



The Triangular Issues in Multimedia Language Courseware Design in the Vietnamese Efl Environment

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Abstract

In this paper, among many issues pertaining to the design of EFL multimedia courseware, I would like to discuss three correlated major fields which are of utmost significance in accordance with the literature and my personal reflection on the present context of foreign language teaching and learning at the University of Danang (UD), Vietnam. The presentation will consist of three parts, including the exploration of potential users of a CALL product; what should be included and what strategies are needed for the selection of the contents of the product, and the essential criteria for the multimedia design. These are followed by a summary of the triangular issues.

Keywords: CALL, Multimedia design, EFL

1. Introduction

Multimedia environments have several unique characteristics which make them of interest to language educators. They allow information to be conveyed through spoken and written language, as well as through images, video pictures, graphics, or photographs (Levy, 2007). Hence, an understanding of the multimedia design process is precisely essential for not only multimedia designers but language teachers as well. Together with the development of multimedia technology and rising requirements of educational standards, the language teachers must now, in addition to the knowledge of the target language and the current language teaching methodologies, possess an expertise of Multimedia CALL (Levy & Stockwell, 2006; Robin, 2007), in which the know-how of the design process of multimedia courseware is a foundation. The paper will present three correlated major fields (Figure 1), among many issues pertaining to the design of multimedia courseware, which are of importance in accordance with my reflection on the current literature for the future application to my language classes in the Vietnamese context.

2. Triangular Issues in Multimedia Design

2.1 Characteristics of the potential users

The first, fundamental issue needs to be taken into account when, or in fact before, designing multimedia language courseware is an understanding of the characteristics of the potential users. As far as the learners' variables are concerned, "knowledge of the learners' age, sex, physical abilities, education, cultural or ethnic background, training, motivation, goals, and personality, computing experience and so on" (Levy, 1999:91) should be considered. There is no doubt that the better we know the needs and characteristics of the users, the better we can make the design. Wherever possible, to ensure that their needs are met, learners need to be involved in the design process. The designer should also be sensitive to factors that emerge as a consequence of individual learner characteristics. As the chart in Figure 2 suggests, the knowledge of the target group is of extreme importance.

Table 1 illustrates an overview of the intended users of a future multimedia courseware program at the College of Foreign Languages, UD. It can be spotted from the table that the greatest advantage of this group of users is the age range. Learners of this age span can be considered active and dynamic. They are neither too old nor too young not to be able to adapt to a new learning environment. However, three matters need to be highlighted are gender, cultural background and computing experiences. Multimedia courseware designers in this context are advised to keep in mind that 65% of the learners are from the countryside where people have limited access to computers and the Internet. This factor leads to the clear consequence shown in the table that 70% of the users have very limited knowledge of using computers.

Besides, it would be a useful approach to conduct a survey about learners' attitudes and aptitudes (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007) to CALL before the actual application of any innovated multimedia courseware into the existing curriculum. Perhaps circulating a computer attitude questionnaire at the beginning of the course would be a good way to attain a

better understanding of these users. In addition, providing an adequate computer orientation would help these students have a better expertise in using computers in language learning.

2.2 Courseware content

Second, the knowledge of the potential users of the particular multimedia courseware means very much to the selection of **content**, which is, according to Colpaert (2004), the main challenge for developers of language courseware. Apart from being correct, authentic and accurate, the content should be as right and proper to the intended users as possible and should engage the learner in meaningful tasks. In order to attain this, the first thing the designer should pay attention is themes or topics. The selected topics should be appropriate to the users' preferences and interests. Next comes the language difficulty. Factors such as concreteness and length of the material play a pivotal role in determining language difficulty. For example, based on the data in the table 1, the course is intended for pre-intermediate English learners and thus the degree of language difficulty is at medium level. The themes chosen are those that should be familiar to these young adult learners. The course should deal with concrete items and try to avoid abstract themes, which would not be suitable for pre-intermediate apprentices. Additionally, text length needs to be measured in the sense that the "text is read more slowly and comprehension is lower when it is read from the computer screen rather than from print-based media" (Hannafin & Hooper, 1989:159). Finally, due to the common textual learning style of Vietnamese learners of English and limited contact with target language speakers, listening and speaking should be regarded as the most challenging macro skills in comparison with the other two skills (reading and writing). Hence, more workload should be put on these two skills than the others and the speed of the spoken part must be below normal.

Another point to make about the issue of content is that language courseware requires a vast amount of rich and varied material. In his doctoral dissertation, Colpaert (2004) mentions that the amount of content needed in present language courseware is generally underestimated. An overview of the language learning CD-ROM "Issues in English" (Kaufman, & Westwood, 1996) will give us an idea of how limited the amount of content is in the particular language courseware. Though carefully designed in terms of technology (using Asymetrix ToolBook Instructor software), the CD-ROM still needs much more material to satisfy the learners' need of as much comprehensible input as suggested by Second Language Acquisition theory (Krashen, 1982). On the other hand, a tour through the other courseware called "Multimedia Little Brown Handbook" (Fowler & Aaron, 2002) presents us a different view about how much information a courseware program can offer. Though "little" is included in the title, the CD-ROM is not little at all. It contains a huge heap of material on language learning. The feeling one may have after taking the tour throughout this CD-ROM is that the resource provided in this program is endless. This similar feeling can be experienced with other Web-based courseware, such as Easton's Materials for English Learning <<http://eleaston.com/>>, Dave's ESL Cafe <<http://eslcafe.com/>> and Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab <<http://esl-lab.com/>>.

