

## **It needn't be CALL-or-nothing: A case of computers as partners not managers in a multimedia teaching kit**

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### **Abstract**

This article reports on a multimedia response to a clear shift in the pedagogical demands of foreign language teaching at the university level in the face of inescapable budget-driven rationalisation and restructuring.

### **The teaching and learning environment**

The excerpt reproduced below from a handout for students in beginner French at the University of Wollongong is an attempt to confront them from the outset with the stark realities of the time constraints of their course.

Introductory French I is an Autumn Session subject for which students have 6 hours of class in each of the 13 weeks of the session. This is a total of 78 hours of class: roughly the equivalent of one 5-day week of 16-hour days. Even if you were to spend this amount of time in France, surrounded by native speakers and having to survive in the language, you would have to use the time extremely wisely and well if you were to emerge from the experience with a sound grasp of basic listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

Learning French as a foreign language --- that is, with little or no contact with the language available outside of the classroom --- requires a great deal of planning and work on the part of both student and teacher.

The following calculation highlights the need for lecturers and students to make the most of class time during the semester:

$$\frac{\text{amount of time in class } 78 \text{ hours (13 weeks, 6 hours per week)}}{\text{amount of waking time } 2920 \text{ hours (6 months, 16 hours per day)}} = \frac{1}{37.4}$$

i.e. over 6 months, for every hour of formal instruction there are nearly forty spent in a linguistic 'wilderness' as far as exposure to the French language is concerned.

It becomes somewhat alarming when one considers that the pattern of six hours per week of class contact on which these sobering figures are based was established in a more affluent era when the labour-intensive nature of language teaching was acknowledged by differential staffing formulae that permitted relatively high contact hours and relatively small classes. In institutions where that practice has not already been abandoned, it is under increasing threat. Under the type of restructuring generated by the industrialisation of tertiary education and budgetary stringency that characterised the nineties in Australia, Modern Language programs are, to survive, increasingly constrained to conform to the same patterns of staff-student ratios and hours of face-to-face teaching as subjects such

as English, History or Sociology. Only the elite or the ingenuous could pretend that, within a decade, we could not have arrived at the logical end position of the current trend: three hours of lectures per week, with no upper limit on class size, and any civilisation and literature components deemed to be core elements being somehow woven into the fabric of what has to date been essential 'language' subjects: i.e. more students, more content, and half the teaching time.

Student requirements, theories of foreign language learning, and relevant teaching approaches have also continued to evolve during this time. There has been an entirely desirable reshaping of the envelope of the foreign language class to accommodate such things as constructivist approaches, a recognition of the concept of language acquisition as well as formal learning, and an emphasis on functional day-to-day spoken communication. Each new idea can only enhance learning if it is translated into student activity. Unfortunately, the fact that an idea is new and relevant does not mean that established practices, though by definition 'old', are irrelevant. The result is intense competition between activities for class time, and pressure to reform, to streamline and to prioritise.

As is commonly the case with 'environmental' shifts, change at Wollongong, although inexorable, has been gradual. For a number of years, we have been endeavouring to free up as much class time as possible for activities that are not easily conducted outside. Examples include presentation and explanation of new material, quizzing, guided speaking activities such as simulations and role-plays, exploitation of audio and video documents, running through homework, monitored conversation, discussion, and other communicative activities. Early stages in this process involved consigning many listening and reading comprehension activities, as well as free written expression, to take-home assignments. A further breakthrough was achieved with the development of an extensive set of computer-based grammar review and maintenance exercises (McCarthy, 1996). It is of little use to banish an activity from the classroom if in doing so one makes more work for students or reduces their chance of making progress. The computer-based grammar activities achieved the dual goals of freeing up class time and enhancing learning by allowing all students to work on these exercises outside of class, at their own pace, regardless of aptitude, proficiency, confidence, motivation, or background. The creation of this resource also made it reasonable for teachers to expect students to have mastered a specific language feature at a given stage of the course.

