

Integrating TransIt-TIGER French into the Second Year Language Curriculum

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Introduction

In today's context of increased budgetary constraint and race for student recruitment, higher education is beginning to see in CALL a remedy to already squeezed human resources. CALL provides a resource-rich and flexible learning environment that, in the opinion of many, enhances the efficiency of SLA, complements class-based activities, or sometimes replaces them. It is an ideal basis for the individual self-access and distance learning culture that massified, highly-skilled educational institutions are gradually being turned into. Its development is driven further by our growing awareness that shortly workers will not be able to envisage a career without life-long learning and reskilling,¹ and by the pressures put on Higher Education institutions to redefine both management and methodology to respond to the challenges of a present and future technologically-oriented society.

The very recent development of self-access computing and the networking of the campus at Leicester have made it possible for us to integrate CALL into our second-year French language course. The initial purpose of our reflection was to develop methods promoting students' autonomy and independent language learning. Although it is on a very modest scale, our first project yielded interesting results with regards to the use of CALL within the syllabus.

In this paper, we will examine first the factors that influenced our methodology. In the second section, we will examine the rationale for developing the TELL Consortium TransIt-TIGER French authoring software, and the pedagogical and technological solutions adopted. We will then examine students' responses to the project, and finally, we will confront our conclusions with a current theory about CALL and with our objectives.

Background

Educational context: French language at Leicester University

French at Leicester University is taught at degree level in modularised, semesterised courses. Language is the key element of all our degrees; the emphasis is on both spoken and written French with increasing stress on independent study in a self-access Language Centre equipped with the latest technology and a wide range of up-to-date resources.

Whilst language is the backbone of any French degree at Leicester, time and staff shortages bring very tight constraints on syllabuses. As a result, second-year students get two hours of French language-work a week, as against three hours in the first and final

year - that means, one hour (50') only tuition in written language per week. This allows too little time to continue consolidating basic grammatical competence after the first year of study, and also means that we have to concentrate primarily on strategies of text-construction, before moving on to advanced translation and other skills in the final year.

It would be naive however to assume that all our second-year students achieve an equally suitable competence in basic grammatical and lexical knowledge. The poor mastery of the grammar of a growing number of students in recent years and the wide differences in abilities between individuals cannot be properly addressed in weekly one-hour classes. CALL was therefore developed for revision of essential skills, and to offer a more appealing challenge to today's students than traditional pen-and-paper work.

Rationale

Objectives

Not losing sight of the fact that grammatical accuracy underpins any stage of knowledge of a language,² we wanted CALL to enable our second-year students to revise and consolidate problematic grammatical points, but also to develop their competence in the following areas: reading comprehension of authentic texts, independent practice of formal summary techniques, and directed text production. More generally, and in line with current research on CALL, the software had to enable students to pursue independent self-access learning in their own time, according to their ability and at their own pace in an active way. The technology must involve the learners themselves in making responsible choices about their learning and provide meaningful interaction between user and computer. Students' work can be self-assessed and monitored through on-line support and feedback throughout the programme. Feedback had to promote cognitive skills. We also wanted to be able to set assignments formally assessed by staff. Finally, we felt students needed to develop their transferable skills in IT and especially e-mail.

In addition to wanting to be able to edit the software in response to users' feedback and other variables, we needed to take into account many local constraints. For instance, on an institutional level, no new budget was forthcoming, and inadequate networking of the campus at the time preempted Web-editing in our department.

Evaluation of CALL software

We began by looking for software that could be integrated following our syllabus, the level, and needs of our learners and the learning purposes it had to serve.³ However, evaluating the efficiency of the huge variety of programmes available is no simple matter.⁴ The range of applications commercially available until recently have often been disappointing or ill-suited to higher education; many state-of-the-art applications are often either of limited benefit to advanced language learners, or simply provide multimedia for multimedia's sake without delivering relevant advanced linguistic and methodological support. GramEx and GramDef, for instance, fail to motivate students, and Medialog is complex to use, does not deliver feedback on meaningful tasks, and ultimately offers little more than a textbook.

