Slideshow Dialogues for Junior Secondary French Language Classes

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Abstract

In the quest to encourage teachers to support authentic learning experiences with computer applications realistic stories must be told of those who have tried, particularly those who have taken their first steps. This is one such story of a young French language teacher, Helen (fictitious name), taking her first tentative steps at supporting a classroom learning activity with computer applications. After a lengthy period of planning and preparing Helen successfully implemented a relatively sophisticated application using slideshow dialogues. This required a number of obstacles and difficulties to be overcome both before and during the implementation.

Keywords: K-12 teachers, using computers, language teachers

Introduction

As computers have evolved into the powerful relatively low-cost technology available today the arguments for their use in schools to support learning have become more insistent (Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning, 2000). However, there is still considerable debate over how computers should be used in schools (Riel, 1998). Many schools (e.g. The George Lucas Educational Foundation, 2001) have adopted the use of portable computing technologies to varying degrees to provide the ubiquitous access that has been the "holy grail" for the last two decades (Hill, Reeves, & Heidemeier, 2000). Australia is recognised internationally as an early leader in the adoption of, and research into, the use of portable computers in schools (e.g. Rowe, 1993). I have conducted a substantial amount of research since1993 on the use of portable computer systems in schools (Newhouse, 1997).

When discussing applications of computer technology to education the question must always be asked, "What educational problem(s) needs to be addressed?". Then if a computer-supported solution is appropriate this must be implemented in a manner consistent with current pedagogical understandings and other components of the learning environment. There is no doubt that the most commonly held set of beliefs about learning, well supported by research, are those bearing the label of constructivism. As the Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning (2000, p. 10) put it, "the contemporary view of learning is that people construct new knowledge and understandings based on what they already know and believe". Further, there is an assumption that learning occurs within a physical and psycho-social environment usually labelled as the learning environment (Fraser, 1994). If the aim is to offer new learning opportunities or to improve how current learning activities are implemented, then the

overall effectiveness of learning environments and episodes is of paramount concern, not whether they are more effective with or without computers.

One of the most important ways in which computers can be used in schools is to support learning in the Vygotskian sense (Vygotsky, 1978) by providing scaffolding tools (Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning, 2000). These tools may support student learning in a variety of ways including the provision of varied opportunities for the expression of ideas, understandings, and skills through the development of multimedia materials (Nikolova, 2002). This paper describes and analyses one such situation where computer slideshow, graphic and audio tools were used to provide students with a creative opportunity for expression of learning in French as a foreign language.

Background to the story

During 2001 I commenced working with a local private school to assist their teachers in developing the use of computers, particularly portable computers, to support teaching and learning processes. During the year this involved surveying all teachers, selecting and interviewing a set of teachers for classroom support (Helen was one of these), supporting these teachers with planning and classroom implementation, providing professional development seminars, and developing a project web-site.

The aims of the project were:

1. For teachers at the school to facilitate an increased (both quantitative and qualitative) student use of computers to support learning across all learning areas and at all stages of schooling.
2. To maximise the benefits in the future of the provision of student-owned portable computers.
3. To provide the school's leadership and the wider education community with more information on the use of student-owned portable computers in schools.

The French activity

Within this broader project, Helen indicated that she wanted to develop an activity she had seen at a conference for her Year 8 (age 13 years) French language students. Initially, this was planned for Term Three and then early Term Four. It was finally successfully implemented in the last week of Term Four. As this was the first time Helen had implemented computer support for learning on this scale she had found that there was a lot of planning involved and that she needed to become familiar with many technologies (e.g. digital camera, audio-input).

With a little help from myself and technical support staff at the school, Helen successfully planned and implemented a three 40-minute sessions computer-based activity "Slideshow Dialogues" and also assisted two other French teachers and their classes to do the same. I observed the three lessons for Helen's class and observed students working in one of the other classes.

The students worked in pairs to design and create an electronic slideshow using Powerpoint to showcase their French language skills. Their slideshow had to consist of five action/dialogue slides designed to tell a story about a scenario. Each slide included a photograph displaying the action of the dialogue that was presented both in text and audio. The students could use props and themselves in the photographs.