## **Class size, contact hours and pedagogy**

In the face of an imperative to have language classes operating with similar staff-student ratios to other humanities subjects, painful choices have to be made. Despite the obvious drawbacks, it was considered preferable, for the sake of students, to maintain face-to-face teaching hours and sacrifice tutorial-size classes rather than to attempt to cling to small group teaching and accept a progressive reduction in face-to-face contact for the students. Classes now typically contain between 50 and 60 students, and there is a clear and unavoidable impact on teaching methodology.

A lecture theatre does not lend itself to simulation and role-play activities either 'topographically' or in terms of student-student, student-teacher interaction.

The teacher addressing a question to a single student at a time (or engaging in any other form of one-on-one speaking) while the rest of the class looks on is extraordinarily inefficient both in terms of quality and quantity of communication, even in a class of 20. To begin with, in that scenario, there is a conspicuous and potentially threatening imbalance of power and language proficiency between the two interlocutors. And there is the further intimidation of knowing that there are 19 potentially critical observers. They may be academically critical, personally critical, or disinterested — whatever the case, the ambiance is markedly and disconcertingly different from that of typically casual conversation. If the student is not intimidated, proficient and responds appropriately, the exercise is of little benefit other than having allowed one student to rehearse something they were already capable of, and 19 others the chance to observe (or not), monitor (or not) and correct their potential response (or not), depending on their inclination. If the student is tongue-tied or does not possess the linguistic skills to respond appropriately, several options are possible. The teacher, sensing the interlocutor's embarrassment, may pass on immediately to another student. The first student has learnt nothing, and felt uncomfortable; the 19 others may or may not have rehearsed a response in their minds, but have not had a chance to express themselves and have received no feedback on the appropriateness of any response they may have formulated. If the student responds inappropriately and is prompted or given constructive feedback, it takes longer and will presumably be of benefit. But there will always be a good proportion of the remaining students for whom the feedback provided is irrelevant or incomprehensible.

## **The design challenge**

The materials that are the subject of this paper, and which we have called 'En tête-à-tête', represent the author's response to what he considered the most conspicuous of the remaining challenges in the upgrading-downsizing imperative confronting the French Program: the need to increase students' opportunities, within the constraints imposed by the institution, to practise speaking skills of the type required in day-to-day communication.

The following are some of the more significant considerations that had to be addressed in the course of development.

- The materials must allow the teacher, in the formal context of the lecture theatre and with virtually no upper limit on the number of students, to avoid following what might be considered the line of least resistance and regressing to the counter-communicative pattern of teacher–speak/student–listen.
- The material must be linguistically graded and relevant to the type of day-to-day communication whose mastery is one of the contemporary students' main objectives in learning a foreign language.
- The resource must be presented in a form that supports both classwork and private study.
- The resource must have an audio component providing students with spoken models to which they can refer at will.
- The solution must be technologically realistic and not have any major resource implications for the institution.

- The medium chosen for a given activity should be the one most appropriate to the learning/teaching task. The temptation should be resisted simply to use technology for technology's sake.
- The content must be finite and manageable. University beginner language courses are generally acknowledged by practitioners to be both time-consuming and academically demanding. It is, in the author's opinion, unfair for teachers to purposely define linguistic objectives in such vague terms that students can never be entirely sure that they have mastered the material. Regular high attrition rates amongst well-motivated students are testimony to the fact that these courses are hard enough without students living in fear of failing because examiners throw curly questions at them in the form of items testing mastery of skills that technically fall within the scope of the course, but which they have never been given the opportunity or resources to practise. A no-traps approach to a substantial proportion of an oral examination provides reassurance and motivation for students as they prepare. This consideration becomes more important as tertiary education comes under increasing pressure to provide a clear definition of course objectives and assessment procedures, for grading to be transparent and for staff to be accountable for the marks awarded.
- As a meaning, not form is the key consideration in communication, provision must be made for a degree of structural variation (but not inaccuracy) in student responses.
- The materials must improve the management of student and teacher time, and optimise the opportunity for student participation in class. In a class of 50, this of necessity involves methodological compromise. Something approximating to authentic situational communication is nevertheless to be considered better than the elimination or strangulation of any attempt at such activity.