Like many higher education teachers today, we turned to tailor-made applications that can be adapted to specific and variable needs. Today's authoring packages enable non-technicians to design their programs and to integrate them as an inherent part of their syllabuses.⁵

TELL consortium TransIt-TIGER French

The TELL consortium TransIt-TIGER French authoring shell is a Windows-based translation program. It is not a Multimedia application in the technological sense of the word, i.e. a piece of software “designed for creation or handling of multiform and multipurpose products (video sequences, sound effects, hyper-text and others”,⁶ or as “the computer-delivered combination of a large range of communication elements - text, sound, graphics, pictures, photographs, animation and moving video.”⁷ Although TT focuses primarily on text-based, written language production and does not contain audio or video features, it is fully interactive, links with the internet or other multimedia sources, and enables autonomous, self-directed active learning (it is hypermedia). It was developed as an alternative to traditional classroom-based methodology to encourage individual tuition where the student is responsible for her/his time management and has free access to grammatical, syntactical and lexical monitoring, to source and target language learning, and acquires basic translation skills.⁸

TransIt-TIGER is very user-friendly. There is only one interface and set of buttons that learners have to use, which avoids getting lost in hyperspace. The Y"A tailor-made package: adapting TransIt-TIGER

Instead of using TT for translation, which is not the main focus of our second-year language course, we use it to complement teacher-based written language classes and for self-study and revision. Students practise their reading comprehension and writing performance with meaningful written tasks of a varied nature and relevant, adaptable reference data. Established CALL practitioners have long insisted that reading activities are particularly suited to CALL mediation and independent study.¹⁰ Our version of TransIt-TIGER involves authentic texts from the French press which are the basis for various tasks such as innovatory comprehension and vocabulary drills, focused grammar exercises, and autonomous written language production pertaining to the topics of the text (letter/ article writing, text to complete, etc) with an emphasis on summary and report writing.

We have so far set up 8 units, offering 3 levels of difficulty. Students select the texts, context, or activities of their choice from a general menu. In each unit, they are presented with the source text and activities in the top window of the screen, while the lower window acts as their notepad, or displays the support data. The Glossary link leads to a detailed glossary, keys, and explanations to the lexical and grammatical activities, as well as detailed grammar tutorials. Hints provide clues to the comprehension questions, as well as step-by-step tutorials on the summary. Two password-encoded sections (Version A and Version B) contain answers to the comprehension exercises and a suggested summary. Finally, Context supplies information about the cultural background of the passage. An external link enables the integration of an on-line dictionary, the Internet, or other reference sources. Students move through the links with a single click. They can move forwards and backward in the program and leave at any time. They can

save their work on a separate disk or as an internal file and can format and print their work as well as all reference data. Apart from the fixed features of the software which are in English (e.g. the initial operating instructions), all instructions and task input were written in the target language.

Students are required to use e-mail to request the password to Version A/B and send their self-assessed results as they hand in their written production. All lexical and grammatical exercises are self-assessed, but feedback is not spontaneous, users must look for it.

Implementation

Two teachers piloted TT with a small group of 31 students. The latter worked on two units per semester as a replacement for formal coursework. For each unit, they e-mailed their marks for self-assessed comprehension and one grammar exercise and returned one written assignment of their choice.

Induction

Whilst we felt that careful induction to the package was necessary, we had thought all the students would have had the basic knowledge of Windows and e-mail. As is often stressed, however, we found the contemporary belief that the present generation of students is largely computer-literate and enthusiastic to be erroneous.¹¹ A surprisingly large number of students tended to be computer-phobias, whilst others were not familiar with e-mail.

Help was provided in the form of an initial induction session held in-class time. Students were given a step-by-step instruction booklet and a demonstration on how to operate the program.