Supporting Documentation for Students

The students were given a double-sided page with a detailed set of instructions (refer to Appendix A). In addition, the students were provided with two templates to support their planning: "Template for Drafting of Action Slides", and "Template for Written Dialogue". The "Action Slides" template was on a double-sided page with space on the left-hand side to sketch a graphic for the slide and lines on the right-hand side to write instructions for setting up the action for the photograph for the slide. The "Dialogue" template was a double-sided page with lines for each slide to write the dialogue that would be both typed on the slide and recorded orally.

Helen also prepared a peer evaluation sheet on which students were asked to rate the presentations they saw using between one and five "smiley faces" under the headings "Language", "Content", "Met Criteria", "Presentation", and "Total".

Teacher's planning documents

To support the other two teachers and herself Helen prepared two planning documents: "Designated Numbers for Each Group's Photos", and "Teachers' Notes". The first document was a single sheet with the numbers 1-6, 7-12, etc. on the left with space to right the group name on the right. This was prepared because the class would need to use only one digital camera with the images downloaded in batch to a shared server. The "Teachers' Notes" document listed the required resources, the process involved in capturing, downloading, and inserting the digital photographs, and Powerpoint instructions (creating, inserting pictures and inserting sound). The resources required were: class sets of laptop computers, microphones, portable hubs, digital cameras (one per class), and all the photocopied support documents.

The school had to purchase a class-set of microphones to use with portable computers which indicated that none of the other teachers had used audio recording with the computers.

Observations

I worked with Helen in her classroom for the three 40 minute sessions to both support her and observe what happened.

Session One: Planning

Helen provided the instructions sheet detailing project requirements and processes and discussed these with the class. At this early stage, one student indicated that he wanted to use his digital camera at home. Helen granted permission for him to try this. The students were organised into pairs and then discussed overall concepts with their partners to decide upon a theme or scenario. Then they started to write on the supplied planning templates (screen design & dialogue on separate sheets).

All pairs had no difficulty developing ideas and started writing on the templates. However, some were confused about what type of information needed to go on each of the two templates, "Dialogue" and "Action". Some tended to write the dialogue on the template designed for a display sketch and action instructions. Also, a problem was raised concerning the use of French accents when typing. Helen said she would find out but that they could be left out until she had done so.

During this session, Helen was able to move around to encourage language ideas. By the end of the 40-minute session, a few pairs had almost finished the plans while some had spent too long on detailed drawings. They were instructed to finish the planning by the next session (the next day) either using lunch-time or meeting after school.

Session Two: Photographs and Start Slideshow

Two digital cameras had been booked for the 2 classes working on the activity and timetabled at the same time. One camera could not be located so the class I was involved with did not have a camera. Helen decided to get the students to locate and download suitable pictures using the internet, or use clip-art. This did not seem to concern the students, no one seemed upset at not using their photographs. They all used the Google search engine very efficiently. One pair of students had done the whole project overnight using their digital camera but was having difficulty transferring the Powerpoint file to school. They had tried emailing the file but it was too large as was the case for floppy disk which was the only removable storage available to them.

As each group completed the layout and graphics/text of their slides Helen gave them a microphone to start voice recording of their dialogue. Background noise in class made recording difficult but by adjusting the settings and cupping their hands around the microphone recording was successful. Only one pair of students did not know how to record sound. There were no significant problems with computers or networking during this session.

Helen was twice called out to help the other class that was on at the same time. This class had a digital camera and had downloaded all the photos to the shared drive to allow students to insert them into their slideshows. This occurred remarkably quickly and without any technical difficulties.

Session Three: Add audio dialogue

All the students started work straight away with computers and microphones to complete their slideshows. However, problems occurred — two computers would not boot (one student who was finished worked on this problem), the 2 students who had finished at home were still having problems emailing their work to school as one slide per file (their file was considerably larger than that for the other pairs). Another pair had lost their work because another teacher had instructed them to wipe their shared drive workspace

(personal storage on F: drive) for the end of the year without realising they still had work to keep. Generally, motivation seemed to have waned a little. It was clear to Helen that there would not be time for the planned peer evaluation and therefore she asked them to put their final products into the classes shared directory or to email it to her (she would send back some feedback).

In the other classes about half the students had finished and therefore no peer evaluation occurred either. In Helen's class, about 3 pairs had finished everything, most of the others were still completing the sound recording. One student did it all by himself and had finished — he had stuck with his plan and was not concerned at not having his photographs. Most students seemed to have stuck with their plans.