### **The materials: In the classroom**

As it is considered important to allow students to interact with another human being who is monitoring and responding to what they are saying and is capable of offering a degree of correction, the creation of a one-on-one classroom speaking activity was a high priority. It took the form of a set of 300 pairs of cue cards (see Fig. 1: 'En tête-à-tête' Specimen Cue Cards). Even the most intricate configuration of the most expensive and advanced hardware and software available would not be able to provide a substitute for the simplicity, flexibility, portability, and humanity of this activity.

Card-cued paired speaking activities allow all students to be involved at one time, in speaking, listening and monitoring, providing authoritative (i.e. with the assurance provided by the model responses supplied on their card) feedback to each other in their idiom, at their own pace, with the possibility of calling on the teacher (whose role in this situation is rather that of monitor and resource) at any time. If students do waste time, it is because they choose to do so. The larger the class, the greater the economy of time.

Each pair of cards provides:

- A cue or series of cues in English which the speaker is required to communicate to his/her partner at the appropriate point in the dialogue;
- The text of what the speaker is most likely to hear from his/her interlocutor at each stage of the dialogue. Wherever possible, structural variants consistent with the

expected level of students' linguistic proficiency are supplied. This reinforces the idea that meaning can be communicated through a range of forms.

All items contain speech acts likely to be of use in everyday communication. Because each act contains its own unique and inextricable blend of notions, structures, functions, situations, grammar, register, and vocabulary, no attempt was made to grade or organise items by any one of those discrete categories. They were simply ranked in three levels of difficulty according to global linguistic complexity.

Work on sets of five or ten cards can be slotted in at virtually any time. Setting up the activity takes only the time required to distribute the cards.

The pattern established over the past three years has been: the lecturer runs through the subset of dialogues on an overhead, making any comments or answering any questions raised by students in the process; cards are distributed to students; students do the speaking activity, reversing roles the second time through; the students return the cards to the lecturer. Different patterns of use would no doubt be appropriate in different environments.

An inventory of the language domains encompassed by the material is provided in Appendix 1.

## **The materials: Beyond the classroom**

A CD ROM was compiled containing text and audio versions of all 300 dialogues (see Fig. 2: 'En tête-à-tête' computer-support screen dumps). Students select the level they wish to practise, and navigate their way to any item in that level. For each item, the computer displays the full set of cues. By clicking, students can: play the whole dialogue, play individual lines of the dialogue (and variants where applicable), display/conceal the full text of the dialogue in French, or display/conceal individual lines and variants.

Also, students are supplied with a full printed set of cue cards and responses to enable them to continue pair-work outside the class or to use for private study purposes.

## **Outcomes**

It would be pretentious, in the absence of a complex, large-scale, statistically-based research project, to make authoritative claims concerning the relative merits of the approach outlined in this article. And given that the approaches it is replacing are no longer practicable in the present institutional framework, it would be difficult to implement or to justify such research. At a practical level, however, the 'En tête-à-tête' materials work. Students are keen to use them in class, they work at their own pace, help one another, make regular of using the computer-based materials in the private-study laboratory, and use the take-home print materials for private study. Performance in cued speaking and other speaking activities in the end-of-session oral exam is at least as satisfactory as under previous systems, as is the students' proficiency and progress in conversation and free speaking as they move to their second and later years of language study.

## Concluding remarks

The 'En tête-à-tête' materials are computer-supported rather than computer-based. They were generated in response to student needs in a changing institutional environment, and they are just one component of a multifaceted language course. They were devised against a background of awareness of past and present methodological developments and linguistic perspectives, but are not bound to any of them. The classroom activity involves two-way communication between lecturer and student and between individual students — in some phases, the communication is in the language, in others, it is about the language. The computer 'speaks' to students consistently, with model French and endless patience.

Most importantly, the materials are genuine 'multimedia': teacher voice, overhead transparencies, possible use of the blackboard (e.g. for explanation), cue cards, student voices, study sheets... and computer support.<sup>2</sup> The computer component offers electronic text, audio, and navigational flexibility.

