The @agenda, an online collaborative workshop

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Abstract

This paper describes @agenda 2.0, a software package which may help teachers of L2 guide their students through the process of oral and written understanding and memorization in context. Students build their own knowledge through the skilful use of dictionaries and lexicons, text-to-speech devices, voice recording and collaborative work involving mutual correction and production of oral or written material either at home or in class. An authoring application allows teachers with virtually no computer literacy to create work agendas.

Keywords: agenda, collaboration, encoding, guidance, inference, online, portfolio, vocabulary

1. Introduction

Learning a second language involves developing competences including the ability to understand and use vocabulary in context. According to Groot (2000), the solid embedding of words in the mental lexicon, which is necessary for efficient receptive and productive use of speech, requires an intensive processing of the new words. This encoding activity achieved by the learner to establish the links and associations with other words for easy accessibility and retrieval is far more elaborate and effective when acquisition is linked to exposure to words in context (Nation, 1990; Singleton, 1999).

The dilemma is that teachers of foreign languages in universities have no time to have learners infer the meaning of words from the context and gradually acquire the various properties of words and expressions through repeated exposures in a wide range of contexts as native speakers do. Roughly speaking, two methods are available: one is providing meaning through the study of vocabulary lists (with or without translations), representing a shallow level of acquisition; the other is through inference, which

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is slow and time-consuming with a deeper level of acquisition. Groot advocates striking a balance between the two contradictory methods.

This paper is not meant as a disquisition on the advantages of any particular method, but to describe @agenda, a software package that I have developed over the past two years, which may help L2 teachers guide their students through the process of understanding and memorization in written and spoken context. The challenge consisted in encouraging students to build their own knowledge through the skilful use of dictionaries and lexicons, text-to-speech devices, voice recording and collaborative work involving mutual correction and production of oral or written material either at home or in class. The online software allows teachers to help learners develop learning strategies before class, and to intervene during the encoding activity before inaccurate knowledge has been embedded.

2. Description of the software

The software involves two sections. One is a work agenda which comes complete with a tool-box, notebook and language portfolio; the other is a follow-up tool for teachers to monitor the acquisition process of their students and intervene whenever necessary during the process. It includes a simple authoring tool allowing teachers to put material online, and to share in the preparation of teaching programmes.

@agenda has been developed in xhtml, php and Javascript and is compliant with W3C standards. It should be uploaded on a server with a Php engine, and requires an SQL-type database containing 25 tables; the character encoding is iso-8859-1. Two empty directories (user_files) are included and must be given full rights (777) for reading and writing, and will contain students’ and teachers’ uploads respectively. The interface is in English, French or Spanish.

2.1. The learners’ agenda

The students must register and are invited to indicate an agenda code and a group code, one allowing them to log on to the work agenda, and the other allowing the teachers to follow up the work of each of their classes, several of them possibly sharing the same agenda.

Learners may open as many agendas as required depending on the number of subjects related to one particular language (translation, summary writing, oral comprehension, etc.). They may open agendas for different languages by using a different password for each language. Vocabulary lists will then be common to all agendas for one particular language with no overlapping of one language vocabulary list on another. Notes will nevertheless be specific to each agenda.

One way to use the @agenda is to ask learners to prepare oral presentations or role-plays for the next class. In this case, to make sure all the roles are distributed, a reservation system can show what roles or subjects have already been selected.

The students’ workspace is divided into three windows:

a. The largest window shows the work agenda with a list of assignments, tasks to be completed, and links to documents, recordings, videos, oral comprehension exercises, etc. The documents must be recorded in web format to appear in the window. Exercises such as quizzes or gap-fills can be associated with a recording (audio or video) which will remain visible on the screen while the exercise may be scrolled up and down depending on its length.

b. A window on the right of the screen includes five buttons to make reservations, open the vocabulary list, see the work history, access a partner’s notes, and close the work session.
The learners can add more words to their vocabulary list at any time. They are expected to provide translations, illustrations in the form of short sentences, synonyms and/or antonyms whenever possible. A tool-box includes three online monolingual and multilingual dictionaries, different lexicons and glossaries selected by the teachers, grammar lessons and exercises, access to reference documents, and a forum.

Learners also have access to two free online text-to-speech converters (Acapela and AT&T) and can compare what they hear – a variety of languages and accents are available – with their own voice by using the recorder included in the tool-box. They may save their own recordings and the text-to-speech conversion.

Two virtual keyboards are available: one for languages using special characters, the other for the international phonetic alphabet. Learners can write from left to right or right to left.

c. The third window, at the bottom of the screen, is a whiteboard where learners can note down detailed plans for oral presentations, translations, answers to open-ended questions, descriptions of pictures, abstracts of documents, etc. These notes can be made available to partners who will need a password for correction, improvement and collaborative work. Partners may belong to any group using the same server. The whiteboard can be enlarged as a pop-up for greater ease of use.

d. Students can change their personal data at any time, include their portrait, send a collective email to their group, or an email to their teacher for guidance or help.

e. The portfolio of languages provided is meant as support for the students to assess their competences in a maximum of four languages. The portfolio includes the three sections of the model provided by the Council of Europe (passport, biography and dossier), and a grid showing official descriptors as well as a more detailed grid to help students assess their progress. Users may store formatted documents in the dossier to complement their notes. They may also store audio or video files which will be accessible to both their teachers and anyone they give the URL of their portfolio to.

2.2. The teachers’ corner

a. An authoring application allows teachers to create work agendas with virtually no computer literacy. All they need to know is how to find a file in a directory and how to browse the web.

Teachers are expected to write assignments and provide documents (text, audio or video files, PowerPoint slides, etc.). They may either copy the URLs of online documents or upload documents from their own computer.

Teachers are given a chance to associate audio or video files (or web pages containing audio or video links) to HotPotatoes exercises after downloading a file allowing the software to collect the scores.

A library of lexicons and glossaries is provided. They can be deleted, more lexicons can be added easily (online ones or personal lexicons to be uploaded), as can grammar handbooks and reference documents.

As many as fifteen different agendas can be created by each teacher. Agendas can be shared, developed collectively, copied, etc. Each agenda is open for a maximum of 24 work sessions, easily covering the needs for a semester or a year and several groups can work on the same agenda.

The agendas can be updated at any time, the names and codes altered, and teachers can select which lexicons, reference documents and grammar handbooks will be accessible from each agenda.

b. The follow-up section allows teachers to select groups of students so as to correct their vocabulary lists or their notes, and consult their portfolios. They may therefore anticipate problems and
communicate with them by email prior to the oral presentations or role-plays they will perform in class. They will also see when and how long they have been working on their agenda, although this is not entirely reliable given that some will prefer to work on paper and others online.

Teachers can also use this section in class to make notes of the mistakes and progress made by the students and possibly note down their presence by ticking a box. They may also send them collective or personal emails whenever guidance or information is needed.

References

