Multimedia and the Acquisition of French: Expanding the Horizons of Language Learning

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At the University of Western Australia (UWA) French is taught to beginners and post-TEE level students with a coordinated programme in the multimedia laboratory. These programmes are designed to focus particularly on the students' speaking and listening skills with some emphasis on developing reading and grammatical skills. The multimedia component of the language programmes has proved notoriously difficult to appeal to students and they generally consider it the least important part of the language learning process. Indeed, it is the first class to be missed when pressure begins to rise as the semester progresses. The programmes in both streams have been redesigned at several intervals using student feedback yet they remain the most unpopular classes for students and teachers alike. SPOT surveys were conducted on both groups at the end of semester one 2001 as well as interviews of the teachers involved in running these classes in order to gain a better understanding of the problems encountered and to explore ways to improve the programme. In this paper, the course will be briefly described and the issues raised by the students and teachers will be analyzed. The discussion will focus on ways to improve the student outcomes of the programme and to allow students to feel they are making a valuable contribution to their language skills by attending these classes.

Introduction

At the University of Western Australia (UWA) French is taught to beginners and post-TEE level students with a coordinated language programme. The basic requirement for beginners' students is that they have not completed TEE French and thus their level can range from no prior knowledge of the language to students who have studied it for some period of time in high school. Post-TEE students have completed five years of study in high school and have passed their TEE French exam. The multimedia programmes have been an integral part of the language learning process and are designed to focus particularly on the students' speaking and listening skills with some emphasis on developing reading and grammatical skills. This component of the language programme has proved notoriously difficult to appeal to students and they generally consider it the least important part of the acquisition of French. The multimedia laboratory in the Faculty of Arts at UWA is well-equipped with state of the art technology and other language classes have achieved a high degree of success with their multimedia programmes. In this paper, the programme will be briefly described and the issues raised by the students and teachers will be explored. The discussion will focus on ways to improve the student outcomes of the course and to allow students to feel they are making a valuable contribution to their language skills by attending these classes.

Methodology

In order to explore the efficacy of the multimedia programmes from the point of view of students, SPOT (Student Perception of Teaching) surveys were conducted on both streams of French classes at the end of semester one 2001 which allowed them to agree or disagree with a number of statements about the course and then provide comments on positive aspects and suggestions for change. At the beginners level 72 students responded to the survey out of a total enrolment of 117 students. For post-TEE level students there were 59 responses out of a group of 83 students. It is significant that the surveys represent only a portion of the students enrolled in French as all teachers reported a drop in numbers as the semester progressed. Presumably the least motivated and most critical students are the ones who withdrew from these classes and thus, their lack of participation in the surveys may distort the results to some extent. In addition to the SPOT surveys, interviews were carried out with the five teachers involved in the programme and they were asked to provide their general impressions of the teaching strategies in the classes and their perceived effectiveness.

Multimedia programme for beginners

At the beginners level, the multimedia programme involves alternate weeks in the computer and audiovisual laboratories. In the computer lab students generally have a cultural experience of France through a CD Rom programme or selected internet sites, exploring French icons such as the Louvre or taking a stroll through the gardens of Paris. Linked to this exercise is a skimming and scanning reading exercise which requires students to understand basic instructions in French, navigate their way around the programme and retrieve varying levels of written French. Following the computer exercise, students spend approximately 20 minutes on computerized grammar problems which mirror the language lectures and tutorials of the week. The grammar component allows students to work at their own pace and the programme displays and explains errors as well as offering the correct answer. In the audiovisual programme students use headphones and follow a series of exercises on tape. In first semester, this section involves listening to and then repeating short dialogues in French, completing short grammar exercises and some aural comprehension. It is up to the individual tutor to expand the exercises and include speaking, pronunciation and any other practice the students need.