Questionnaires

The students were given a short questionnaire to complete which involved closed questions as well as open questions inviting qualitative comments. These sections covered: IT experience; induction; use of resources; time management; tasks set; and opinions and suggestions on TransIt-TIGER.

Questionnaire analysis

The main impression on the project over two semesters is on the whole relatively positive, even if students have rarely proved over-enthusiastic and there has been some very pertinent criticism. The main observations about TransIt-TIGER can be summarized as follows:

- for a large number of students, our project was their first CALL experience.

- the induction was deemed satisfactory.
- the students stressed the usefulness and efficiency of what TT had been set up for. They thought TT made it easy to revise grammar and other points they usually have difficulties with.
- they stressed the importance of learner independence and autonomy. They liked being able to work at their convenience, check, monitor, and assess their work on their own. TT and CALL are perceived as more efficient and as permitting better time management. [“You can quickly check up on reasons why the answers are what they are (sic)”]; “easier to correct the work with computers”]
- a large majority believed that the integration of immediately accessible support and feedback is the main advantage of TT. Tiger is useful because it ‘prevents constant use of dictionary/grammar books’. Interaction with the machine and easier access to learner support was seen as important.
- TT enables students to focus on the tasks and their learning strategies: one student remarked that TT (and we might extend this to most authoring packages) is a useful, reassuring guide because it gives indications to the student as to what the teachers consider important.¹² It helped others develop their awareness of skill- and knowledge- acquisition, with subsequent language gains: “I find that presently while I am using the computer I tend to keep a lot of information in my head rather than write it on paper.” Or: ‘I am testing myself all the time and trying to find out how much I know and how much I don't know.’
- they liked the variety the project offers. Many thought it an interesting, ‘different’ and ‘fun’ way of learning - for much more interesting and enjoyable than pen and paper; the novelty effect accounted for quite a lot at the beginning of the year. CALL helps students to notice language features and to concentrate better.
- the repeatability of TT has a similar effect: “Yes, there are advantages. We can ask the computer to repeat the question as often as we like unlike the case for the teacher who does not always have the material time. We can repeat the lesson until we are sure we know it” a majority of students, however, remarked that if it was interesting, it did not replace teacher-based learning, which they valued more. Most enjoyed it because it enhanced their computer literacy

Difficulties did not arise from the software itself, which is simple to operate, but more from obstacles inherent in the technology. It has been suggested elsewhere that lack of efficiency in the technology can lead to demotivation and frustration in users.¹³ The efficient handling of the technology does not just depend on the proficiency of the users alone, it also requires powerful operating conditions.

- the lack of physical resources was repeatedly stressed. The demand for PCs is too high, and the system is slow, making it longer at times to complete the assignments on TT than a normal pen to paper activity. Some complained about the noise levels.
- Only one student stressed that TT was not multimedia, and of little use. Two criticised the interface and regretted the fact that the small size of the two windows is detrimental to the display of data. The small number of remarks of this kind seems to suggest a lack of experience in CAL amongst students. The interest they have found in TT might therefore simply be the result of their inability to compare it with other applications.

- Some frustration arose from the fact that TT does not allow students to check feedback alongside their answers, they have to go back and forth all the time. Others regretted that answers were grouped instead of being individually accessible. TT would be more user-friendly if it displayed the supporting data in pop-up screens. These limitations, added to the fact that it is impossible to display, or scroll through, large portions of text, are so severe that some students preferred to print the material before working on the assignments - this response in itself indicates that our use of TT does not offer an alternative to pen-and-paper activities.

The language tasks

Most students liked the purpose to which TT has been assigned and felt that the majority of the tasks were of suitable interest and were useful. Someone even suggested that TT should include more grammar exercises, and less translation (when only one unit involves translation), which is an interesting remark in the light of TT's original purpose. Students claimed to have selected tasks according to their assessment of their needs. That some of the tasks were rated as difficult might indicate that those students had not taken advantage of the various options available. We, therefore, need to elaborate on user guidance.¹⁴

Does TransIt-TIGER enable us to meet our objectives?

