On-line Support for Learning French at University

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This paper reports on the design, use and evaluation of on-line resources for the teaching and learning of French at Beginners and Advanced levels at the University of Sydney. The first part of this paper will provide a description of the WebCT component of the French Introductory course and a preliminary evaluation of its educational potential. The second part will focus on how Advanced students of French make use of the internet for research, and on how they evaluate this new mode of extracting information.

1. Pilot Project 1: Introductory French on-line

The Introductory French site has been created to complement the face to face component of the course which has been reduced from four to three tutorial hours. The aim is to develop a powerful multi-modal on-line resource for accelerating and enhancing the learning of French by beginners students. The site enables students to have ongoing access to the French language and cultural resources. This virtual learning environment aims to complement and expand the classroom learning environment and serve to bridge the gap between formal and natural language acquisition.

The site is also a means of researching the benefits of web designed language courses, and for the first pilot project a questionnaire was incorporated into the site to obtain students’ feedback.

This project is part of a Faculty-wide project, Arts On-line, which is funded by the University’s 2000 Teaching Improvement Funding scheme. The WebCT framework has been chosen as the development tool to support web-designed courses at the University of Sydney. It is an on-line course management system linked to the University’s Student Database (FlexSIS) to allow authentication and student management.
Once a student has logged in into the WebCT system, they see a list of the Units of Study (UoS or courses) in which they are enrolled (if those UoS have an on-line component). This way, only those students enrolled in French 1101/1102 (Introductory French) have access to this on-line component. They can communicate with other students enrolled in this UoS as well as with their lecturer and tutors. The lecturer and tutors also benefit from the interface which allows them to add content and quizzes with minimum intervention from any Information Technology Service. The lecturer can also use the administrative tools to mark quizzes, to keep track of their students and see how often they access the on-line material or how much they participate in the on-line forum. More information on WebCT can be found at the following URL [http://www.webct.com/](http://www.webct.com/). Through this framework, the lecturer can also run surveys such as the one on which this paper is based.

1.1 The course structure: integration of face to face and on-line components

The model of integration of face to face and on-line teaching and learning is circular and aims at providing constant feedback and support for the students. The face-to-face/online integration model is represented in Figure 1 below:
The course consists of one hour lecture and three hours of tutorials. This is complemented by compulsory activities on the web as a means of replacing the lost hour of face-to-face tutorials. The lectures mostly serve to introduce the students to grammar, to give general information to the students about the course, the language and the culture. The development of the web site has allowed greater communication between the students and the lecturer as well as amongst students. The web component of the course, designed with the tools offered by WebCT is introduced to students in the lecture. The lecture notes are available on the web and are linked to compulsory weekly grammar exercises, which are assessed on the web. Students have access to a database showing them their progress. The lecturer can also keep track of the students’ progress and use of the web.

The first pilot project, which was implemented during the first semester of 2001, had the following components:

1. A Syllabus with course description, timetable, textbooks, recommended textbooks and consultation hours.
2. An Assessment page with information about continuous assessment, exams etc…
3. A Calendar to put notices for the students and reminders
4. A Lecture section with weekly lecture notes
5. A Practice section with grammar exercises linked to the lecture content and reading materials.
6. A Language tools section with dictionaries, guide to pronunciation and links to various relevant sites.
7. A Discussion section where students could post questions when problems arise.
8. An Evaluation questionnaire.

The Introductory French 1 homepage is reproduced below:
Students were asked to read the lecture material before the lecture and do some exercises, which were incorporated in the lecture notes as preparation. Following the lecture they were asked to go in the Practice section and do the exercises before their tutorial as well as additional reading. Following the tutorials, they were encouraged to access external resources, listen to songs, practice pronunciation, and acquire vocabulary.
These additional resources were found in "Web Activities" and "Beginning French Resources". Students were told that the use of the web component would be taken into account in their participation mark. What mattered was not the mark they received in the quizzes but that they did them as a means of reinforcing what had been learnt in class. Having access to students' responses meant that the lecturer could make a compilation of students' errors and use them as a starting point in the lectures.

