

SVETIMŲJŲ KALBŲ STUDIJS/STUDIES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

New Technologies in Language Studies. A Case Study in the French Division at the University of Northumbria (UK)

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Abstract: The study reported in this paper assesses a web-based course specifically designed to enhance the learning and consolidation of French grammar among students of Modern Languages at the University of Northumbria. It will first describe the pedagogical issues raised by the use of ICTs in the teaching of Modern Languages, contrasting ICTs as mere tools and ICTs as a new pedagogical method leading to a new approach to learning and teaching. It will then analyse the assumptions at the core of both the content and the design of the website and relate them to learning theories in particular the constructivist paradigm. Finally it will present and assess various questionnaires that highlighted the pattern of use of the website, the learning strategies adopted by students, the impact of such a web-based course both on students' approach to grammar and their motivation level and raised questions about deep versus surface learning in ICTs as well as whether transferability of knowledge is possible.

Introduction

At all levels and in all disciplines, ICTs have become a part of the educational world. This is especially the case in British universities where contact hours between tutors and students have been cut whilst independent learning through ICT has been promoted. Whilst it could be argued that ICTs are often regarded (rightly or wrongly) as a way to cut costs, they also have a major impact on pedagogical issues, which raise some fundamental questions in terms of the teaching and learning processes.

Judging by the number of packages produced, Modern languages seem to have provided an ideal context for the use of ICTs for an educational purpose. Indeed, by nature, languages are based on interactivity and communication, two key elements offered by ICTs.

The relevance of using ICT's in the teaching and learning of Modern Languages will be examined using the example of "Grammar is Beautiful" as a case study. "Grammar is Beautiful" is a web-based package designed for intermediate/advanced learners of French as a foreign language in Higher Education. The main objective is to enforce and consolidate the knowledge of grammar by offering not only structural grammar but also a context to apply it, in the form of translation from English into French. The site has been designed to be fully integrated into the second year of the BA (Hons) ML and was piloted with the whole cohort of students this academic year. Every week, students were set a grammar point to cover independently using the web site. On a regular basis, students would complete a class test covering the grammar points set. Whilst in the first semester the application of the grammar points to a translation context was left to the

discretion of students, it became a set exercise in the second semester.

For research purposes, the "Grammar is Beautiful" site was also used with two other cohorts of students so that the pattern of use could be compared. The first cohort consisted of non-specialist first year students for whom the language component represents a third of their degree. These students come from various departments ranging from Law to International Business Studies. This is a mixed ability and mixed motivation group. In this case, the access to the site was provided for independent learning use. The second cohort consisted of the final year students of the BAML who are all highly motivated. Again, access to the site was provided for independent learning use.

Research questions

The design and the use of ICTs raise a series of questions.

First of all, should ICTs be considered as a mere tool that could be used in education or as a new pedagogical method? In other words does the use of ICTs in education influence not only the delivery of materials but also the content?

On the one hand, if we assume that ICTs are nothing else but tools, can we therefore assume that all is needed is to transfer existing material onto an IT-platform? In the case of Modern Languages, IT-based grammar "books" have flourished on the market. Does this mean a learner is more likely to use the IT-based version than the traditional print copy? On the other hand, if we assume that ICT's imply a new pedagogical methodology, "e-teaching", we have to adopt a new approach to learning and teaching. More specifically in higher education, in the words of Diana

Laurillard (1996), *do we have to re-think university teaching and learning, focusing both on the learning and teaching experience?*

If we consider ICTs as a methodology as well as a tool, it is then essential to determine the elements required for the use of IT which are not necessary or differ from traditional teaching to make e-learning possible. For example, in a classroom situation it is always possible to clarify and simplify a specific point in response to a student query. Ways of incorporating this aspect on an IT-platform where guidance has to be provided for independent learners need to be found. Many research projects have placed the emphasis on the learning but only implicitly on the teaching, does this emphasis needs to be more explicit? Do ICTs actually provide the practitioner with an opportunity to re-examine his/her approach to student learning?

