FRANEL the Free Electronic Language Learning Environment Providing Language Learners with Authentic and Semi-authentic Video Clips

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Abstract

*In the framework of the European programme COBALT –COmmunicating and Building bridges thanks to the Acquisition of Languages through Technologies- (INTERREG, 2008-2013), the **free electronic language learning environment FRANEL** (which was awarded the **European Language Label 2013**) offers authentic video materials provided by French, Walloon and Flemish local television channels in order to improve the learner's knowledge of French or Dutch as a second language. As a matter of fact, the authentic audio and video should be something that strongly motivates the learner. His eyes, ears, brains light up when confronted with the "REAL thing".*

It is generally taken for granted that authentic features in video documents are good indicators of quality and cultural carriers, provided that the pictures serve the didactical development by increasing comprehension as a whole. As suggested by several linguists [Sherman, J. 2003], video better helps learners build a mental image, curiosity increases concentration, and video's combination of modalities (dynamic image and sound) facilitate recall. In addition to this, foreign language words are learned better when directly associated with appropriate nonverbal referents (objects, events, emotions, context, etc.); this efficient association can only be found in real life or in authentic video.

Authenticity, however, often requires a higher level of language competence (B1), in spite of the fact that authentic speech and listening are essential for all levels. The lower the level, the richer the context and images must be, to support understanding and learning.

Keeping these objectives in mind, a multi-disciplinary team of technicians (professional audio-visual staff, language teachers (linguists from three universities) and young actors (students and teaching staff of the Drama Department, KULeuven, Belgium) worked together to record a series of video clips. Actors were given carte blanche to play the sketches based on scripts written by the FRANEL team. The constraints were clear: stick to the dialogues, make sure that words are well-articulated, but sound natural. The results were staggering and unexpected.

The content developers had to make difficult choices in terms of attractiveness (nice pictures, choice of settings, humour, parody), pedagogical relevance (articulation, emotional aspects, speech acts, functional approach) and didactical development perspectives (task-based exercises).

1. Introduction

Using ICT for language learning has been the choice of many language teachers since the early sixties. Initially, image and sound promoted in the audiovisual approach were largely considered as a necessity and the need for updated material was a crucial matter in the seventies and eighties.

Since the appearance of the Internet and the World Wide Web in the nineties, content developers of textbooks have had to cope with a new tool of which the power has been focused on the speed of the information transfer and the unpredictable impact of the transferred message. Due to the fast evolution of ICT tools, the language teacher found himself in front of a tremendous amount of audio, visual and written material, not knowing what to do with it and how to implement it in his daily teaching activities.

Offering free video material as an authentic (or semi-authentic) reference source,- from which many tasks and exercises can be developed-, can reassure teachers, who like a well-structured digital textbook. But this can only work if they do not feel suffocated by strict constraints and prescribed guidelines.

The **free electronic language learning environment FRANEL** (which was awarded the *European Language Label 2013*) offers authentic video materials, some of them have been used for pedagogical aims, others are offered as free, authentic raw material and this constitutes a unique video library where teachers can pick up documentaries corresponding to their needs.

2. Why using authentic video materials?

As suggested by several linguists [Al-Seghayer, K. 2001, Sherman, J. 2003], video better helps learners build a mental image, curiosity increases concentration, and video's combination of

modalities (dynamic image and sound) facilitate recall. In addition to this, foreign language words are learned better when directly associated with appropriate nonverbal referents (objects, events, emotions, context, etc.); this efficient association can only be found in real life or in authentic video. Nowadays, researchers widely agree on the effectiveness and added value of the use of (semi)authentic audio-visual materials in electronic learning environments [Mayer 2001, Hirschprung 2005]. It is, however, absolutely necessary to conduct a thorough reflection on the technological and pedagogical constraints imposed on the selection and integration of video materials within a CALL application. In this paper, we will focus more specifically on the A2 level, since there are only few electronic language learning environments based on (semi)authentic video materials, even though there is a large demand for this lower level, both in educational institutions and on the labour market.

In present language pedagogy, task-based language learning and teaching is quite a dominant approach which offers students authentic materials which they have to use actively in order to complete an authentic task in the target language [Ellis 2003]. In this approach, the selection of the content is based on the needs of the students and the emphasis is put on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language. The introduction of authentic materials into the learning situation is important in order to link the classroom language learning with the language use in daily life [Nunan 200]. Moreover, authentic materials have a positive effect on the learners' motivation (Sherman 2003).

3. What and how to integrate authentic audiovisual materials in CALL?

This leads us to the features that have to be taken into account and their influence on the students' motivation and learning process. The first main issue is the selection of adequate video materials. The content developers of a language learning platform have to select carefully the videos among a wide range of available broadcasts. Therefore, important technical and pedagogical parameters have to be considered when preparing the broadcasts for the students [Desmet & Eggermont 2008]. From a technical point of view, environmental and visual indicators are highly relevant for a beginner's level, since they contribute to a better understanding of the video message. Consequently image and sound have to be of high quality. The videos have to be easy to download, hence the use of streaming video. As the developers edit the videos themselves, the flexible final editing facilities must be included. From a pedagogical point of view, the most important criteria are the length of the video, which should last less than 2 minutes, the lively and attractive setting, the thematic variety, the high degree of interaction and functionality of images, and finally the use of oral language, close to daily life contexts.