The lecturer could also keep track of student's visits to the various pages as shown below:

![Fig.4: Tracking students' access to the web site](image)

In addition a history of each student's visits to the web was also available. This was also accessible to the students. It is important to inform students of this tracking tool and make them feel that its purpose is not surveillance. Its function is to provide students with a record of their work and feedback to the lecturer so that the course can be improved on the basis of the popularity of particular tasks. The Progress table, as shown below, also motivates the student to use the web site.
A week before the end of term, students were asked to fill in an evaluation questionnaire modelled on questionnaires designed previously by the ITL and the IT unit but with a focus on online learning. This was probably a bit late as only 50 students out of 180 contributed. Nevertheless, the data provided by the answers is to some extent representative of the group as a whole. The results to the questions that were targeting the use of the site and its learning benefits are reproduced in the next section.

1.2. Results from evaluation questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of a few general questions regarding age, sex, whether students had studied a foreign language prior to their enrolment in Introductory French, whether they had access to a computer at home, for example. Then they were a few questions with a particular focus on online learning and some more open questions. Here, we will mostly report on the answers regarding students' perception of the learning benefits of the online component. Questions and answers follow:
Question **Home computer**

Do you have access to a computer at home?

1. Yes
2. No

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**Response Summary**

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**Internal resources assisted my learning**

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Agree
4. Strongly Agree

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**Response Summary**

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Online resources are a helpful complement to classroom learning

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Agree
4. Strongly Agree

**Response Summary**

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Online resources helped me learn more efficiently

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Agree
4. Strongly Agree

**Response Summary**

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I have developed independent learning strategies

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Agree
4. Strongly Agree

**Response Summary**

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The above results show that students have responded positively to this first introduction to learning French via the web, even though the resources were quite limited and essentially oriented to grammar and written comprehension. The results show extensive use of the grammar quizzes, and a perception that they were very useful as a way of building up on the grammar lectures. The Discussion site was mostly used for asking the lecturer questions about the web, when they encountered problems. Students also liked other resources such as songs and a speech synthesiser.

As a preliminary project, this first attempt at integrating face to face and on-line teaching and learning of French has proved to be a success. However, there is a long way to go before a comprehensive multimodal learning environment is offered to students. New developments have however taken place in the second semester of 2001, which I will discuss in the next section. It is too early yet to compare students' reactions to semester 2 in relation to semester 1, as an evaluation has not yet been conducted.

1.3 Recent and future developments of Introductory French on-line.

The main recent development on the WebCT site is an oral component with conversation recorded with digital equipment. Oral comprehension activities as well as dialogic tasks accompany these. The dialogic tasks are generated through the Discussion area. A question is posted by the Lecturer in relation to one of the oral text and a written discussion in French then takes place between the students. This is an attempt at making greater use of the Discussion component. Grammatical mistakes generated in the on-line discussions are not taken into account. This is to encourage dynamic conversation as it may occur in a
natural environment. The use of the written medium via the channel of the computer means that some students may feel more at ease to communicate than they would in the classroom context, for example. This environment also encourages shorter rather than longer postings. This factor may make this communication task seem less daunting. In addition students may feel better able to control the accuracy of their language. They can re-read and check their language (grammar, orthography, etc.) We know that ESL/EFL students often feel more comfortable contributing to class discussions in this text-based environment. The Edit function in the Compose Message window assists with checking for accuracy too. This kind of discussion helps fluency of expression but does not help pronunciation. However, the availability of an oral corpus means that students have the possibility of practicing pronunciation by repetition and synchronous reading. The second semester also differs from the first in that the students are introduced to a novel. Part of this novel has also been recorded and is available for listening.

The homepage of Introductory French 2 is represented below:

![French Introductory 2 Homepage](image)

Two new sections have been added: “Culture” and "Robbe-Grillet". The culture site was developed in response to the only evaluation question in semester 1, which did not have a majority of positive answers. The question was: do you agree that On-line resources helped you develop a greater interest in French culture. 24 out of 46 students disagree as shown below:
As a result of this negative feedback, the lecturer decided to create a section dedicated to French culture with discussions on various topics related to French social customs. The "Robbe-Grillet" section contains information relevant to the novel students are studying: information on the author, on the literary genre "the New Novel" and on the novel itself. All this background information has been very well received by the students and has motivated their interest in French culture, which is essential to second language learning.

