

Language Learning with First Click on Slovene

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First Click on Slovene is an interactive multimedia CD-ROM for learning Slovenian as a foreign language. It is intended for English speakers without any prior knowledge of Slovenian language. The user learns the minimal vocabulary and acquires the basic verbal skills of the language, useful in everyday situations: at work, in public places, or in spare time. Although the CD-ROM is designed to be used by learners working alone, it has proven to be a helpful tool also for a teacher in the class. In the paper, we first introduce the computer assisted language learning (CALL) and the role of multimedia in language acquisition. Then we explain the motivation and main ideas of our work. The description of the developed CD-ROM follows: the course structure, its content and the system implementation. The discussion on future work concludes the paper.

Keywords computer assisted language learning; educational system; interactive CD-ROM; foreign language learning; multimedia; Slovenian language

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning with computers is nowadays a part of our life. Especially Internet and multimedia have brought new perspectives to the use of information technology in education. Multimedia CD-ROMs have become very popular tool in learning languages, especially in second language acquisition, since the specific of language learning makes them ideal teaching tool, either as flexible self-study resources or as teacher's aids in the classroom. The importance of computers in this particular area of education is proven by many commercial products that are available today.

2. Multimedia and computer assisted language learning

Computer assisted language learning (CALL) is not just an approach to language teaching and learning, where the computer is used to assist the presentation, reinforcement and assessment of the learning material. It can be more generally defined as a search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning [1]. Traditional CALL can play three different roles in language acquisition [2, 3]: the computer can act as a tutor (e.g. for delivering instructional materials to the learner), as a stimulus (e.g. to stimulate discussion, writing, or critical thinking), or as a tool (e.g. word processors, spelling and grammar checkers, and concordances).

Most present day CALL programs fall in one of the following two categories [1]:

- Multimedia CALL (usually on CD-ROMs or DVDs), or
- Web-based CALL (in addition to traditional multimedia CALL features exploits other technologies, such as audio and video conferencing, chat, email, etc.).

In multimedia, different ways of presenting information can be combined to increase the effect of that information to the learner. Each media element has its own particular advantages in conveying particular kinds of messages and evoking particular kinds of learner responses [6]. The computer's ability to combine, link and organize all these communications elements leads into multimedia message which may be

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much greater than the sum of its individual parts [6]. This non-additive principle [5] is one of the biggest advantages of multimedia.

Effective methods in language teaching and learning traditionally incorporate different media, including text, radio, broadcast TV, audio and video tapes, etc. This richness of different media (in digital form), combined with interactivity and speed of access, is typical for modern interactive multimedia courses [4, 5]. Learners using interactive multimedia material are active and involved [6], they have to think about the language, engage with it and respond to it, and this is what makes them better learners.

3. Multimedia CD-ROM First Click on Slovene

Multimedia CD-ROMs as flexible self-study resources [6] have become very popular tools for learning languages. Although the market is swarming with products for most popular languages, the choice of products for Slovenian language is very limited. Our product, which is called First Click on Slovene, expands the offer of multimedia CD-ROMs for learning Slovenian as a foreign language.

The initiative for this product came from the US Foreign Affair Office, which sought for a multimedia CD-ROM for their Embassy employees working in Slovenia. The language course is intended for English speakers without any prior knowledge of Slovenian language. The course covers the basics of the language, useful in everyday situations: at work, in public places, or in spare time. The user learns the minimal vocabulary and acquires the basic verbal skills in Slovenian language. Although the CD-ROM is designed to be used by learners working alone, it has proven to be a helpful tool also for a teacher in the class.

The development of this interactive multimedia CD-ROM is a joint project of experts from various fields: linguistics, computer science, design, and video and audio production. Their work was coordinated by United States Embassy to Slovenia, Ljubljana.

3.1 Course outline and structure

The language course is thematically divided into six learning units:

- introduction (*ABC*),
- work and occupation (*Hello!*),
- leisure time (*What are you doing?*),
- shopping (*How much does it cost?*),
- eating out (*Let's eat!*), and
- searching for information (*Information*).

The first unit introduces Slovenian alphabet (sounds and letters), numbers, and basic communication, while the next five units encompass different topics from everyday life situations. The chosen topics correspond to the language needs of a businessman at work as well as in the spare time.

The learning material consists of various media and is presented in different forms: plain text, hyper-linked text and icons, illustrations, pictures, photos, audio, video, and animation. The language of explanations is English and a written English translation can be easily obtained for all words, dialogues and texts from the lessons. Their Slovenian pronunciations (i.e. audio clip) can be played on request.

Complying with its purpose, the course focuses more on listening and reading (understanding the language), and less on speaking and writing. Thus, not all four language skills are equally represented.

In each unit, the learner gets familiar with the basic communication patterns, frequently used words, and short texts. The learning unit consists of different activities, where each activity focuses on different learning aspect: introduction to the topic (*Picture*), listening and understanding the dialogues (*Dialogues*), reading (*Reading*), real functional materials (*Authentic material*), and exercises for practicing and assessment (the pen icon in Fig. 1). The only exception is the first learning unit with the introduction activities, where *Alphabet* and *Numbers* replace *Picture* and *Reading*. Grammar (the book icon) and glossary (the magnifying glass icon) are common for all six units. All activities can be selected directly from the menu (see bottom-page menu in Fig. 1), which can be accessed any time during the course.