The effectiveness of ICTs is another main issue. Is the use of ICTs for an educational purpose effective, both from the learner and the tutors' point of view? Although it is difficult to assess the impact of ICTs on the quantity and quality of learning, and taking into account the fact that ICTs are still in their early days, is it possible to identify patterns? Can we definitely say that ICTs are a plus? Are they a plus only when used in certain conditions or for certain types of tasks? And finally, are they a plus across the board for tutors as well as learners whatever the activity or subject?

This leads on to the issue of the suitability of ICTs for the teaching and learning of Modern Languages. The question here is to determine whether ICTs can be used for any language task or activity or whether the use of ICTs needs to be considered to work on a specific range of language skills. Can ICTs be used for aural and oral skills? Does the technology available surpass the standard of other platforms such as audio or video? Should the use of ICTs in Modern Languages teaching and learning be restricted to reading and written work and how can, or to what extent, can they be used for free writing tasks in the target language?

Assumptions

After assessing various IT platforms and reviewing academic research in the field the site was created with five key assumptions:

- ICT is a means and not an end. Too often ICT is technology-driven and not adapted to the learners' needs. One key assumption is that the design of the site has to go hand in hand with the content.
- Learners' needs have to be mapped out to create a learner-centred approach (Friedrich et al., 2001).

Social constructivism stresses the need to take into account students' experience. Ravenscroft's "concept mapping" (2001) was used in order to adapt the site to our students' needs and previous experience.

First of all, their grammar needs were analysed. Both student needs analysis and teaching experience showed it was necessary to enforce grammar in "plain English". Most

of our students have hardly had any contact with grammar, even in their native language. If grammatical terminology is not introduced explicitly it can only lead to frustration/lack of confidence and rejection so not only the main grammar points but also the main grammatical structures are explained in plain English with glossaries accessible at all time to ensure additional support. Students' various abilities were then built into the site.

To achieve this goal the exercises are mapped out in terms of difficulty but at the same time there is no prescription on how to use the site therefore the most able can start with the most difficult exercise or translation and choose from the menu where his/her needs are. That means that the design of the site has to ensure total flexibility for the students to switch from one exercise to another.

Moreover, explicit feedback needed to be included so that students can check their progress and have an explanation of the right answer. The use of frames enables them to see both their marks and the explanation, which also means that students can choose to read every explanation or only the ones they have difficulties with, depending on their needs.

Finally, IT needs and abilities were assessed. One key issue with ICT, in particular for non-IT specialists is the varying degree of expertise in the use of an IT platform, which, if not addressed, could lead to a wider gap between students. To address this particular issue the site is designed to be as easily navigable as possible. Additional support is given with key-skills in IT module, demonstration, paper user-guide and on-line help.

- Students' learning-cycle has to be addressed. In the words of Laurillard (1996: 176), ICT on itself does not complete the learning cycle of students. In particular ICT does not always address the essential process of reflection/error-checking/determining hidden wrong assumption that tutor-student interaction creates. To ensure students have full advantage of the IT platform and to make it a meaningful experience the following features were added.

First a message board and chat room facilities were set up to enable students to reflect on their learning and ask questions. Peer and student-tutor interaction can therefore be recreated. Then, the use of the site on a directed learning basis is integrated into a taught programme. It offers students support in addition to contact hours. Because it was integrated into a taught programme students were provided with the opportunity of having contact time with tutors to ask for clarification and build on their knowledge. Finally, class tests to check their progress, spot areas of difficulties and address these difficulties were introduced, which also enables tutors to take advantage of the easy upgradeability of the Internet by adding new exercises.

- Students' different learning styles have to be addressed. Whether the holistic/serialist paradigm is used or the pragmatist/reflectors/theorists/activists one it was felt vital to build these styles into the site. That means that students can choose whichever

combination they want: lesson + exercise; exercises and then lesson; lesson and translation....

