Chapter XI

The Effect of a Native-Language Interface vs. a Target-Language Interface on Students’ Performance

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Abstract

The Internet is being used more often to help teachers of second and foreign languages to create activities for language learning and assess their students’ progress. One kind of computer package used to manage various types of online course work is being used ever increasingly in language learning environments: course management systems (CMS). The choice of which language, native or target, to use in a CMS is a source of debate. This chapter details an experiment conducted to determine the effect of an English and a Japanese interface on a CMS quiz module. The participants were 48 Japanese students of English. To control for internal sources of invalidity, random assignment was made and the design was a post test-only control group. The results showed no significant difference in the scores; the English interface may be an acceptable choice for the interface language of the quiz module for those whose native language is not English.
Introduction

As computers and the Internet come to be used more and reach farther into institutions of higher education, they are increasingly being used in new ways in courses not often associated with Internet-linked computers. One form of technology, placed into the all-encompassing term computer-assisted language learning (CALL), has been used for years, but this format is often associated with “kill-and-drill” exercises, where learners pit themselves against the computer to study grammatical and/or vocabulary features of the target language. The Internet has opened new opportunities for language education, enabling learners to conveniently communicate with their teachers and other course members, complete homework assignments and test their knowledge and understanding of course material (Clark & Meyers, 2003; Wood & Smith, 2001).

E-mail was one of the first Internet modalities to allow learners to move beyond traditional CALL activities. Warschauer (1997) examined several studies detailing the uses of e-mail to improve class discussions with both classmates and teachers. The asynchronous characteristic of e-mail allows for learners to think more constructively during actual class meetings.

More recently, the use of CMS (not to be confused with content management systems), also known as learning management systems (LMS), are being explored as a means of connecting students in a variety of courses. CMS modalities are helping teachers create a wide variety of activities that can help learners with the goals of learning a second or foreign language (Catterick, 2001; Thornton, 2002). CMS provide instructors with powerful tools for organizing their courses. The tools included with CMS can help create opportunities for promoting interactive communication, encouraging productive collaboration and developing methods of evaluation and/or assessment.

Two of the most popular CMS are Blackboard (2005) and WebCT (2005). These are powerful packages, but are known to be associated with high costs and occasional maintenance problems. Open-source software is noted for its no-cost pricing structure and dynamic development structure. Although there are some CMS dedicated to e-learning, such as Segue (Schine, Chapin, Franco, & Radichkov, 2005) and Claroline (De Praetere, 2005), one recently developed CMS stands above the rest in the open-source community: moodle (Dougiamas, 2005). Moodle is a fully featured CMS and incorporates most tools associated with robust CMS. Thanks to the dynamism of the open-source community, moodle is under constant development and refinement. This development is bringing new features, such as multilingual interfaces, which are being requested by the users most responsible for putting moodle into practice: the teachers.

Since the merging of language teaching and learning through the use of CMS is a fairly new innovation, much has yet to be researched about CMS and how their use can be optimized for language programs. Since the debate continues on whether to allow use of students’ native language or the target language exclusively (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003), a parallel question that arises is, which language should be used in the CMS interface to help foreign- or second-language students: their native language or the target language?
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