Fig. 1 *First Click on Slovene*. Each unit starts with *Picture* that presents the basic words and phrases related to the topic of the unit. The picture can be explored using the mouse - the user can hear words and dialogues in Slovene with the left click, whereas right click displays the translation in English. The topic on shopping (Unit 4: How much does it cost?) starts with a picture of a supermarket with some dialogues between costumers and a shop assistant. The goods on the shelves are labelled with their Slovenian names when the mouse is over them.

A context sensitive help (*Instructions* in the left-side menu in Fig. 1) is available throughout the course, which describes the functions and the effects of each activity, together with the unit number and the unit title.

Learners can traverse the course in two distinct manners. They can freely browse and explore the material by making their own choices of unit sequencing and activities (*Guidance OFF* in the left-side menu in Fig.1, which is also the default option). The alternative is to turn on the guidance (*Guidance ON* displays in the menu) and the program guides the learner through the learning material, following the suggested predefined sequence of activities and learning units. Either option can be selected from the menu at any time.

Learners can also check their progress in the course (*Results* in the left-side menu in Fig. 1), which is measured by the percentage of the solved exercises in the current unit and in all units altogether.

3.2 Topic of the unit

The main topic of the learning unit is introduced in the activity *Picture*. This is the entry point to each unit, where the basic vocabulary and general phrases of a certain topic are presented.

The learner can browse through the picture using the mouse to discover the names of different objects in the picture as well as short dialogues between the protagonists. Each displayed item (object description or dialogue) is presented in written form; its Slovenian pronunciation and a written English translation are provided on request (by left-clicking or right-clicking on the item). An example of *Picture* on shopping is illustrated in Fig. 1.

3.3 Listening

The activity *Dialogues* develops the learner's listening skills as it offers several dialogues on the unit's subject area, which are in the form of audio, video, or comic book. Although the audio and video dialogues are performed by amateur actors, they try to imitate authentic Slovenian speech. The Slovenian

dialogue text is available also in a written form together with its English translation, which helps the learner to follow and understand the presented dialogue. New grammar structures from the dialogue are marked in the text and links to their detailed explanations are provided.

3.4 Reading

The activity *Reading* provides a short story on the topic of the lesson and is intended for improving learner's reading skills. All written texts can be heard if needed (i.e. audio can be obtained on a mouse click to check the correct pronunciation) and the English translation is available on demand.

3.5 Real functional texts

To better prepare the learner to everyday life in Slovenia, some real functional texts and phrases are gathered under *Authentic material*. They include important telephone numbers, common abbreviations, Slovenian documents, an engagement calendar, greeting cards, public signs, a menu from a restaurant, money orders, weather reports, etc.

The material was either scanned (e.g. identification documents) or illustrated (e.g. greeting cards) and can be explored using the mouse (left and right click provide the correct pronunciation and translation for the text).

3.6 Practice and Assessment

The learning material is supplemented by different types of exercises for practicing different language skills, such as listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Basically, all *Exercises* are divided into four groups:

- Comprehension (testing learner's understanding of words, dialogues and stories from the lesson),
- Practice (rehearsing learned words and phrases, their meanings, and training their use as well as the use of grammar structures),
- Translation of words and phrases (matching Slovenian words and phrases from the unit to their English translations), and
- Games (not mandatory, but informative and entertaining).

The correct answers to all questions in the exercises are also available and the learner gets immediate response after solving the exercise. In order not to discourage the learner, we decided to allow the repetition of the exercise until the correct answer is given. Each exercise is thus considered completed only when the correct answer is provided and the learner gets one point for each successfully answered question in the exercise.

3.7 Grammar Structures and Glossary

The explanation of all grammar structures together with words and phrases that can be grouped by their meaning (e.g. days and months) can be accessed from the grammar menu. We restricted ourselves to the elementary grammar structures and forms that are used in everyday communication and thus have to be recognized and understood.

The grammar structures in the course (e.g. in dialogues) are marked with the grammar icon, but are not explained there; the learner can access the explanation following the icon link or by selecting them directly from the grammar menu.

The glossary is comprised of approximately 300 frequently used words from the course material and comprises the vocabulary that the learner is preferably to acquire by the end of the course. It consists of two parts: Slovenian-English and English-Slovenian, both assisting the learners in acquisition of new words.

4. The application

Since the course is intended for various learners with different backgrounds and abilities, we were trying to design a CD-ROM that every user would benefit from. Our goal was to create an attractive application with an appealing and easy-to-use user interface, so that also non-technical learners would enjoy using it.

The application was developed using ToolBook Instructor [7] multimedia authoring environment, which supports all needed multimedia components and contains an internal scripting language called OpenScript for creation of more advanced products. ToolBook Instructor follows the event-driven programming paradigm, where the event handlers are called in response to external events. Besides, it supports object hierarchy, where each object has its own properties and attached scripts that describe its reaction to different events.

The implemented software is intended to run in Microsoft Windows environment with standard multimedia requirements (e.g. CD-ROM drive, video graphics adapter with accelerator, sound card, speakers or headphones). The application provides easy installation through a setup program, which installs the required ToolBook run-time engine and the core application files on the hard disk, while all media files (audio and video clips) run directly from the CD-ROM.

The course encompasses over 9 minutes of video (480 by 360 pixels, 25 frames per second) in 7 video clips (167 MB in total), over 1200 different audio clips (287 MB in total) and a short Macromedia Flash animation in the opening sequence. All video and audio material, animations, images, illustrations, and texts from the course as well as the page and course design are authored work of different experts working together on this project.

5. Conclusion and future work

The presented interactive multimedia CD-ROM has been successfully employed as a complementary teaching tool in several courses and summer schools for foreign students. Encouraged by its success, we are now preparing an advanced course, called Second Click on Slovene, with additional six learning units.

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