In the light of claims made by research in CALL and of our initial objectives, we now seem to come to four conclusions. Firstly, TT seems to confirm the hypothesis that CALL is a flexible tool that promotes faster individual progress. Secondly, by transferring the initiative and control to the self-directed learner, TT may increase the efficiency of the learning process. Next, TT is interactive, and as such it vindicates claims that CALL facilitates second language acquisition. Finally, TT promotes transferable skills.

Flexibility and learners' differences

Various studies have suggested that CALL used as a flexible self-study resource may accommodate differences between the needs and abilities of individual students.¹⁵ This explains why it is usually found particularly useful for grammar instruction and revision, both at beginner's and advanced level.¹⁶

From this perspective, it seems that TransIt-TIGER at Leicester has verified these hypotheses. As a learner-friendly and non-threatening learning tool,¹⁷ TT transforms the learning process into primarily a private affair, and grants the user more freedom to explore. It makes available a relatively large number of combinations of tasks, and its on-line help, tutorial, and context sections can be used outside the context of Tiger sessions. Students can select what to study and have full responsibility for these choices, irrespective of levels of competence between individual students. The apparent satisfaction of our students as to the purpose to which TT was adapted shows that in this respect we did not waste our and their time.

Autonomy/ learner control

The use of CALL within the curriculum is compatible with recent debates on resource-based learning, distance learning, and learning technology. Constructivism has stressed the active role of the learner in knowledge acquisition and comprehension¹⁸ and the efficiency of learner autonomy and control.¹⁹ Control reduces learner passivity, increases receptivity to language, and boosts the self-confidence of learners.²⁰ Similarly at Leicester, TT enabled our self-directed learners to have voluntary access to on-line task-based and goal-oriented practice material and support tools, and monitor their progress. Results show that it has increased their perception of their individual needs and learning strategies, and has improved their competence by restoring time management to them. Although there was not enough time to conduct a summative evaluation of TT, their teacher-assessed written assignments were on the whole of good quality, and it seems that a large amount of thought and concentration went into them. In that respect the experience was positive.

Interactivity and second language acquisition

The consensus in research about CAL is that its efficiency must be attributed to interactivity.²¹ The importance that SLA theory lays upon interaction and negotiation of meaning is well known.²² On a cognitive level, multimedia enables the learners to ‘notice’ differences between the nature of the language input and that of the language they are producing. It is by insisting on those differences that language gains occur.²³

Our own students' motivation and assiduity as far as this activity was concerned can be explained first by the novelty effect that new technologies produce. The fun element in CAL increases interest and produces gains in the efficiency of the learning. The experiment also confirms that instantly-available on-line support features and feedback motivate attendance and make the input more accessible and intelligible. In addition, repeatability helps ‘noticing’ and facilitates understanding. By their very nature, computers never get tired or impatient and know no time restriction. But this, of course, can be said of all new programmes that involve new technologies.

However, it is interesting to note that students' criticisms were extremely homogenous for such a small group. Their complaints were realistic: the limitations of the software are detrimental to the learning processes; they increase frustration and demotivate the learners. If it is learner-friendly, it is not exactly practical, nor attractive. In addition, the feedback the software can provide does not amount to self-assessment of individual results. It is not spontaneous, and there is no scoring system.

It is interesting, however, that none of our students remarked upon the conventional, dry nature of the assignments they were asked to work on. Yet it is now clear to us that the format of the tasks ignores the immense possibilities and flexibility offered by the technology. Our mistake was to rely too much on the traditional linear, pen-and-paper approach, instead of looking for methods that make full use of multimedia.