4. The digital learning environment *Franel*

Some researchers from KULak (KUL University) started to develop a free learning platform called Franel as part of the Interreg III Lingu@tic project in 2006 (Desmet & Eggermont 2006). Between 2008 and 2013 Franel grew up and could be enriched thanks to the Interreg IV Cobalt-project (**Co**mmunicating and **B**uilding Bridges thanks to the **A**cquisition of **L**anguages through **T**echnologies). In addition, we adapted the initial look through integrating the web 2.0 technology in order to make surfing more user-friendly and intuitive.

The Cobalt-project brought together three neighbouring areas: Flanders, Wallonia and the north of France, each of which provides an academic partner: the *KULAK* in Flanders, the *Université de Mons* in Wallonia and the *Université Charles de Gaulle-Lille3* in France. These partners were supported by the local governments' employment and professional training *VDAB*, *FOREM* and *Maisons de l'emploi* in order to stimulate professional mobility and intercultural communication. In addition, regional television channels provided a huge amount of video material (hundreds of short documentaries) which could be used freely.

Franel is an online learning environment for French and Dutch as a second language. It is based on (semi)authentic audiovisual materials and is available for free on the Internet. More than 40.000 users have logged in so far and use Franel either in the framework of French or Dutch classes, or as a completely autonomous tool to help them improve their language skills.

The project focuses on the A2 and B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference of the Council of Europe. Besides, the emphasis is clearly on productive skills and tasks which prepare the students for speaking and writing skills, and it is not restricted to knowledge and receptive language tasks.

4.1. The didactical scenario

FRANEL places authentic videos at the learners' disposal. Those videos have been carefully selected among a wide range of available broadcasts from the regional television channels WTV, NoTélé and Wéo. These rich and lively reports deal with the everyday life across the border and thus focus on the

neighbour's area whose language is learnt by the FRANEL users. The videos we receive cover economic and cultural subjects on both sides of the Franco-Belgian border, and deal with topics we personally know about. It is from these reports that the language activities are developed.

In order to demonstrate why and how we integrate the video fragment in the environment, we need to explain the term "didactical scenario". When logging to the Franel platform, there are different thematic modules. (e.g. "emploi", "environnement", "achat et vente", for French) (e.g. "vrije tijd", "natuur en milieu" for Dutch). Every module is divided into several didactical units. Each didactical unit has been built around a video fragment and contains a lot of learning activities, organised in a similar way: the didactical scenario. This scenario contains two series of linguistic components. The first one concerns the comprehension of the audiovisual document (pre-listening, global listening, and detailed listening) and the second one focuses on the acquisition of functional linguistic knowledge such as vocabulary, grammar, speech acts and spelling and pronunciation. Each one of these components contains a wide range of learning activities (almost 6000 for the entire environment).

4.2. Integrating the clips into the didactical scenario

Once the learning activities around a video have been developed, the learner can see the exercise and the matching video in the interface of the platform. Depending on the location of the video in the didactical scenario, it will be presented entirely or just partly, with or without transcription and with or without translation. An adapted player has been developed to view all these options.

4.3. Designing adequate learning tasks

Another important issue is the creation of adequate learning tasks based on those materials. The scenario we had already developed and tested for the B1&B2 levels had to be adapted to the specific needs of the A2 level, and is focused on listening comprehension, vocabulary and speech acts.

The learning activities themselves vary as much in form as in content, according to the item of the video. Franel does not solely provide closed activities but also meets the recurring need for semi-open activities where multiple answers are possible and which are corrected automatically by the system. A very useful feature also offers the possibility to add error specific feedback or intelligent feedback.

Thanks to the large range of activities and the systematic offer of flash cards, receptive skills (reading and listening) as well as vocabulary, grammar, speech acts, pronunciation and spelling are explored. Every lexical exercise offers the possibility to refer to a lexical flash card, which offers further information on the word the learner has chosen. Moreover, some additional exercises containing cultural information are most of the time on offer at the end of the unit. This enables the student to have an overview of all the linguistic and cultural skills and knowledge he needs in a given domain.

4.4. Semi-authentic video clips for A2-learners

Authenticity often requires a higher level of language competence (B1), in spite of the fact that authentic speech and listening are essential for all levels. The lower the level, the "richer" the context and images must be, to support understanding and learning.

Keeping these objectives in mind, a multi-disciplinary team of technicians (professional audio-visual staff, language teachers (linguists from three universities) and young actors (students and teaching staff of the Drama Department, KULeuven) worked together to record a series of video clips. Actors were given *carte blanche* to play the sketches based on scripts (didactical scenario) written by the FRANEL team. The constraints were clear: stick to the dialogues, make sure that words are well-articulated, but sound natural.

We chose different topics which learners will need early on in the use of the language in daily life: e.g. making a reservation (booking a room in a hotel), finding their way (information search), getting to know someone (introducing oneself, the new neighbour), …

The content developers had to make difficult choices in terms of attractiveness (nice pictures, choice of settings, humour, parody), pedagogical relevance (articulation, emotional aspects, speech acts, functional approach) and didactical development perspectives (task-based exercises)

5. Conclusion

The selection and integration of authentic audiovisual learning materials have proven to be a tough job and some electronic learning environments may have difficulties with that: on the one hand, they offer very long videos or offer very few fragments. On the other hand, videos are not online and there are only references mainly to television programmes or video is used only in some parts of the environment. We observe that videos which are at the learners' disposal generally exceed 2 minutes, are not lively and attractive, don't offer any thematic variety, are too difficult for A2-learners, have a low degree of interaction, the images are not functional, the language use is not authentic, nor is the

written language and does not contain much intercultural information. Moreover, the image and sound quality are often quite low and the videos are not easy to download. With FRANEL, we want to meet the learner's needs and go towards a reference frame for the effective integration of video materials.

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