The main new component of the course is the oral corpus which at present contains 7 dialogues and one chapter of the novel.
The development of an audio-visual component remains the central purpose of this project. A web-based audio-visual environment for Beginner Students of French will provide the students with spoken input which is not readily available to them and give them access to cultural and social information that are indissociable from natural language production. So far the students have provided positive feedback regarding the oral corpus, but very few students have been involved in the discussions. This is to some extent predictable as it is not compulsory but also represents a mode of teaching they are not accustomed to. There is no doubt that the site has enhanced the course and to some extent compensated for the loss of hours. It also gives students choices about what they can do, how they can do it and when they can do it.

We believe that the web revolution in language teaching is only beginning and further research needs to be done on the most efficient ways of packaging and delivering information to the students as well as encouraging online interaction and dialogue with and between students. The next part of this paper will discuss another pilot project involving the web as a resource database for advanced students of French at the University of Sydney.
2. Pilot Project 2: The use of the Internet with Advanced French students

Internet sites in French constitute a rich resource for language students. That is why, in order to familiarise them with this online data, students in an advanced-level French language program (July to November 2000) were asked to give an oral presentation on the theme of their choice, the only constraint being that they carry out the preparatory research on the Internet.

The students were given the following instructions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oral presentation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working from French Internet sites, do some research on a subject which interests you, so as to be able to do a 5- to 6-minute oral presentation in class in French.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Logbook</th>
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<tr>
<td>Keep a record of your research in the form of a logbook. How and where did you start? What stages did you go through? If you used a search engine, what keywords did you enter? What sites did you look at? What information did you keep? What problems did you encounter? What technique did you devise to carry out the task (cut and paste, note taking, …)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>This list of questions is not exhaustive, and any element that allows you to make your research ‘objective’ is worth noting.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Copy out the notes you take as you carry out your research, and put together a document of 3 to 5 pages to be handed in for assessment.</td>
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My talk today is based on this exercise. I intend to focus first on the way in which the students went about doing their on-line research, and then on the perceptions they had of this type of Internet research.

2.1 The research: a process in four stages

The process of on-line data collection implies different types of operations: sites have to be found (first stage), then the sites have to be browsed- this is what I will call
'exploration' (second stage); this is followed by the selection of relevant sites (third stage), and, finally, by the processing of the information found, in view of the presentation to be made (fourth stage).

2.1.1. Finding sites

The most common course of action was to use a search engine (but some students went directly to a specific site, most often a newspaper site). The choice of search engine depended firstly on the language in which the students wanted to find information, but also on their knowledge of the different search engines and the comparisons that they were or were not capable of making between the performances of these engines (in relation to the students' personal preferences).

Often the students tried out several engines in the hope of obtaining data, but some limited themselves to the search engine they preferred (in 2000, google.com was one of the favourite engines). There were two ways of accessing data: the most common consisted in typing a keyword in the engine's Search field, so as to get access to the list of sites proposed in answer to that request. This way of operating was all the more efficient when the students had already mastered advanced search procedures to access information (and they knew how to use, for example, Boolean operators to eliminate sites and delimit their search). On the other hand, this method proved to be difficult and frustrating if the keyword typed in was misspelled in French, or if the students had difficulty in determining the appropriate keyword for the research they wanted to do;

the second type of access consisted in starting from the search engine's home page and researching a specific theme from the various domains presented on the screen. For example, for research on the Roman Empire starting from the home page of yahoo.fr, they clicked on 'Sciences sociales', then on 'Histoire', then 'par période', then 'Antiquité', then 'Romain', and arrived at 'l’Empire romain au temps d’Auguste'. This somewhat laborious process thus allowed any initial unhelpful keyword to be "made good", but it was sometimes chosen as a first move (just as some students went directly to the sites of the French newspapers, from where their research proper began).
At the end of that first step, the learners thus had a list of sites in front of them, most often one which was inordinately long.

2.1.2. Exploring the sites

The second stage of the (re)search consisted in browsing through the sites which appeared to be pertinent to the subject chosen. Faced with lists containing, at best, a few dozen, and, at worst, thousands, of sites, most learners in fact followed the order of presentation (the first site on the list, then the second, and so on, the list of sites being ordered, with some engines, in terms of their percentage of relevance to the initial keyword). Other learners determined their choice of site according to the presence in the title, subtitle, or summary of a keyword linked to their research interest: "When I saw 'History' or 'Geography', I opened that"; and "I chose the sites which contained in their descriptions the words I was looking to find". In most of the searches, the number of sites explored was about twenty-five.

