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Ms Parrot the detective solves grammar problems in an online resource for students and lecturers

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The University of Adelaide

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www.adelaide.edu.au/english-for-uni



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List of acronyms used

AALL – Association of Academic Language and Learning
EAL – English as an Additional Language

Executive summary

An Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) seed fund grant in 2012 allowed the recipient to create a resource to learn and teach the difficult area of the English article system, which research shows to be an especially difficult grammatical item for learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL). The grant was used to fund a professionally filmed video, which has been placed on a newly created website with interactive exercises for students to use independently or for teachers to incorporate into their lessons. The video is based on the story of grammar detective Ms Parrot, who enters a quiz show called 'Thanks a Million' and wins a million dollars to save English grammar. The quiz show includes an international student audience, and the video is humorous and creative. The website is now freely available (www.adelaide.edu.au/au/english-for-uni), and is achieving as many as 200 page views a week, with people all over the world watching the video and completing the self-study exercises. Teachers are also using the site in their classes, and referring their students to the exercises for independent study.

Qualitative and quantitative evaluation indicates that the objectives of the project were achieved, with a pre- and post-test achieving statistical significance ($n=335$, $p<0.001$) and much positive qualitative feedback.

Recommendations for the future include wider dissemination of the website, and the addition of further resources to the site.

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Project Outcomes and Impacts

This project aimed to produce a high quality video and accompanying exercises on a website for use by those learning or teaching English as an Additional Language (EAL). The focus of the materials was the English article system, which research shows to be one of the hardest areas for EAL learners to master (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Miller, 2005; Miller, 2006). The materials were developed after extensive research on the English article system by the chief investigator (Miller, 2005; Miller, 2006).

The video is based on a story in which grammar detective Ms Parrot wins a million dollars by competing in a game show, and saves the English article system from an anonymous kidnapper. The game show is based on the popular format of “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?”, familiar to students from many different countries. The video project thus built on students’ existing cultural knowledge to create a shared learning environment (Vygotsky, 1978), in which student and lecturer interaction was enhanced by a learning space constructed via a video story and game show context.

Teachers in English language schools frequently use games and other less ‘academic’ activities in their lessons, and the literature on using games to teach grammar content in English classes is well attested (see, for example, Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1998; Ur, 1995). However, less research has been conducted on the use of popular culture in teaching within a university context, although a study by O’Shea (2006) indicates that this is a medium to explore further. There was no previously existing resource of this type for the teaching of grammar, thus the Ms Parrot resource is helping to fill a large gap in the market and contributing to research on the use of popular culture in lectures.

Another key feature of the video was the use of humour. Humour may obviously vary across cultures and should be used carefully in lectures so that students do not feel excluded (Nesi, 2012). Indeed, in one study of 176 students in China, it was found that these students did not engage with humour in the classroom and in fact felt apprehensive (Zhang, 2005). There is also debate over whether the use of humour leads to increased learning (Derks, 2007, p. 212, as cited in Roth, 2008, p. 59), with little evidence so far on either side. Nevertheless, unlike Zhang (2005), Dörnyei (2001, as cited in Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011) suggests that judiciously used humour can in fact lower students’ anxiety. This project included questions in its evaluation on the use of humour in the video, and the results indicate that humour was a key feature of the video’s success (see Evaluation, below). The project has thus helped to fill a gap in research on the use of humour in lectures.

The project supports several key OLT program objectives. The quality of the video aims to raise the profile of teaching in universities and in the general community by providing a resource of commercial quality freely available to potential users. Publication of the results of the project, and dissemination of the website link, will help others to use and embed good practice in Australian higher education institutions. International links have been forged at the CLaSIC conference and through personal responses to List server postings, which it is hoped will result in further collaborations for resources of this nature.

The project prioritises international and intercultural dimensions of language learning support by providing a resource that facilitates EAL students in their English grammar learning and stimulates their desire to learn a difficult but vital area of English.