Our use of TT did not verify claims made for it as to voluntary self-directed learning either: on the whole, our students all said that they used TT as a modular course requirement, and never out of their initiative. The motivation which we stressed above seems in fact to be a minor factor, linked to the novelty of the method rather than to the

interest it promotes. As the project evolved throughout both semesters, the reluctance of our students to use the program increased spontaneously. This reluctance amongst students have in fact already been commented upon elsewhere.²⁴

Transferable skills

Autonomous language learning prepares the students for life-long training and continuing education. In the days of TQA and Dearing, promoting IT skills within the context of Transferable Personal skills should equip our students with skills highly valued by the employment market. Even the computer-phobias in our group recognised the importance of practising their IT skills. Some learned to use the campus network and e-mail for the first time.

Conclusion

In terms of language production, the objectives underlying our methodology in adapting TT to the second year modular written language course were more or less met. The software is an efficient language learning tool and positively affects the learning strategies and transferable skills of the users. Whether it improves their knowledge considerably better than traditional methodologies remains to be seen.

There is still quite a lot of resistance to CAL amongst students. It is not always clear whether the activity and the tasks themselves, dislike of computers, or the experimental nature of the project was the main cause of their reluctance. Beyond the difficulties brought about by our diverting TT from its original use, the lack of attraction of the interface,²⁵ and the intrinsic limitations of TT are undoubtedly further reasons for it.

The way forward for us will be to develop more attractive, multiple-tasks multimedia technology which involves the Internet, as we have begun to do with first-year students. But, as always, this requires that pragmatic issues of resourcing and support be resolved. Moreover, it must always be made clear that CALL is best seen as a resource and not to replace teachers.

Footnotes

1. Brett (1998): 82; Dickinson (1998)
2. Tame, Recall, no 10, March 1997: 6
3. Garrett (1991): 75
4. Kidd (1997); Brett (1998)
5. See also Small, in Recall Newsletter, no 12, October 1997: 5
6. Topol (1998): 36
7. Brett (1998): 81
8. Doug Thompson (April 1996), in Jenny Parsons, Recall Newsletter no 7, February 1996: 3

9. The authoring process and userfriendliness of TT have already been well-discussed in Holmes, Recall Newsletter, no 12, October 1997: 3-4
10. Pusack and Otto (1984); Lyman-Hager and Davies (1996)
11. Fox, M., Holder, J.D., Weaver, M. (1998): 67; Holme (1998)
12. see also Butt (1990)
13. Esch (1995), 5; Fox, J. (1990): 123; Fox, M., Holder, J.D., Weaver, M. (1998): 69
14. Burgess, (1990): 11
15. Dickinson (1997); Brett (1998): 88
16. see also Small, Recall Newsletter 12, October 1997: 5
17. See also Krashen (1985)
18. Brett (1998): 83
19. Self-directed learners “(i.e. able to determine their own language objectives, choose their own ways of achieving these, and evaluate their own progress)” [Ellis (1994): 516] are for Brett better learners because they can “clarify and confirm their understanding.” [Brett (1998): 83] Because learner autonomy and responsibility for their learning are in is eyes the keys to communication, [Brett (1998): 81] multimedia environments are ideal tools in language learning. [Brett (1998): 84] see also Duffy and Jonassen - in Hare, Recall Newsletter no 11, June 97: 3
20. Monteith, M.&R. (1993): 156
21. Romiszowski (1986); Topol (1998): 35
22. In SLA theory comprehension and therefore language acquisition are made possible through clarification of information and negotiation of meaning (i.e. strategies such as confirmation and comprehension checks). [Pica and Doughty (1986)] Pica has also suggested that access to language forms occurs through interaction, and makes comprehension possible. Brett believes that multimedia offers an ideal environment to provide both input and mediation simultaneously, thus promoting individual understanding through the freedom of manipulation it grants. [Brett (1998): 86] On the importance of interaction as part of the learning process, see also Romiszowski (1986); Topol (1998): 35.
23. Schmidt (1990)
24. Debski (1998): 54; Small, Recall Newsletter, no 12, October 1997
25. Stenton (1998)

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