The word 'multimedia' to have evolved in the way that it has testified to its healthy semantic serviceability and the fluid state of the domain of communication technology. In the case of 'multimedia', however, the four different meanings must be recognised as having parallel existence. The addition of a new meaning does not indicate that the existing ones have become obsolete, and it should not be allowed to mask them. Just as a language is impoverished if later meanings of a word hijack earlier ones (the classic example is the word 'gay'), so foreign language learning would suffer if, in the minds of teachers and materials designers, 'of or pertaining to several types of media' were to allow the meaning of 'media' to be restricted to those that can be contained in 'a computer system or program'. Computers are at their most influential when they are flexible, inclusive partners that can be called into service as required. And materials development and student achievement can only be enhanced if teachers and designers can resist the temptation to think in terms of CALL-or-nothing.

## Notes

1. The CALL component of the materials could not have been realised without the considerable design and programming expertise of Ray Stace, who invested much time and effort into the project over a long period.
2. The term 'multimedia' is very much a child of our generation. It does not feature, for example, (even as a term following the prefix 'multi-') in the 'revised and completely reset' fifth edition of the Concise Oxford Dictionary (1964) in which, it is claimed, "developments in technical and scientific subjects are reflected by the inclusion of words like 'feedback'". The 1989 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary lists the earliest instance of its use as 1962. The 1987 (2nd Revised) edition of the Macquarie Dictionary lists two meanings: 1. of, pertaining to, or involving several types of media; 2. of or pertaining to a personality who is or claims to be well-known through several types of media.

The 1997 (3rd) edition of the Macquarie adds two further meanings: 3. combining text, sound, and video; 4. a computer system or program which incorporates a plurality of elements such as sound, graphics, animation, text, and video.

## References

- McCarthy, B. N. (1996). 'Fully Integrated CALL: Mission Accomplished', *ON-CALL - The Australian Journal of Computers and Language Education*, 10 (2), 15-28; also published in *ReCALL - Journal of the CTI Centre for Modern Languages*, University of Hull, England, in association with EUROCALL, 8 (2), 1996, 17-34.
- McCarthy, B. N., and Stace, R. (2000). *En tête-à-tête: Situational Dialogues for French Beginners* (audio CD ROM, plus pairwork cue card masters), Wollongong, Visa Software.

## Appendix 1

Inventory of 'En tête-à-tête' language domains

- identifying self, identifying others, requesting information regarding identity (name, age, address, nationality, profession)
- spelling aloud
- numbers (age, address, phone numbers, years, etc)
- Information-seeking questions: qui est-ce, qu'est-ce que c'est, comment, quand, à quelle heure, où, pourquoi, en quelle année, combien, quel
- telephone contact and conversation
- introducing yourself and others, being introduced
- destinations (places, countries - à, à la, à l', au, aux, en)
- greeting and leave-taking
- date, days, months
- invitations, offers, acceptance, refusal
- permission
- expressions of quantity (indefinite articles, partitive articles, beaucoup de, 1 kilo de, 3 paquets de, etc)
- making rendez-vous and appointments
- tastes and preferences
- holiday plans
- countries and nationalities
- sports and pastimes
- food and drink
- asking and telling the time
- negation (neqñas, neqñilus, neqëamais, neqñersonne, neqóien, neq pas encore)
- thank you, you're welcome
- wishing good evening, weekend, holidays, etc
- giving orders
- physical description of self and others

- colours
- contradiction (mais siq)
- indicating position (sur, sous etc; à gauche de, à coté de, etc)
- floors of buildings (au rez-de-chaussée, au sous-sol, au Xème étage)
- real estate - description of houses, apartments, rooms, location
- height and weight
- possession (à qui; à Jacques; mon, ma mes, etc; le livre de Pierre, etc)
- ordinal numbers
- attracting attention
- interrupting
- apologising
- choosing/negotiating meal choice
- pour lui, avec eux, etc (disjunctive pronouns after prepositions)
- me too, me neither
- expressing admiration (n.b Quel que)
- narrating daily activities (present and past)
- shopping, prices, quantities, goods
- train travel arrangements
- describing the way things were (use of imperfect tense)
- clothing (items, fit, size)
- seasons
- flight times
- weather
- tout le, toutes les, etc.
- giving directions
- comparisons
- reporting speech
- pronoun objects
- parts of the body
- seeking/giving opinions
- family relationships
- future tense
- situating events in time (the day before yesterday, yesterday, today, tomorrow, last week, next Tuesday, etc)
- seeking news of someone
- frequency (d'habitude, souvent, deux fois, etc)
- school/university subjects and faculties
- nouns and corresponding verbs
- duration of time in the past, present, and future
- reflexive verbs