Critical factors in the project's success were the expertise of outside consultants. For example, input from the film maker was vital in the quality of the final product and affected the design of the storyline, as he advised on what would look best and what was possible in a video format. Advice and practical help from a university online consultant was invaluable in setting up the website.

The only obstacle to the project's success was the lack of completed online surveys. I had thought that the offer of three iPod Shuffles would entice people to take part in the online evaluation, but it has proved difficult to get people to complete the evaluation form, even when they were personally invited to at the end of a lecture.

Similar projects could be undertaken at other universities if suitable equipment and expertise is available.

Dissemination

The video and accompanying exercises are available on a website that is freely accessible to anyone, anywhere in the world: www.adelaide.edu.au/english-for-uni. This site was set up so that the project leader, or a replacement, could edit it when necessary, and the level of the website address means that it will not be hidden in another webpage which might disappear if restructuring of a unit or department should occur.

Information about the website has already been made available by dissemination through the Unilearn, AALL (Association of Academic Language and Learning) and EATAW (European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing) Listservers and The University of Adelaide Staff News. Information has also been posted on the Grammar Gang website and four Linked In group sites: Higher Education Teaching and Learning; TESOL; Think: CLASS (Centre for Learning and Academic Skills Support); and Innovative and Creative Teaching Strategies in Higher Education.

A red carpet première of the video was held at The University of Adelaide in October 2012, attended by many students who participated, members of the School of Education, and the University's Pro Vice-Chancellor (Student Experience). The Head of the School of Education formally presented DVD copies of the video to all the participants.

Information about the project was also disseminated at the AALL symposium held at Swinburne University on 22 and 23 November 2012 and the Adelaide AALL tri-institutional day on 29 November 2012. I also presented a paper on the video at an intercultural language and communication conference (CLaSIC 2012) in Singapore on 6 December 2012, giving out free copies of the DVD there, as well as promotional flyers.

A book chapter on the pilot project leading up to the production of the video has been submitted to a peer reviewed book of selected papers from the CLaSIC conference, and is currently being reviewed. Data analysis is nearly completed based on a lecture given to 335 international students at which a pre-test and post-test were given and the video was used as the only teaching material. This analysis is in the process of being written up and the paper will be submitted to a peer reviewed international journal. A further paper on the use of articles in English will also be submitted for peer review to another international journal.

Linkages

As a result of the project, further ideas for videos are emerging with other language lecturers at the University, in the areas of French and Japanese. These will be piloted at a later date and possibly become grant applications in their own right. Links are also being established with staff at other universities, such as the University of Bergen in Norway, where staff have produced an excellent video on plagiarism.

Evaluation

The usefulness of the video of a teaching tool was evaluated in a lecture given to 335 international students who had recently arrived in Australia. Ethics approval was obtained for this study. The students were given two pre-tests, the first consisting of an exercise in which 16 spaces indicated potential gaps where articles (a/an/the) needed to be included; the second test had four articles missing, but no gaps were indicated. The second test was therefore much harder, as the students had to decide not only which article to use, but also when to put an article. The students completed the pre-tests and then watched the whole Ms Parrot video (totalling 27 minutes) on a large screen in a lecture theatre, with no extra commentary from the lecturer. They then completed the post-test exercises, which were identical to the pre-test exercises. There was a significant improvement in the mean number of correct scores for the gap-fill exercise from time 1 ($M = 11.86$, $SD = 2.03$) to time 2 ($M = 12.53$, $SD = 2.30$; $t(330) = -5.28$, $p < .001$). There was also a significant improvement in the mean number of correct scores for the non-gap exercise from time 1 ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.21$) to time 2 ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.67$; $t(328) = -5.06$, $p < .001$). These results were very encouraging, showing that the instruction in the video made a statistically significant improvement to their use of English articles in the two tests.