Feedback

Feedback from teachers and students reveals a striking correlation with generally positive comments directed towards the computer component of the multimedia programme and negative aspects emphasized in the audiovisual part. Teachers have found that students overwhelmingly enjoy the computer session because of the visual and interactive presentation of aspects of French culture to students. As one teacher described, this part of the computer lab is "informative, extends the students vocabulary-wise and has an element of challenge and discovery about it." There has also been an extremely positive response to the follow-up grammar exercises which allow students to work on individual problems and have the benefit of the teacher present to explain any difficulties. The few students who did not respond positively to the computer lab reported that they found these classes limited in their usefulness because of the difficult reading texts, described by one as being "a bit irrelevant trying to decipher tertiary level French". Others wrote that they found the time taken to navigate their way around the computer plus the frequent technical glitches wasteful and that the Internet exercises were childish. Overall, though, the computer lab appears to have been very successful.

The audiovisual laboratory, however, has drawn extensive criticism from teachers and students alike. Teachers have emphasised the artificial nature of the audiovisual laboratory and the uninspiring material to be presented to students. To some extent there is more room for teachers to encourage participation from students in the audiovisual component, but the exercises themselves provide little opportunity for meaningful communication. Thus, teachers have emphasized the need for greater interaction between students and between teacher and students and have also suggested more focus on pronunciation which seems to appeal to students.

One of the most frequent comments to emerge from the student feedback is their desire to look at more 'everyday' French texts and to learn social and practical French. For many, the ability to speak and communicate with French people is the driving force behind learning the language. In the current beginners programme there is no designated conversation class although speaking is encouraged in other classes from the first day. As Brookfield and Preskill (1999) have pointed out, one of the main reasons for students not to participate in classes is "their sense that the topic of the discussion is removed from their experience, that is it has no meaning or relevance to their lives." (p. 75). One teacher recommended that conversation should be introduced by the end of semester one and it has been previously considered replacing the computer lab with a fortnightly conversation class. A number of students also suggested having a conversation class and more still have emphasized the need for greater interaction and more listening practice. This idea would complement the recommendation that a topic's relevance to everyday life can be illustrated to students by solving "problems that relate theory to practice" and brainstorming "applications of theory to everyday life" (Meyers & Jones, 1993, p. 64). Extrapolated to languages, this clearly demonstrated link between material learned in the language laboratory and its use in everyday life could be of benefit.

One student reported the desire to have the learning objectives made clear although teachers all said they attempted to do this. Beard and Hartley highlight the vital need for a clear and logical connection between key concepts and ideas for effective learning and comment that learning "is better when the material to be learned is personally relevant, and when learners are responsible for their own learning" (Beard & Hartley, 1984, pp. 53-54.). Bertola and Murphy (1994) also highlight this point, stating that students benefit from the teacher clarifying her/his role and demonstrating clearly what is expected of them. They write that "one of the major reasons why groups fail to work, especially at first year level, is that the students do not know what is expected of them." (pp. 6-7).

Multimedia programme for post-TEE students

The multimedia programme for post-TEE students was rewritten for 2001 after feedback from SPOT surveys in 2000. A structural change also occurred with the decision to abandon the computer session of the programme and replace it instead with a fortnightly conversation class. A typical class begins with a song and cloze exercise, followed by a short aural comprehension, some grammar exercises and finishes with a role play or discussion on a set topic. The revamped audiovisual programme was designed specifically to correlate closely with the grammar covered in other classes that week. Students work with headphones and a tape and the individual teacher chooses how to deliver the material. In the conversation classes every student makes a short presentation on a chosen topic some time in the semester and the group is then free to ask questions and explore issues raised. Following the oral

presentation the group then discusses a set topic. Vocabulary is provided each fortnight which students are expected to learn, but its incorporation into the class is left up to the individual teacher.