2.3 Screen design

Finally, after the potential users have been clarified and the material has been selected, how to present the content on the computer screen is another crucial issue. Technically, **screen design** (Smidt & Hegelheimer, 2004) should be taken into consideration and this is the last issue in this discussion. Research proves that effective screen design causes potential learners to develop and maintain interest in lesson content, promotes the engagement of the learner with the material, and facilitates deep processing of important information (Stemler, 1997 and Hannafin & Hooper, 1989). In other words, well-designed screens focus learners' attention, help students find and organize information, and support easy navigation through lessons. To demonstrate, Churchill House School of English Language Web-based learning environment can be evaluated as excellent in terms of fabulous content and attractive screen design <<http://www.churchillhouse.com/>>.

In fact, screen design is the large issue that covers such micro factors as presentation of text, graphics, sound, movie and the use of colour. Presentation on screens should visually stimulate, be easy to read, and exhibit no annoying or distracting features (Richards, 2005). It is recommended to use the number-three principle. For example, no more three types and sizes of fonts should be presented per screen. Also, highlighting of text with colours and flashes helps to control selective perception and focus attention on identified information. However, too many colours and flashes can be distracting and make texts difficult to read. Along with texts, graphics should also be used to present information. In fact, both ought to be applied in multimedia software, especially for difficult topics with beginning learners. Furthermore, a multimedia language-learning program will hardly be complete without audio and video elements as sound and movie have obvious advantages for presenting materials to young learners, particularly those Vietnamese learners of English with limited contact with English speakers previously mentioned.

In a word, one of the merits that multimedia technology brings about is the possibility to combine various presenting styles into one particular product, which then has significant impacts on the selection of the content and the motivation of the learners. It is required that the designer make use of this facility to *systematically, easy-accessibly and artfully* arrange as much suitable material as possible on the computer screen. Obviously, the more user-friendly the program is, the more efficiently the users can learn.

3. Conclusion

In summary, the three interrelated issues presented in this short essay, though not the only ones since there are many other issues with regard to multimedia language courseware design in the literature, are complement to each other. In order to be successful in developing multimedia courseware, the designer is advised to master this triangle, which is also my accumulated knowledge and preparation for the design of a future courseware program for the students of English at the University of Danang, Vietnam.

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Table 1. Intended Vietnamese users of multimedia language courseware at UD

Intended users	Second-year students of English
Age	17-20
Sex	Female: 80% Male: 20%
General Education	High school diploma
Cultural background	City: 35% Country: 65%
Language level	Pre-intermediate
Computing experiences	Novice: 70% Intermediate: 20% Advanced: 10%

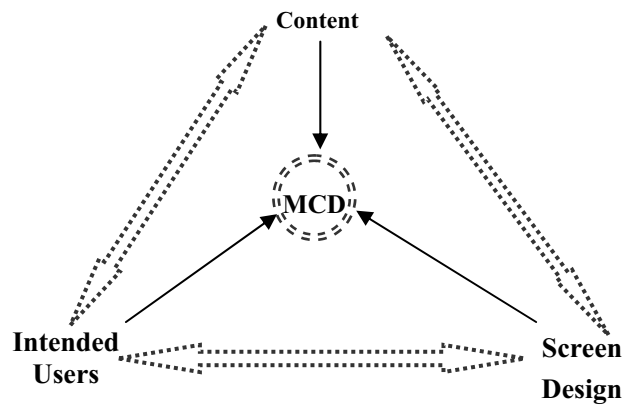


Figure 1. The Triangular Issues in Multimedia Courseware Design (MCD)

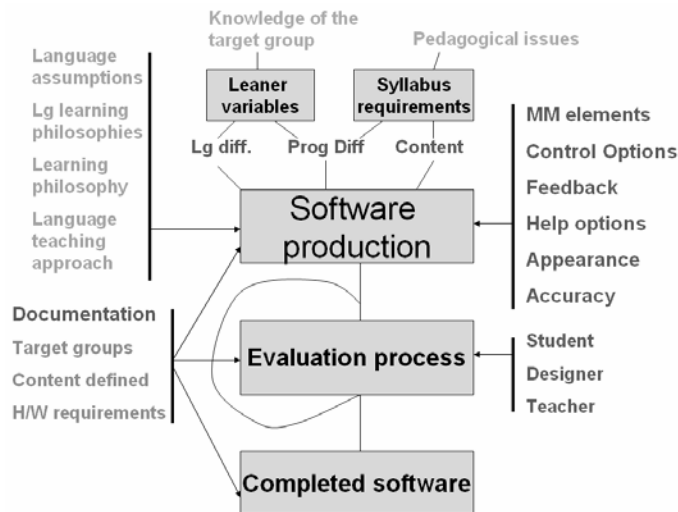


Figure 2. Process of Multimedia CALL Design