The video and website have also been evaluated through an online evaluation, so far completed by 17 students and 6 teachers in various countries. Because a pre- and post-test were conducted in a lecture featuring the video I did not ask those 335 students to evaluate the resource at the same time, as I did not want to over-burden them in the space of a 1 hour lecture. I had thought they would visit the website and complete the survey there with the incentive of winning an iPod Shuffle, but this was not effective and I was disappointed in the number of surveys eventually returned. The results of these surveys were nevertheless very encouraging, with students and teachers enjoying the humour and the characters, and finding the resource very useful for marking the grammatical subject matter interesting.

Students

Students particularly valued the humour and clear explanations provided in the video (see Table 1).

Table 1: Online evaluation of the video website by students (n=17)

| | Strongly agree | Agree | Undecided | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|-----------------------|--------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| This video stimulates my interest in learning about the English article system | 64.7% | 29.4% | 5.9% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| This video provides clear explanations | 76.5% | 23.5% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| The use of humour in the video stimulated my interest in the grammar content | 52.9% | 41.2% | 0.0% | 5.9% | 0.0% |
| The use of humour in the video made me feel more relaxed; | 47.1% | 35.3% | 11.8% | 5.9% | 0.0% |
| The detective story made the grammar content more interesting | 47.1% | 35.3% | 5.9% | 11.8% | 0.0% |
| The quiz show made the grammar content more interesting | 52.9% | 29.4% | 11.8% | 5.9% | 0.0% |
| This video has helped me to reflect on the use of articles in English | 52.9% | 47.1% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| This video will help me to use articles correctly when I speak or write English in future | 58.8% | 35.3% | 5.9% | 0.0% | 0.0% |

Qualitative feedback included comments such as:

- It was not boring and want to watch again and again.
- All the people in this video are so lovely with such good talents in acting.
- The video described a whole story, I think it was complete and have made audiences have interested to watch it to the end.
- The teaching point is made in a creative way; simplify the complexity of the use of articles; easy to follow the whole story.

Teachers

Only six teachers have so far completed the online survey. Their answers are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Online evaluation of the video website by teachers (n=6)

| | Strongly agree | Agree | Undecided | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|-----------------------|--------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| This video stimulates my interest in teaching the English article system | 33.3% | 50% | 0.0% | 16.7% | 0.0% |
| This video provides clear explanations | 50% | 33.3% | 16.7% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| The use of humour in the video stimulated my interest in the grammar content | 40% | 60% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| The use of humour in the video made me feel more relaxed; | 33.3% | 50% | 16.7% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| The detective story made the grammar content more interesting | 33.3% | 33.3% | 33.3% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| The quiz show made the grammar content more interesting | 66.7% | 33.3% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| The quiz show was an effective way to help me think about correct article use | 66.7% | 16.7% | 0.0% | 16.7% | 0.0% |
| This video has helped me to teach the use of articles in English | 50% | 33.3% | 16.7% | 0.0% | 0.0% |

The teachers in the survey obviously enjoyed the use of humour, and thought that the quiz show was an effective vehicle for the teaching material. Qualitative feedback also showed that they valued the production quality. Their suggestions for how they used or would use the material in their own teaching included:

- elicited rules for articles; presented video Mrs P.; students worked individually; students pooled answers and completed online; students did quiz in groups
- To present articles in a more interesting way than through a gapfill on paper.
- I'm going to give my students the link so they can practice at home (we do not have access to the internet in the classroom). I might use the ppt presentation in class.

A number of DVDs have in fact been created, and are freely available to anyone who is unable to use the Internet version in class.

The project leader has also received many emails from teachers in different countries who have used the website and found it a valuable resource, with comments such as this one from a lecturer in Germany:

- Thank you very much for providing the link to your website. I would like to congratulate you on the very approachable style of the website and the

clever invention of Ms Parrot (I am not sure though if Hercule would be amused about such stiff competition). I will definitely include your website in my lectures as a reference on online exercises and look forward to the expansion of your website.

Google Analytics were started for the website in January 2013, showing as many as 200 page views a week from a wide variety of countries

It is thus clear that the video and website are making an impact in the English teaching sector, both in Australia and overseas, and helping to fill a gap in the market by providing high quality, innovative, well-researched teaching materials in an engaging and creative format.

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