The most widespread reaction among the learners was amazement at the extreme variety of the sites proposed. A student who was interested in the problem of suburban violence, for example, and had entered "suburbs" as a keyword, complained that she then found herself on estate agency or local radio sites - in short, on sites which were not relevant to the question that she wanted to find information about. The exploration of the sites gave learners the opportunity to "stumble onto" data which was surprising, in the positive sense of the term, data which was able to hold their attention. Among these pleasant surprises can be cited musical excerpts, video footage, or forms of presentation which broke with what the students were used to: thus a map of the world on which a dot of light flashed every 36 seconds, indicating that someone had just died of hunger (thehungersite.com). The student here made it clear that this humanitarian site was "very attractive because it gives the Net user the chance to make a gift of food free of charge". Another student was thrilled about making a guided tour of Monségur under the leadership of Guilhabert de Castres, an interactive character. So it was the multimedia (sound, video) and interactive (the suggestions for action made to the user) properties of the Net which were picked out by the learners as being particularly interesting and attractive to them.

2.1.3. Selecting relevant sites

The aim of that first exploration was to determine what sites were really useful for the area of research chosen. On average, after visiting about twenty-five sites, the
students took information from only five or six of them (with variations ranging from a minimum of one to a maximum of ten).

The organisation and structuring of the site appeared to be the determining criteria in keeping a site or not in order to extract information from it: "I love sites which are well organised, well structured, not those which only have text"; and "there have to be different types of entry points and images". Generally, the first sorting out of sites enabled commercial sites to be eliminated, and most learners also rejected personal sites, which they considered to be too subjective. In fact, the sites which were most frequently prized by learners were official sites (e.g. those of the UNO, the Cannes Festival…), university sites (American in particular), and media sites (newspapers and television in French and English).

2.1.4. Processing the information

The first operation consisted of storing the details of the site so as to be able to return to it, analyse its contents, and select the parts which were relevant to the presentation. This operation of storing information was performed mostly by bookmarking the pages that needed to be kept, and less frequently, by downloading the information and saving it on the computer's hard disk or onto a floppy. A good number of students, however, did not go through either of these processes: they either printed out the pages that they wanted to study later, or took notes directly from the screen.

Behaviour as regards the processing of the information retained varied from 'all on computer' to 'all on paper'. Some students opened a word processing document, in which they included all the information which interested them by 'cutting and pasting'. They then worked from that document, either by printing it out or working directly on the screen. Others printed out from the sites most of the information they thought they would use, proceeding after that by highlighting the important parts. They then clarified and structured this data according to a plan, which then became that of their presentation.

Here again, the choice of strategy for the storage of the data depended on the technical know-how of the Internet users (whether or not they knew how to bookmark, how to
work on several documents at a time, etc.), and also on material factors like whether their Internet connection was free or not, whether their printer was working well or not, and even family rules which could control its use ("I printed off a hundred or so pages - my mother wasn't happy about this!"). It should be pointed out that most learners in fact used several techniques: one stored long and interesting sites in a Word document, and only wrote down short pieces of information, while another printed out all the pages that interested him so as to be able to work from paper, and completed the task by taking notes. Each learner had their reasons to justify such behaviour: for example, "using the cut-and-paste technique means avoiding having to copy everything out by hand and so also making spelling mistakes, as well as economising on paper (you use less paper than when you print out all the sites)". Printing out the sites was linked to comfort and work habits. The use of the images and the statistical tables found on the Internet was often associated with the drafting of the presentation. On transparencies or in class handouts, they were used to illustrate the oral presentation of the research.

2.2 What the students thought of online research

In their Online Logbooks, the students reported on their feelings, on what they thought about first, on-line research, and second, the information they found. As regards the first aspect, the learners' reactions were, rather surprisingly, very positive, even those of first-time Internet researchers. So it is interesting to note that the simplicity and straightforward nature of on-line support made it accessible to every learner, without prior knowledge or experience (as a comparison, we can say that the book classification system in a library demands at least some prior methodological training). This ease of use is, moreover, one of the points which was picked up by most students.

