imagined by the tutor. Many of these activities were linked to their acquisition of French, of course, but others can best be described as general skills of critical thinking and academic writing.

To complete the project successfully, the students had to engage in most if not all the following activities:

• research their topic: in some cases this involved consultation of texts and Internet sites in French,

• summarise and edit all text to their own needs,

• adapt text to the non-linear structure of the multimedia program: this required a new approach to the rhetorical structure of the overall "text" they were producing,

• translate English materials into French,

• devise exercises for the viewer, usually comprehension exercises.

Summative evaluation was carried out during a celebratory lunch held at the end of the course. Kinder and Fardon attended and asked a number of open-ended questions of the whole group. The following considerations emerged from this evaluation session:

- the students were enthusiastic about the many (non-linguistic) skills they acquired through the project, e.g. using a multimedia authoring program, preparation of digital resources, etc.,

- the students believed their French has improved through the project; although they had to concentrate on the "technical" aspects of the program, the researching, editing and composing of the their texts had required them to concentrate hard on their language,

- technical assistance was seen as essential (Fardon worked full-time as a Programmer in the MMC and could be booked to help students any time, with sufficient notice),

- the students observed that the project was time-intensive, which was not necessarily a problem: their principal concern was that the investment of time be recognised in the assessment weighting allocated to this part of the course; the weighting will be increased in future versions of the project,

- the students were required to work on individual projects: some said they would be happy to collaborate in small teams as this would alleviate the load and encourage teamwork, which we consider as a valuable educational outcome; one student, inadvertently perhaps, acknowledged the importance of this when he stated he would prefer not to do team projects since he did not like having to cooperate and compromise with others –perhaps he would benefit particularly from the experience!

6. CONCLUSION

Despite initial fears that the technology might be too time-consuming and all-absorbing to leave enough space for language acquisition, we found that this was not the case. Language learning was enhanced by the free choice of topics since students chose themes of interest to them –in the same way the tutor authored her StoryTime on a topic of interest to her. The language creativity of both students and teacher, far from being stifled by the technology, was stimulated through a user-friendly, elegant multimedia program.

It must be stressed however that to make sure the discipline –French language in this case– remained a central focus of the learning process via multimedia, instructions on the minimum requirements in language use must be clearly stated from the outset, and reflected in the assessment procedure (the issue of assessment is addressed in

Jaccomard, 2001). Research on topics, minimum amount of written and oral production, level and accuracy of language, must be given a higher weighting than the use of the technology itself –even though using technology is part of the learning of generic skills.

Not all teaching and learning necessarily lend themselves to multimedia format. Students are clear, and rightly so, in their desire for real time, face-to-face interaction in any language program.

Perhaps the single most important feature of this experience for us was the need for integration of the multimedia component into the overall design and assessment of the course. The success of this multimedia experiment is due in large part to the fact that all material used and worked on in the course are built into an experience in which the crucial and central elements are not the technology, but the learners, teacher and students alike.

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