

A Computer-Assisted Language Learning Approach to Teaching Writing / Αξιοποίηση των Νέων Τεχνολογιών στη Διδασκαλία Γραπτού Λόγου

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ABSTRACT

Classroom language learning cannot easily overcome limitations such as the lack of authenticity, which affects learners' motivation to interact and produce effective speech in the same way as in natural settings. More precisely, learners meet with many more difficulties when having to produce written speech. Adopting Yalden's (1987) argument the description of the learner profile should be taken into account; in addition Hubbard (1992) considers learner variables to be a major factor for the design and development of CALL courseware. A corpus-based portrait of L1 Greek learners indicates their weakness to produce effective and appropriate written speech, consequently teachers should be creative by adapting current methodology and selecting a better-tailored, computer-assisted teaching writing methodology. Finally, the design of a CALL tutorial meets the identified needs of L1 Greek learners.

KEY WORDS: *Written Speech, Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching, Learner Profile, CALL application/tutorial*

INTRODUCTION

Language is at the center of human life. People exchange ideas and experiences through language. The acquisition of communication skills in one's first language is a life long process, but the basic skills are acquired quite early in life. When starting school children are already conversant in their mother tongue. Therefore, language teaching aims to enable them to use language effectively and appropriately in various social and cultural contexts, consequently teaching focuses on "language for/as communication". Applied linguists such as Lightbown and Spada (1989) have found that language learning is promoted effectively in a non-naturalistic environment like the classroom. However, other linguists such as Krashen (1982) and Charalambopoulos (1997) point out that classroom language learning cannot easily overcome limitations such as the lack of authenticity that affects learners' motivation to interact and practice language in the same environment as in natural settings. More precisely, learners meet many more difficulties when having to produce written speech. Producing a successful written text for a particular audience and a particular purpose is a complex task for them and they often fail to accommodate the absent recipient-reader of their texts.

In order to overcome classroom teaching limitations, Yalden (1987) argues that the description of the learner profile should be taken into account, because the syllabus design and the development will then be better tailored to the needs identified. In addition Hubbard (1992) considers learner variables to be a major factor for the design and development of CALL

courseware. Adopting the above arguments this research focuses on the description of L1 Greek learners profile and for this purpose a L1 Greek Learner corpus has been compiled.

On the basis of the description of the L1 Greek learners profile, this paper aims to suggest a better-tailored, computer-assisted teaching writing methodology and the design of a CALL application which meet the identified needs of L1 Greek learners.

The underlying objectives are the following:

- To introduce a teaching writing approach based on discourse analysis, text typology and context-based grammar;
- To describe the corpus-based portrait of L1 Greek learners written skills, indicate possible weaknesses and suggest a modification of the current teaching methodology focusing on developing L1 Greek learners' awareness of the communicative functions of written speech;
- To introduce the design of a CALL tutorial for L1 Greek learners based on the concept of FreeText (Hamel 2001) emphasizing the advantages of computer use for both learner and teacher.

TEACHING WRITING

The communicative function of text

This subsection is an introduction to discourse analysis and the notions of text type and genre. Discourse is connected with language in use, while text, genre and register are crucial factors regarding the effective communication between two or more co-participants. A piece of discourse is an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning (e.g. words, structures, cohesion) that relate coherently to an external communicative function or purpose and a given audience. Furthermore, the external function or purpose can only be properly determined if one takes into account the context and the participants. Moreover, the communicative function of the text also determines the strategies of text production. Generally, a combination of features, with both extra-textual (pragmatic) and intra-textual (semantic, syntactic and stylistic) elements (Nord, 1991), characterizes texts with a particular function. Thus, a systematic classification of text types or genres is possible in relation to certain feature combinations. Text type or genre (teachers often use these terms synonymously) conventions affect both text production and text reception. Firstly, the text sender can successfully transfer his/her communicative intentions, if s/he follows the conventions closely and as a consequence, the text recipient may understand the author's intentions more clearly. Hyland (2002) points out the danger of regarding genres as linguistic abstractions, because of the focus on text typology. On the contrary, competence to recognise the different genres leads to choose the language features efficiently according to the contexts, so to produce appropriate and effective discourse.