- It is important to spread cognitive effort and in line with the constructivist paradigm to provide activities which include real-world problems (Moallem, 2001: 116). Structural grammar is not enough. It is good to acquire knowledge of grammar but it is too tightly controlled. It is essential to ensure transferability of knowledge to real-world tasks. It was felt that translation would be the best way of achieving this aim because: it is a task that most of our students will be asked to do in the workplace, it enables them to transfer their structural knowledge of grammar to a far more open-ended task and gives them the opportunity to see how grammar works in a context.

Observations

It is interesting to note that out of the three cohorts who were given access to the "Grammar is Beautiful" web site, only the cohort of BAMLII students used it regularly. This observation seems therefore to imply that integration in a taught programme is crucial if ICTs are to play a meaningful part in the learning process, if it is perceived as an essential part of the course. 40% found it "essential" for the package to be integrated in the programme and 60% "useful".

However integration is not the only important factor, motivation is too. It is interesting to note the pattern of use by our two non-integrated groups: although, final year students were expected to be regular users given the fact they are very motivated and should feel more responsible for their learning, it is actually amongst the first year non-specialist students that the most addicted students were, with a hard-core of highly-motivated students. The relative lack of response of the final year students can be explained by the fact that because the use of the site was not integrated, their workload and the schedule of assessed work throughout the academic year did not allow any "spare" time in which to use the site. Besides, it seems that when there is a heavy diet of assessment, independent learning is not perceived as being a priority.

As far as the first year student's cohort is concerned, although they are non-specialists, a language is a major part of their course, which implies that they could potentially be moved to another course in case of failure. Hence, the core of very weak students using the site regularly on an independent basis, made aware of their needs by their results in class.

We can draw from these observations that integration in a programme seems to be essential to ensure that students use the material, see it as being a key part of their learning and thereby become more motivated. If they were not integrated ICTs would only benefit highly motivated and self-disciplined students.

The second main observation is that learners (especially the weaker ones) valued both the guidance provided to alert them of problem areas and the feedback in plain English explaining a specific point rather than a right or wrong feedback system. All students commented on how

more self-confident about grammar they felt and less daunted to use the site rather than using traditional grammar books. Therefore it seems that guidance is essential and should be provided using very accessible terminology, which confirms that concept-mapping is a necessity to ensure a site is adapted to the learners' needs.

Feedback questionnaires also indicated that various needs and strategies can be identified through the use of "Grammar is Beautiful" web-site. Whilst some learners will systematically start with the lesson, then the exercises and finally the translation, others will start with the translation and will use the link with the lessons to check a specific point. 50% started with the lesson in a holistic manner whereas 25% started with the grammar exercises and 25% with the translation. Some learners will systematically use the guidance and feedback while others will complete the task and identify certain problem areas and will therefore check only these.

Finally, in all cases, whenever learners have used the "Grammar is Beautiful" web-site it has triggered a reflection process and they initiated a discussion in contact time on particular points covered independently. The vast majority of learners who used the site regularly have asked for consolidation sessions during contact hours mainly because they feel they need the interaction with the tutor (which can be provided through a forum facility or on-line tutorials). 85% found the monitoring of the points covered via a class test "useful". This highlights the need to cater for the full learning-cycle and to find ways of integrating tutor-student relation within ICT.

Conclusion

This experience started in September 2001 so many questions remain unanswered. Two are of particular interest. First of all Improvement in students' grasping of grammar has been noticed as shown not only in their class test results but also their translation. However it remains to be seen whether this is short-term improvement/surface-learning due to the intense focus on specific grammar points or whether the integrated use of the site has triggered deep learning that will show in the remaining years of their degree.

Finally, The site focuses on structural grammar and translation. What remains to be seen is whether transferability of knowledge will occur and the expertise acquired will also be applied to other kind of tasks such as essays or reports.