Helen was happy with the results and said that she was now keen to do more using computers. She felt that the activity had enhanced their language learning. The fact that the students were almost all self-sufficient in ICT skills allowed her to concentrate on language. She and the students had readily overcome a number of difficulties that are always likely to occur when using computer technology. The lack of a digital camera, while competently overcome, highlighted the need for the school to invest in more cameras to allow either each teacher to have one or have one to share amongst the French teachers. It was disappointing that the students had not had the opportunity to evaluate each other's work. This activity needed another session for evaluation which would have been possible if the activity had not been left to the last days of the school year. However, I am sure that with her newly found confidence in the future Helen would organise such activities earlier in the year as critical components of her programme. The important result was that she had successfully implemented the activity and now could confidently plan other activities to include computer support.

Conclusions

Since the early 1990s, I have conducted classroom-based research aimed at investigating the impact on learning environments of implementing computer support for learning, and on factors affecting how computer support is implemented. This has led me to develop a model to explain the relationships involved (Newhouse, 1998). This model focuses on the perceptions of teachers and their actions within the environment. The centrality of the role of the teacher in the effectiveness of computer support for learning in well known (Becker, Ravitz, & Wong, 1999). Almost always it is the teacher who decides to use computers in a learning activity, even where the computers are controlled and/or owned by the students. Generally, I have found that the degree to which teachers facilitate the use of computers to support learning is determined by a balance of pressures, or forces, and the presence and size of barriers, or obstacles, to be overcome. Of the forces teachers' experience, some may encourage them to facilitate computer use and others discourage facilitation of computer use. When combined, they provide a resultant force that could be considered as a measure of the motivation and "energy" level a teacher has towards facilitating computer support. The resultant force will determine the extent (both quantitatively and qualitatively) to which a teacher is likely to implement computer support for learning, barring obstacles, over some time. This extent or level of facilitation is represented by the "energy level" plateaus. To achieve this level of facilitation there is usually a raft of obstacles to overcome, represented by "energy humps" before each level.

This feature of the model is designed to indicate that typically a teacher requires a greater level of motivation, time, and energy to initially overcome the obstacles than to maintain a level of facilitation.

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Appendix A: Student instructions sheet

Aim:	You and your partner are to create a PowerPoint presentation using the language skills you have learned so far in your French course.
Time Frame:	3 periods

Criteria:	In order to successfully complete this project you and your partner need to fulfil the following requirements: Your presentation must comprise of 6 slides — 1 title slide and 5 action/dialogue slides. Each of the five slides must consist of dialogue — both written and recorded, and a photograph displaying the action of the dialogue. Your language/vocabulary is to be appropriate and correct. You may use props or costumes in your photos — keep it simple! The content must be relevant and reflect your learning. Organisation must be sequential and make sense to whoever is viewing it. Use of PowerPoint effect to be kept to a minimum — 1 per slide. Be consistent with your effects — use the same effect throughout. Your presentation must be both suitable and appealing.
What to do:	Day 1: Choose a partner. Decide upon an idea for your script, e.g. introducing people, discussing favourite subjects, birthday party, school etc. You must each write a draft of your dialogue using the template provided. Decide upon the actions that are going to best display your script — each of you write or draw a draft for these i.e. a storyboard, like a cartoon strip, using the same template as above. Rehearse your ideas to discover any problems, and to sort them out by re-drafting. Day 2: Digital photos will be taken of your actions. These photos are to be accessed form your specific class folders on the P Drive (more information will be given to you via your teacher about this process). Using Powerpoint, incorporate the images and the written dialogue onto individual slides. You will be shown how to do this if you are not sure — please ask. Record your dialogue, using a microphone, to accompany the written dialogue for each slide. (To be done in the second half of this lesson, only after you have completed your slide show). Edit your slide show for clarity/appropriateness and correctness of language. Day 3: Do step 9 today (as above), or repeat it if necessary. Present your slideshow to the rest of the class. Evaluate each other's presentations with the evaluation sheet provided.
Hints:	Keep it simple, as this will be most effective. Reveal your text after your recorded voice is heard. Spend more time on the script and dialogue than on the actual look of each slide.

Have fun using the language you have learned this year!

Assessment: Your teacher and your peers will assess your slide shows.