Feedback

Students and teachers came together to praise the effectiveness of the conversation classes. Particular mention was made of the oral presentations by students which provided them with the opportunity to get to know each other better and ask questions. Teachers also reported that numbers remained much more constant in this class than in the audiovisual classes. Concerns raised by some students included the need for more structure in the class and the problem of some people dominating the conversation and others contributing very little. This class is effectively a combination of students who have completed TEE French and those who finished the beginners' course the previous year. A recurrent criticism by the ex-beginners students is their feeling of timidity and lack of confidence in the presence of post-TEE students who have had 5 years experience of the language compared to their single year. A number of these students suggested separate classes for the 2 streams. Despite the extensive vocabulary provided in the handbook for each session both teachers and students noted that on the whole students did not learn it and it was not effectively incorporated into the class. One student suggested regular vocabulary tests to enforce the acquisition of this new language.

The audiovisual component of the programme still attracted negative comment despite the considerable effort to improve it. Numbers dropped dramatically half-way through the semester and one teacher reported having only 8 regulars out of a class of 20. Another teacher reported that certain grammar points were not grasped by the students and that the multimedia classes are too short to solve these problems in depth. Again the question of more 'real life' material arose with some students wanting greater input from newspapers, magazines, television and especially film. For teachers and students the overwhelming feeling was that the current material is too easy for students and does not contain enough challenge. One student mentioned wanting to use computers and the issue of pronunciation was an important consideration for a number of students.

Discussion

While many positive qualities of the current multimedia programme were highlighted in the surveys conducted, there was an overwhelming feeling that this component of the language learning process is not as effective as it could be. Myers and Jones (1993) point out that the small group setting such as that offered in the multimedia laboratory should allow for greater student participation and for them to "gain confidence in their own learning abilities and the worthiness of their own ideas." (p. 62.) Evidently these programmes need to be looked at in greater detail to enable students to take a more active role in their learning and to feel that the material is of relevance and interest to them.

The most prominent reaction from both the beginners and post-TEE classes is that learning French should be interactive, practical and communicative. Possible recommendations include introducing conversation to the beginners' classes and developing those at the post-TEE level. These classes could be tailored to meet a wide range of student needs with some aimed specifically at role plays and pair work, others at group discussion and still others using authentic material input such as a short magazine article or a film clip to stimulate discussion. Students could then choose the class or classes that appeal to them and in this way, the

different levels of students' confidence and ability in speaking could be catered for. It would also be desirable to include an element of structured pronunciation practice to aid in communication as well as to enhance the input of authentic materials such as newspapers, magazine articles, film and music.

The visual component of the audiovisual class remains largely undeveloped and thus there is considerable scope for improvement in this area. Students consistently requested input from French films and teachers could design an interactive worksheet to make the material directly relevant to the language learning process. As well as improving listening practice with exercises such as gap-fills and aural comprehension, the material could also be utilized as a springboard for group discussion, role plays and other imaginative adaptations such as interviews with the "actors" in the film, played by other students. In order to give the visual component a more contemporary feel, teachers could also use more up-to-date sources such as music videos and clips from the French News.

To make the audio section more relevant, tapes designed specifically to match the language programmes at UWA would be useful, rather than using commercial tapes which tend to be out-dated and unappealing to students. As much as possible it would be beneficial to lift the material in the audio-visual laboratory from the page and to bring it alive with real-life interaction. This class may be better suited to pronunciation practice which the students generally enjoy and to meaningful communication in French between teacher and students and between students themselves. It is desirable to expose them to a wide variety of French accents and thus, it could be an opportunity to have invited French native-speakers for a short interactive presentation. The most important thing is that the relevance of this part of the multimedia programme is made clear to students.

Conclusion

There are myriad ways in which the multimedia programme could be improved to complement and enhance the acquisition of French and other foreign languages. The overwhelming response to the surveys conducted is that the material must be meaningful for the students and with imagination and innovation these classes could be transformed to become one of the most dynamic aspects of the language learning process. The recommendations suggested in this paper as well as any others could be followed up with SPOT surveys and interviews with students and teachers. There is great potential for the multimedia programme to foster a trusting rapport between teachers and students which allows for safe and productive communication and which directly feeds into a successful language learning experience.

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