Chapter VII

Computer-Enhanced Grammar Teaching

David Barr

University of Ulster, Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on the results of a study undertaken to gauge what difference computer technology makes to grammar learning. Unlike other studies that compare the student performance learning grammar with the aid of technology to performance and without the technology, this work focuses on the impact technology has on student attitudes towards learning grammar through the computer. The chapter outlines how traditional grammar classes have been adapted for delivery in a multimedia situation and assesses the impact, both in terms of students’ perceptions about learning of grammar and in their actual performance that the computer has had on the process. The chapter also draws on the lessons learned in this project to help to maximise the potential of using technology in this type of teaching and learning context in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown that the transition between school and university can be difficult (Martinez, 2001). There are many reasons for these difficulties, including adjustment to a new teaching environment. Students often require a period of readjustment and training to encourage them to become more active, constructivist learners and to extend the learning experience beyond the classroom (Fry & Ketteridge, 1999, p. 37). Within the area of language learning, implicit grammar teaching can be seen as one way to promote active learning and develop learner responsibility (Davies & Williamson, 1998). Adamson (1998) points out, however, that this is not always the best way for students to learn grammar and Schulz’s (2001) examination of the importance of corrective feedback from teachers points convincingly towards a need to ensure that students are not
left entirely to their own devices in the study of grammar. Furthermore, Krashen (1999) points out that post secondary language students are not only used to formalised grammar teaching, but expect it. This suggests that despite the importance of students taking more responsibility for their learning, the study of grammar is one area where they need explicit guidance, especially in the early stages of their post secondary education.

The use of computer programs to guide and support students in their learning is not a new concept, in particular in the area of language study, which has been the subject of much research over the last two decades (See Levy, 1997, for example). In particular, the potential for using technology for teaching and providing explicit guidance in more mechanical areas of language learning, such as vocabulary acquisition and grammar learning have been well documented (Powell, 1998; Sciarone & Meijer, 1993). Studies also have been conducted comparing the use of a computer-based approach to a traditional teacher-directed approach to determine whether one is better than the other. One of these (Nutta, 1998) provides some quantitative conclusions showing that the computer-based approach is more effective for grammar teaching than the teacher-directed approach. Many of these studies tend to point towards improvements in student performance in grammar related tasks. Nevertheless, success in teaching grammar needs to be examined in context. Despite the explosion in packages that teach grammar (and do so very well) over the past 20 years or so, Engel and Myles (1996) point towards the decline in the standards of grammar among students entering higher education: this means that more and more students are coming into university with a less developed appreciation of foreign language grammar and, as a result, considerable time needs to be spent at the early stages of their university career revisiting basic areas of grammar, which can sometimes have a demotivating effect on students. For some, the revision of basic grammar is seen as a step backwards (even though it probably is not); for others, the admission that they struggle with basic grammar is a source of personal embarrassment. In both cases, this can affect their willingness to contribute to or even attend grammar classes. This suggests that the issue to be addressed in the area of learning grammar is not only developing packages that teach grammar well and that produce quantifiable improvements in grammar acquisition but also that important changes are required in student attitudes and perceptions to motivate them to learn grammar.

In keeping with the research aims of the book, of which this chapter forms part, (i.e., to provide comprehensive coverage of successful translation of language learning designs utilizing ICT in practical learning contexts), this study will discuss the findings of a project that saw the teaching of French grammar move from a traditional teaching room to being taught in multimedia language computer rooms, thereby changing the entire dynamic of the teaching and learning experience. The chapter will examine whether technology has helped to change the attitude of students towards learning grammar through an initiative undertaken among first year undergraduates of French at the University of Ulster, many of whom had very different attitudes towards learning grammar. The work undertaken seeks to address two main research questions:

a. Does the use of technology make any qualitative difference to student attitude towards grammar work?
b. How do perceptions and qualitative evidence compare to quantifiable student performance?

The chapter will outline the stages involved in the project, before assessing whether engagement with a computer-based model for grammar learning had any impact on student learning. It will do this through quantitative study of the student cohort and also through a micro-analysis of
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