

WELL Case Study Report

Language: French

Learner level: low intermediate

Objectives

The aims of the study were to investigate the implementation of Web-based research and Web-publishing in a student-centred French language course. Our interests involved: evaluating student attitudes to the Web, before and after their completion of a short project; studying the roles played by choice, responsibility and motivation in relation to the use of images during the project.

Implementation

The use of the Web for research and publishing focussed on a single project where all aspects were delivered in the target language. Students were asked to choose an image or picture which then formed the central theme to a presentation, a question and answer session and a written piece incorporating further research suggested by peers.

Student profile: 39 non-specialist language learners at a lower-intermediate undergraduate level on a one-year course. Students were split into two groups with 50 hours total contact time per group.

Tutor profile: The Group 1 tutor was an experienced Web and educational technology user. The Group 2 tutor was relatively inexperienced in the use of ICT.

Timetable:

In the first term the project timetable for work and submission was described by the group tutors. The two classes were divided into project teams of either one or more persons and research began on the choice of image and background study. During the second term, the students gave their presentation, discussion and analysis of their chosen image to the tutor and class peers. After each presentation, they participated in the formulation of 'follow-up' research questions as suggested by their peers and in negotiation with their tutor. In the third term, the students submitted the results of their further research to tutors who then marked the projects using an encoded mark scheme and returned them to students. Following any corrections to their work, the students published their projects directly to the Web site.

Technical details:

The interface used by the students for submitting their work was a simple form based Web page. Hand-written CGI (common gateway interface) scripts on a Unix Web-server were used to upload the student files to the Web site.

Outcomes

To assess the outcomes and evaluate the course, the students were asked to complete both a pre- and post-project questionnaire. The questionnaires covered several areas of the project: students' technical expertise; their attitude to different aspects of language learning (listening, speaking, reading and writing); their attitude to using the Web as part of a course (including motivation and

personal satisfaction). A focus group was also run at the end of the project to gain further insights into some of the issues which had been raised by the questionnaires.

The results of the above are informally presented here:

- Despite a wide differentiation in the technical expertise of both the students and tutors, very few technology related difficulties were encountered.
- Motivation: a definite increase was perceived after the early presentations; the questionnaires and focus group identified that the Web as a publishing medium in combination with the presentation did act as an incentive for a large proportion of the students. A minority remained who were indifferent to the publication of their project.
- Group working: with students coming from different degree disciplines, it is not recommended to have groups with more than 2 people, due to reported problems with students' time management and organising face-to-face project meetings with their peers. One solution may be active encouragement in the use of e-mail.
- Effect on language learning: according to student ratings, the skills most practised were speaking and writing followed by listening and reading.
- Use of images: the free choice of image formed the focal point of the project and was linked to many of the motivational factors that were identified by the students: pursuing enjoyable background research; self-expression; advanced use of language; participation during the presentation and question and answer session; producing a Web-publishable document.

Evaluation

- Both the presentations and the written work were of a consistently high quality – the comments from the tutors were very positive.
- It was clear that the transparent use of technology was a success factor. The design of the Web environment was purposely kept as simple as possible to avoid distraction from the main process of language learning.
- Negative aspects: as this was the first year of implementation, some teething problems had to be overcome e.g. students often asked for "previous models to follow"; there was a disappointing level of research carried out by some students as they believed that they had finished the bulk of the project workload by the presentation stage.
- Lessons learned: the intention is to extend the project next year. This will include vocabulary lists, better integration of the research element of the project, expansion of the Web-site and possibly the use of a discussion board.
- In conclusion, although this was something entirely new to us, the pedagogical methodology and ideas suggested themselves quite readily; the project highlighted the importance of tightly integrating any novel activities with the course structure; the biggest problems were essentially in overcoming anxieties in implementing something innovative into a set curriculum and attaching a value (i.e. assessment mark) to it.

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This project also forms part of the ongoing work of the TELRI (Technology Enhanced Learning in Research-Led Institutions) project at Warwick University (<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/ETS/TELRI>).