References

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Ariane Bogain and Florence Potot

Naujų technologijų įtaka mokantis kalbų. Individualaus atvejo tyrimas Jungtinės Karalystės Nortumbrijos universiteto Prancūzų kalbos katedroje

Santrauka

Tyrimas, pateiktas šiame straipsnyje, įvertina internetinį kursą, sukurtą tam, kad būtų sustiprintas prancūzų kalbos gramatikos mokymasis ir įtvirtinimas tarp Nortumbrijos universiteto studentų, studijuojančių dabartinės kalbas. Visų pirma jis aprašo pedagoginius ginčo objektus, kuriuos sukelia informacinių technologijų panaudojimas dabartinių kalbų mokyme, sugretinant informacines technologijas vien tik kaip priemones ir kaip naują pedagoginį metodą, sąlygojantį naują požiūrį į mokymąsi ir mokymą. Po to straipsnyje bus analizuojamos prielaidos tiek tinklo turinio, tiek sudarymo pagrindo požiūriu, siejant jas su mokymosi teorijomis, ir ypač su konstruktyvia paradigma. Galiausiai bus pateiktos ir įvertintos įvairios anketos, kuriose akcentuojamas interneto svetainės panaudojimo modelis, mokymosi strategijos, kurias naudoja studentai. Tokio internetinio kurso įtaka tiek studentų požiūriui į gramatiką, tiek jų motyvacijos lygiui, iškėlė klausimus apie nuodugnų, o ne paviršutinišką mokymąsi, naudojant informacines technologijas, ir ar yra įmanoma perduoti žinias ir mokėjimus.