In the light of the above paragraph, it is not easy for teachers to teach writing effectively. Language researchers (Hyland, 2002) and Systemic Functional Linguists (Halliday, 1994; Martin, 1987; Cope & Calantzis, 1993) argue that students often fail to produce effective writing, mainly because they do not know or they do not consider the demands and the constraints of the contexts. Learners thus need to be familiar with the different genres and text types in order to structure their writing experiences according to the demands and the constraints of target contexts. On the other hand, teachers need to be aware of the individual differences learners face and provide them with the appropriate help and learning strategies to overcome the difficulties and start using the language efficiently.

Teacher Awareness

Traditional language teaching methodology (which includes *presentation, practice and production*) may need to be modified to include activities that involve in developing greater awareness of the nature of spoken and written discourse. McCarthy and Carter (1995) propose the following sequence: *illustration, interaction and induction*:

- By illustration they mean using real data wherever possible, presented in terms of choices that depend on context and use;
- By interaction they mean discourse-sensitive activities that focus on uses of language and negotiation of meanings, designed to raise learners' conscious awareness of critical features through observation and class discussion
- By induction they mean getting learners to draw conclusions about the functions of different lexico-grammatical options, thereby developing a skill for noticing critical features of form.

In the last section we present a corpus-based CALL application which follows the sequence mentioned above while also aiming at developing students' awareness of text typology and its communicative functions.

L1 GREEK LEARNERS PROFILE

This section focuses on the description of L1 Greek learners based on the exploitation and qualitative analysis of a L1 Greek learner corpus which was compiled following learner corpora methodology and specific design criteria. The L1 Greek corpus can be described as follows:

The learners' group consists of 17 year old Greek students, male and female, in their final High School year. Their advanced *level of proficiency* is defined by the fact that they are graduating High School students attending classes of mother tongue Greek language (*learning context*). Here, the L1 Greek Curriculum is used as the starting point for the planning and design of the teaching methodology. All the students use the same coursebook for their Greek language classes, which is provided by the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs: *Ekfrasi-Ekthesi (Expression- Composition/Essay)*. The L1 Greek corpus compiled consists of 18 essays written in the Greek language (the corpus being hence *monolingual, synchronic and written*), of the same genre: *persuasive speech* and the same text type: *open letter*. These essays are 350-400 words long. Regarding the task setting, students were given two hours of school time to write the essays (*time limit*).

Due to space limitation, the detailed exploitation and qualitative analysis of the L1 Greek learner corpus will not be presented here, sole the summarised results, and that in order to focus on the learner profile. The learners' open letters were analysed against six selected distinctive text features. The results of the case study show that learners do not always produce effective and appropriate speech, which is relevant to the communicative situation. Indeed, a large number of them fail to continually consider the absent reader-audience. As a result, their text does not always have the expected effect and the sender's intentions are not always fulfilled. This mainly happens because the learners fail to choose the appropriate register, genre and text type. Consequently, they fail to produce a piece of written text that promotes communication. Furthermore, the problems identified in punctuation; the links between subordinate clauses; and the use of spoken speech expressions alongside formal written speech, indicate that some of them are not familiar with the constraints imposed by written speech.

Under those circumstances, teachers should be creative in finding ways to overcome the weaknesses mentioned above by adapting their methodology to the needs of the students. We have already mentioned McCarthy and Carter's (1995) arguments regarding the need for modification

in teaching methodology and the arguments of language researchers (Hyland, 2002, Martin et al. 1987) seeking to outline teaching writing based on text typology. Moreover, Χαραλαμπίδης /Charalampopoulos et al. (1997) indicates that learners can produce communicative spoken or written speech only when the classroom environment and the teaching methodology promote the use of language for communication. Consequently, the same authors suggest that teachers should create language activities and motivate the learners to interact and practice effective language through different tasks. Additionally, writing requires careful planning and revision; Αρχάκης/ Archakis et al. (2001) suggests that learners should be motivated and encouraged to read their texts acting not only as writers, but also as readers-recipients of them. In that way, they can conceive better the characteristics of written speech and the fact that writing is a procedure.

In the following section we are going to present the design of a CALL tutorial, based on the innovative concept of the FreeText environment, which promotes language learning focusing on text typology and text grammar, while an authentic document is used as the departure point to all activities.

PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

Advantages of Computers for the Language Learners and Teachers

The advantages of computers for the learner can be summarized as follows: first, regarding the need for *interaction*, Stevens (1992:32) indicates: “the computer is capable of greater communicative interchange than is possible with any other educational medium, save another person”. Moreover, he argues that computer assisted language learning could remedy the lack of *authenticity* in the classroom environment: “the new technology (micro-computing in foreign language learning) offers unprecedented exposure to authentic samples of other cultures, integrating sound, symbol and image in ways that appeal to a broad range of learners (op.cit: 15). In addition, computers offer access to natural language resources taking account of the learner’s needs, interests, etc. In that way, “the potential for personalised instruction” (Ahmad et al. 1985:6) promotes *individualization* in language learning.

Moreover, the use of computers also offers certain advantages to language teachers as they allow them to process and present authentic materials with *flexibility*. It is possible to store large databases containing natural language on computers. The content of these can be easily and quickly retrieved and modified before being used. CALL could also remedy the learner’s lack of motivation to produce communicative speech, because a diversity of methods, media and tools are used to teach the language. According to Hamel (2001), *diversity* is an important teaching prerequisite which affects the learner’s motivation. Finally, this motivation is increased in CALL, because “learning with computers is highly rated by students” (Almad et al. 1985: 6).

FreeText: An Innovative CALL environment

FreeText consists of a full-sized learning environment targeting adult intermediate to advanced learners of French. The CALL software comprises 5 tutorials and over 600 exercises; help resources such as a reference grammar and a glossary of terms; Natural Language Processing tools able to handle (relatively) free text productions. The project consortium consisting of UMIST, the University of Louvain, the University Of Geneva and Softissimo received funding from the European Commission between April 2000 and March 2003. The concept of FreeText was developed by Hamel (2003). It is inspired by the text linguistic approach developed by Bronckart et al. (1985), text analysis by Nord (1991) and the research carried out by Bain (1991) on the use of text linguistic/analysis in the L2 classroom. FreeText also builds on the work of Chapelle (1998) which focuses on the link between successful conditions promoting SLA and the development of ideal CALL environments.

L1 Greek Tutorial: “Εξερευνώντας το κείμενο”

As said, the underlying idea of “Εξερευνώντας το κείμενο” is based on the FreeText concept: to provide the L1 Greek learners with a learning approach on the basis of text typology and text grammar. This paper will only focus on the design of the tutorial, while further implementation and development could be subject of future work. The starting point here is also an authentic document, which is representative of a text type and models the linguistic elements related to the communicative function of this text type. The suggested tutorial could ideally exploit many different text types, but the objective of this work is to show how the concept of FreeText can be adapted for the purpose of teaching L1 Greek language. Therefore, the exploitation of one text type only is described in this work:

- It is a combination of *persuasive and argumentative* speech.
- The text that models this text type is *an open letter*.
- The sender/author intends *to contest a statement and persuade* the recipient to *perform* a certain activity).

The starting point i.e. the authentic document selected, is the following letter extracted from the web: www.pe.sch.gr/~prezas/klinton.htm The web page displays the open letter translated into English as well.

50ο Δημοτικό Σχολείο Πατρών
Ε1 τάξη

Προς -τους ηγέτες των χωρών μελών του ΝΑΤΟ*
-τον πρόεδρο της Γιουγκοσλαβίας
-τον Γ.Γ. του Ο.Η.Ε.


Σας γράφουμε για τον πόλεμο που ξεκίνησε το ΝΑΤΟ εναντίον της Γιουγκοσλαβίας .
Σ’ αυτόν τον πόλεμο **σκοτώνονται** και **υποφέρουν** αθώοι πολίτες κάθε ηλικίας.
Διαλύονται οικογένειες και **γίνονται** πρόσφυγές εκατοντάδες χιλιάδες άνθρωποι.
Ακόμη, ο πόλεμος αυτός **είναι** καταστροφικός για τη φύση. Από τη μόλυνση του περιβάλλοντος που προκαλείται εξαιτίας του πολέμου, **θα πεθαίνουν** άνθρωποι σε όλες τις βαλκανικές χώρες για πολλά χρόνια.
Απαιτούμε να σταματήσετε αυτόν τον πόλεμο. Οι διαφορές μεταξύ των κυβερνήσεων δεν πρέπει να οδηγούν σε σφαγές αμάχων.
Απαιτούμε να βρεθεί λύση διπλωματική στα πλαίσια του ΟΗΕ.
Απαιτούμε να ενδιαφερθείτε για ύπαρξη διπλωματικής λύσης και σ’ άλλα διεθνή προβλήματα, όπως το χρονίζον πρόβλημα της κατοχής μέρους της Κύπρου από τους Τούρκους.
Αφήστε μας να ονειρευόμαστε ένα καλύτερο αύριο χωρίς πολέμους και δυστυχία.