<p><b>Card 22 - Speaker A</b>          You point someone out to the person with you. Ask them if they know that boy. [Hint: Use the 'tu' form]          Oui, je le connais.          Oui, je connais ce garçon.          Ask his name.          Il s'appelle Robert Picon.          Ask where he lives.          Il habite à Rouen.</p>	<p><b>Card 22 - Speaker B</b>          Tu connais ce garçon?          Est-ce que tu connais ce garçon?          Indicate that you know him.          Comment s'appelle-t-il?          Il s'appelle comment?          Tell the person his name (Robert Picon).          Où est-ce qu'il habite?          Où habite-t-il?          Il habite où?          Say he lives in Rouen.</p>
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Fig. 1: 'En tête-à-tête' specimen cue cards

<p><b>Card 239 - Speaker A</b>          Explain the following advertisement to the other person. [Note: Use full sentences]:          LOUE          appart. 2 p.          4e ét.          près Gare de l'Est          7.000F/mois</p>	<p><b>Card 239 - Speaker B</b>          Il y a un appartement de deux pièces à louer.          Il y a un F2 à louer.          C'est près de la Gare de l'Est, au quatrième étage.          On demande sept mille francs par mois.          Le loyer est de sept mille francs par mois.          Le loyer mensuel est de sept mille francs.</p>
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Figure 2: Sample 'En tête-à-tête' computer-support screen dumps