The ease of use of the Internet was noted at several levels:

- in the flexible nature of the work that the Internet allowed: Internet work could be done where students liked (at home as well as at university, or even while at work (part-time jobs) outside university), and when they liked (at night, on public holidays), that is, the time did not depend on library opening hours. In the same way,
printing off images from web sites was considered simpler and more practical than photocopying from books; and

during the research process itself: as has been noted above, while the information obtained online gave rise at first to surprise, even annoyance, sorting through it did not seem to be an element cited as working against this support medium. On the contrary, a learner pointed out that the ease of consultation, as well as saving time, came from the fact that "everything is in the same place", implying by this that the address did not change (according to the learner...), while it is often difficult to find the location of works in an open access library like the ones the students use. Moreover, books could be already out on loan or have disappeared. Some students also seemed to appreciate the simple and bare page format of information on the sites: "with books, you have to begin with the Introduction, the Contents... whereas with the Internet, there's no 'Contents' section, and you can quickly see what you want."

2.3 Evaluation of the information found

Most students had reservations about the nature and the reliability of the information that could be found on the Internet: "there are strange, modern and less serious things there than in books"; and "I was disappointed with the information found: it was superficial, especially people s’ opinions". For the essential problem was that "you don't know, as you do with books, where the information comes from"; "there are identical sites - people copy and make another"; and "as regards feminism, even if the research had taken longer with books, the quality would have been better".

To resolve the problem of how to assess the quality of information on a site, one learner, for example, preferred "known sites, those I've been given the address of". The fact that on the Internet, the floor is given to speakers who have not been legitimated by a board of editors as for books, sometimes proved to be interesting: when professionals such as dog breeders, for example, gave "first-hand" information which could be used in a presentation on Rottweilers. This multiplicity of points of view was considered by some students to be a boon: "it's easier to find several opinions about the same subject than in books"; and "all you have to do is click to change the point of view". Finally, interaction with the site's author was possible: thus a student tells how she found "a photo of a New Caledonian landscape, but
Unfortunately, in the comments, the authors made a mistake. I sent them off a nice e-mail so that they could correct their error.

All the students agreed that the regular updating of data on the Internet made it a tool which was sometimes more reliable than books (particularly in the area of law). As a general rule, the view of their teachers was the determining factor in their own opinion of the Internet: students of Government, who were used to using web sites in their courses, knew how useful they could be, while those who had been warned by their former teachers about the lack of interest of web sites and the superiority of books for university work, were less enthusiastic. Therefore, it is important to provide learners with the tools which will enable them to assess the quality of websites.

Most of the students involved had been using the Internet for an average of four or five years. The majority said that they preferred books as a more "natural" way of doing research and getting access to information: their methodological criteria had been established from this medium of support. There were some problems, of course, like breaks in communication during an Internet session, the difficulty of reading from the screen, computing mistakes (which led to the loss of data), and the fact of not having the right plug-in to be able to view a particular site. However, it is still interesting to note that all learners were able to use online data without difficulty.

From a didactic point of view, there is no doubt that online data leads students to put in place new ways of acting, new learning behaviour, and a new relationship to knowledge, several aspects of which have been sketched out here, and which it could be interesting to try and clarify further. Within study in the domain of learning and teaching, student research - and more generally, access to knowledge - via online data is a research area waiting to be developed.
3. Conclusion

In this paper we have presented two examples of use of the Internet in French language teaching; one making use of the development tools of WebCT to create additional resources for Beginner French students, the other making use of existing web-based information for the purpose of introducing student to a new mode of research.

The initial focus for both experiments has mostly been on retrieving, using and understanding information, rather than producing oral or written texts. At present, the Internet does not provide adequate resources for assessing complicated tasks involving exchanges and text production. This limits the language teacher in the kind of assessments s/he can give to students. However, as shown in regard to the WebCT project, we are working on ways of incorporating tasks involving both synchronous and asynchronous exchanges (bulletin boards and chats), as well as oral comprehension activities.

Another project in development involves the creation of a site for oral exchanges between students in France and students in Australia. This Franco-Australian project will be partly funded by the French Embassy in Australia. The project will consist in French students in their fourth year of a Teaching French as a Foreign Language degree supervising the learning process of a selected group of Australian students. The communication across countries will take place via the web, e-mail, video-conferencing and web-cams.

The endless potential of new technologies in teaching and learning foreign languages means that more than ever before, students can have access to natural language as opposed to classroom-based interaction and constructed dialogues alone. Paradoxically in this case, advances in new technologies, rather than producing more artificial modes of teaching interaction, have produced an environment that can be explored within and outside the classroom for more natural interaction. This can only enhance and accelerate the learning process.
References

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