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APPENDIX

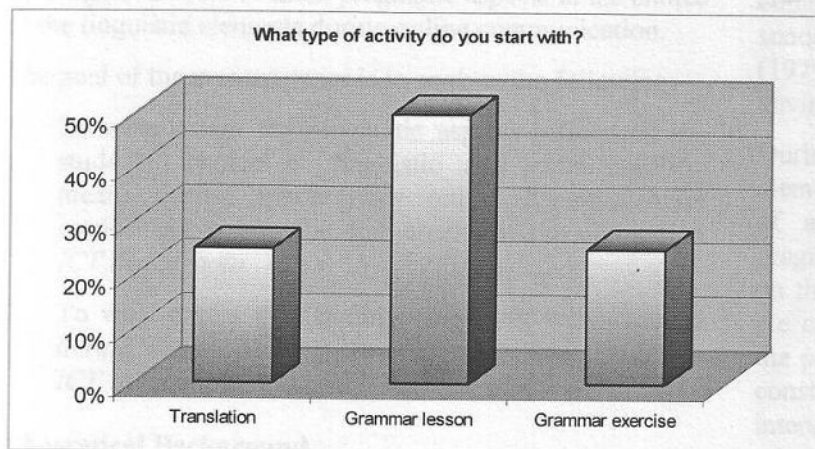


Figure 1. Type of Activity undertaken

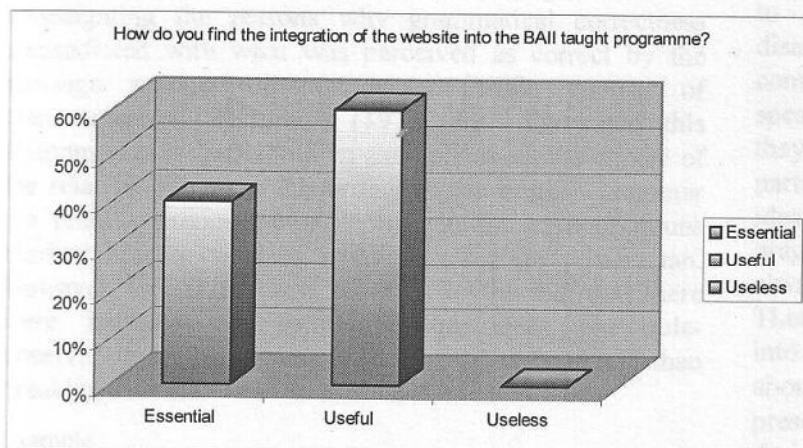


Figure 2. Website Integration into the Teaching Programme

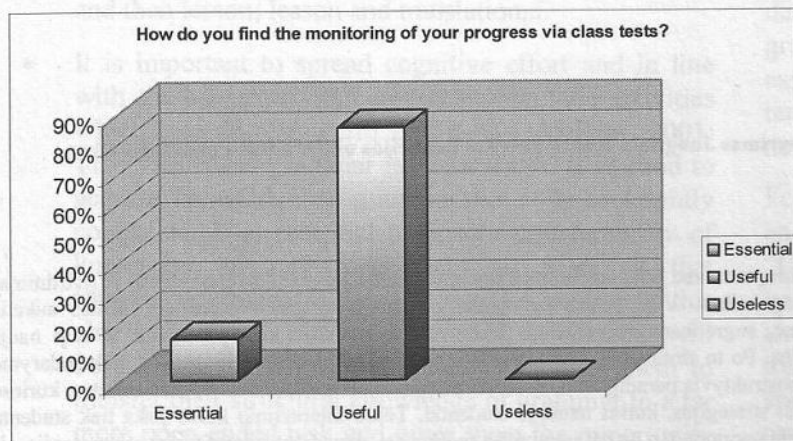


Figure 3. Test Monitoring

However, it is not a matter of course that all of the first-year students were given access to the computer. It is important to note that the only reason for this was that the computer was used in the first-year course. The observation was that the students who were given access to the computer found it a useful part in the learning process. It is perceived as an essential part of the course. The students who were not given access to the computer found it a useful part in the learning process. It is perceived as an essential part of the course.

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We can draw from these observations that integration in a programme seems to be essential to ensure that students use the material, and it is being a key part of their learning and thereby become motivated. If they were not integrated it would only benefit highly motivated and self-disciplined students.

The second main observation is that teachers (especially the weaker ones) are not providing the guidance in their class to help in learning. At the same time, the students are not being helped in learning. At the same time, the students are not being helped in learning. At the same time, the students are not being helped in learning.

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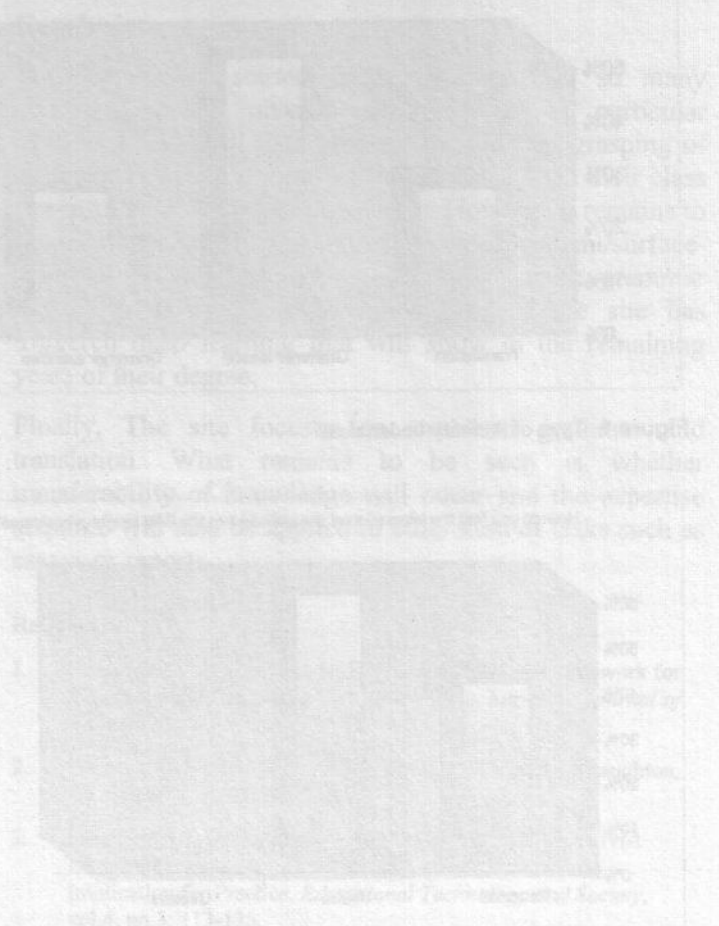


Figure 2. What is important in the Learning Programme