Οι μαθητές της Ε1 τάξης

*Βέλγιο, Καναδά, Τσεχία, Δανία, Γαλλία, Ελλάδα, Γερμανία, Ελλάδα, Ουγγαρία, Ισλανδία, Ιταλία, Λουξεμβούργο, Ολλανδία, Νορβηγία, Πολωνία, Πορτογαλία, Ισπανία, Τουρκία, Αγγλία, Η.Π.Α.εοικίς

Four types of activities, as suggested by FreeText, are used here for full text exploitation. *Ερωτήσεις Κατανόησης* (=Comprehension activities) focus on extra-textual (pragmatic) features that surround the text production (Nord, 1991); *Δραστηριότητες Εξερεύνησης* (=Exploration activities) focus on specific intra-textual (morpho-/syntactic) linguistic features used to build the

text; *Δραστηριότητες Επεξεργασίας* (=Manipulation activities) allow the learner to re-use the identified features within restricted contexts; finally, in the *Παραγωγή Λόγου* (=Creation activities), the learners are invited to re-use these features in more open contexts while still adopting a similar text type to the text studied. An illustrative example of exploration activity will be presented here. In the following activity, the features identified for each linguistic category chosen on the text can be seen in coloured fonts:



Ο Δάσκαλος συστήνει να προσέξεις στο κείμενο τις χρωματισμένες λέξεις που αντιστοιχούν στις παρακάτω κατηγορίες. Έτσι μπορείς να κατανοήσεις καλύτερα τον λόγο πειθούς.

In order to help learners understand better the nature of argumentative/persuasive speech, a *mentor* (a pedagogic agent) suggests here to notice in the text the coloured words displayed in the same coloured fonts as the distinctive marks below. Explanations are provided as well as introspective questions, etc.

Αποστολέας/Sender
 Παραλήπτης/Recipient
 Α' πληθυντικό πρόσωπο ρήματος/ 1st person plural of verb
 Α' πληθυντικό πρόσωπο προσωπικής αντωνυμίας/1st person plural of personal pronoun
 Β' πληθυντικό πρόσωπο ρήματος/ 2nd person plural of verb
 Β' πληθυντικό πρόσωπο αντωνυμίας/2nd person plural of personal pronoun
 Έγκλιση Οριστική: Χρόνος Ενεστώτας-Μέλλοντας/ Indicative: Present-Future
 Έγκλιση Υποτακτική/ Subjunctive/ Προστακτική/ Imperative

The design of the tutorial for L1 Greek language described above could be implemented and developed as a full CALL application to be used by individual learners in order to support and supplement activities initiated in the classroom. It is just a sample of application proposing a mixture of instructional, collaborative and facilitative (Hubbard 1992:55) learning style. Focusing on text typology and grammar, the CALL application could facilitate teachers to increase the learner understanding of the communicative function of written text and help them overcome some of the students' weaknesses pointed out by the learner corpus study. Moreover, it would allow the teachers to process and present authentic material and models of text types. The use of such a CALL application would motivate learners to interact and produce more effective communicative speech. Detailed instructions and guidance provided here would promote individualization and autonomy during the learning process. Hence, successful learning would be achieved.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper focused on an innovative L1 Greek language learning and teaching approach to writing suggesting modifications of the current teaching methodology and the design of a CALL application tailored to a corpus-based portrait of L1 Greek learners. The use of computer has already provided exciting challenges in language learning and in particular in teaching writing. Computer can stimulate and encourage learners by adding an innovative aspect rather than as an alternative to the traditional pen and paper and chalk and talk method.

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