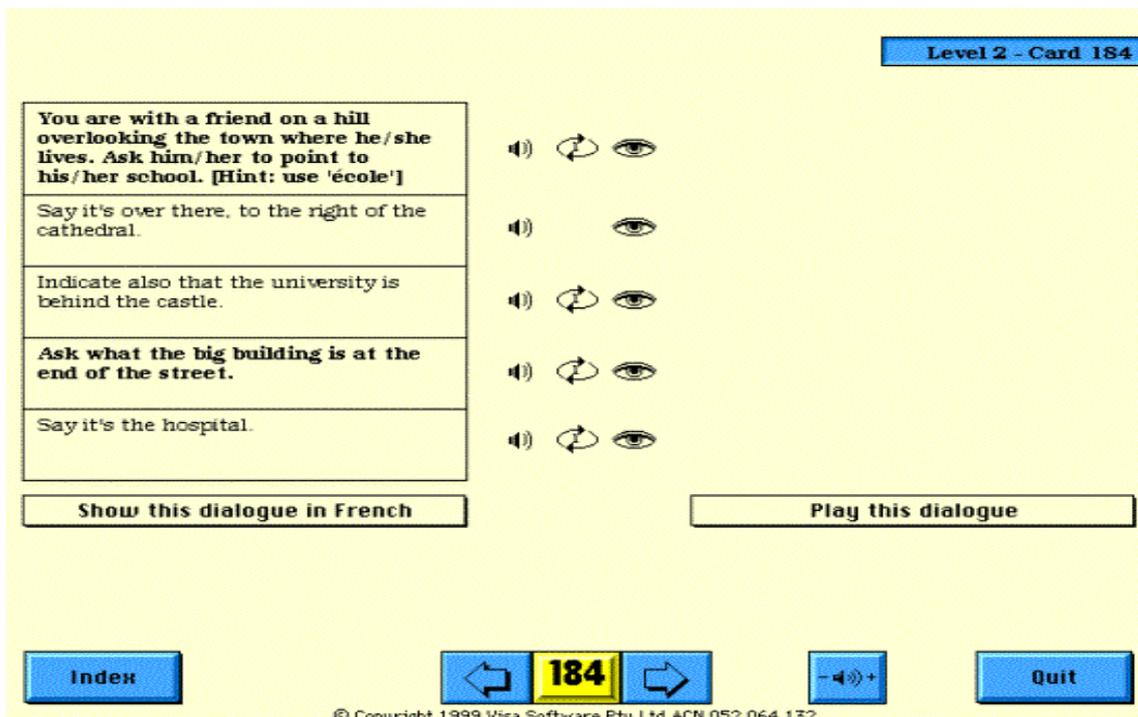


Figure 2.1: screen dump of 'En tête-à-tête' Level 2 - card 184

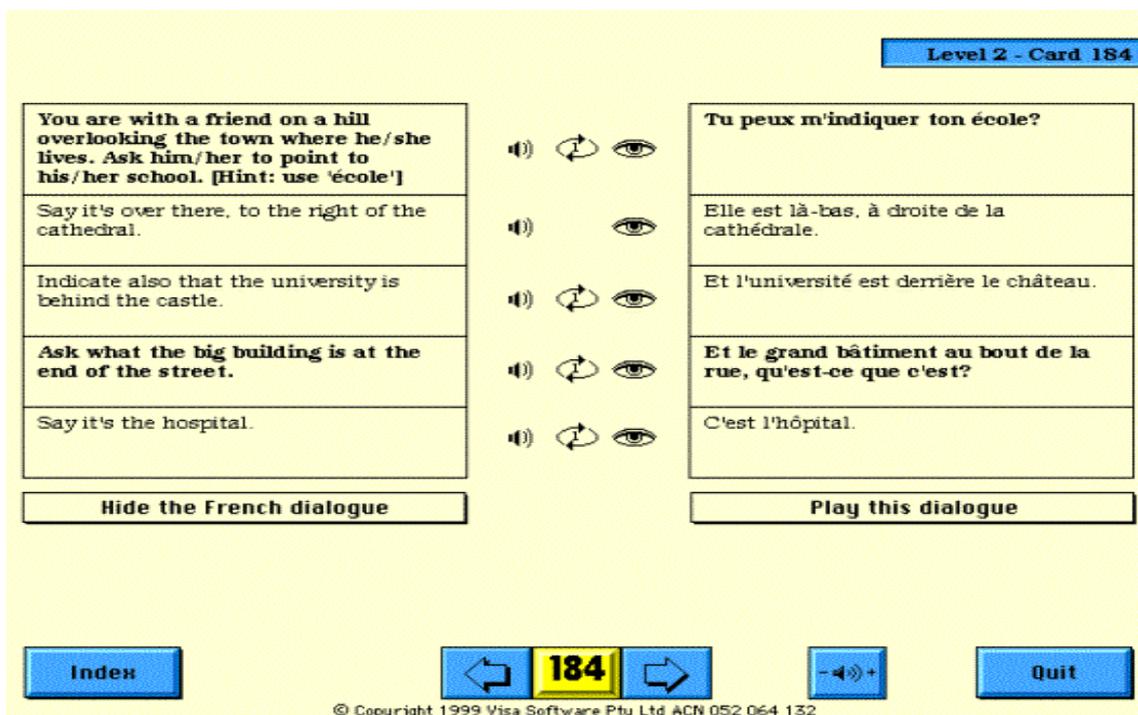


Figure 2.2: screen dump of 'En tête-à-tête' card 184 with text of French displayed

**Level 2 - Card 184**

<b>You are with a friend on a hill overlooking the town where he/she lives. Ask him/her to point to his/her school. [Hint: use 'école']</b>	  	<b>Elle est où, ton école?</b>
Say it's over there, to the right of the cathedral.	 	Elle est là-bas, à droite de la cathédrale.
Indicate also that the university is behind the castle.	  	Et la fac est derrière le château.
<b>Ask what the big building is at the end of the street.</b>	  	<b>C'est quoi, le grand bâtiment au bout de la rue?</b>
Say it's the hospital.	  	Ça, c'est l'hôpital.

**Hide the French dialogue**                      **Play this dialogue**

**Index**                       **184**                                             **Quit**

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Figure 2.3: screen dump of 'En tête-à-tête' card 184 showing selected variants