

COMPUTER-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING



NEWSLETTER



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MESSAGE FROM
THE CHAIR

By Katherine Muhlhausen

The process of reading and selecting abstracts for San Antonio (TESOL '89) was emotion-laden for me. First, horror as I contemplated 64 abstracts to send to the 24 readers and to read through and evaluate myself. Then, exhilaration as I read through them and, for the most part, found that I really wanted to attend the presentation. Next, depression as I began the delicate task of skimming off the top 20 that would represent such an incredibly rich and varied Interest Section's year-long work. And finally relief (the way Pontius Pilate must have felt) as I sent off the results to TESOL and let it be their responsibility to make the ultimate decisions (although you can bet I'll scream if they don't go with our first choices!). There were literally enough excellent abstracts for three good conferences. I strongly urge those of you who were unfortunately rejected this year due to lack of space in the program to submit your papers in writing to the CALL-IS Newsletter and/or to CALL Digest and to your local and regional conferences. I wish we had received that many good solid abstracts for our regional conference!

I tried to be as fair as possible in the abstract reading process. Out of the approximately 40 individuals who had expressed interest in reading abstracts at the Chicago conference (TESOL '88), 24 responded to my letter asking if they were still available. (Apologies to those who may not have received the letter. How did I miss you?) TESOL recommended three readers per abstract; we had six. Going on a purely numerical rating system, I could clearly pick out about the 20 most popular and 20 least popular proposals. That left me with about 20

question marks. I went on the readers' recommendations for the overall selection, then tried to make sure that a wide area of interests was being served, that currently "sexy" topics were adequately represented, that we didn't have too much repetition or overlap, and that old favorites and newcomers alike were welcome. Then it was up to the powers at TESOL to work their magic and put together an unforgettable conference.

Some suggestions to those of you sending in abstracts in the future:

1. The abstracts that were clearly unattractive to the readers seemed to fit one or more of the following descriptions: they were "old hat" (things that were done years ago; you can read about them in any book); they had too much theory or background information and didn't get around to explaining exactly what they would cover during the presentation; they were too broad (the "everything but the kitchen sink" approach); they were too narrow (the "this is what I did on Friday morning with three students" approach, much more suited to the Software Applications Fair); they never specified what they were going to do; they were boring to read and perhaps therefore boring to listen to at a conference (who knows?); they were off-the-topic (either not really ESL or not really CALL); they were too slick (perhaps a vendor in disguise); and some were just unbelievable (they're gonna do all that in that short amount of time?!). But of course, just to confuse you more, some of the clearly popular topics had the same shortcomings!

2. The attractive topics were above all easy to read. They first established their focus, then explained what they would be doing in their presentation. (Let's hope that's what the presenter actually does next March in San Antonio!) They didn't try to cover too much in the specified time. They were innovative, different, exciting, interesting, and well-written.

3. TESOL now sends the Chair the names of the abstract writers (they never did in the past - a major victory for those past IS Chairs who needed past conference chairs about the value of knowing who had submitted the abstract), but I did NOT share the

student missed--this is unfortunate because a homonym pair is not a concept. My guess is that this heading is used in the entire series and that it might be appropriate in some programs.

With typical Hartley meticulousness, the Teacher's Guide is clear, and people who are new to computers should find it easy to follow. One example is the advice in the section on how to print out a student's results:

"If Y, it will ask for the slot which will usually be 1 or 2. If you're not sure, take off the cover and check the location of your printer card." (p. 24)

Nothing threatening in those instructions! They make it possible to use HOMONYMS for an intermediate staff training workshop in program modification. This disk has so many options, addition and deletion possibilities, that it is too complex for a first try at program modification although a new user could fare quite well with the program as it is written.

In the 34-page Teacher's Guide, it is only in the Suggestions for Use section that the guide loses its strength. Under "Other Uses," we learn that the format has been used for such diverse things as teaching students to use the library, working with LD students to develop sequencing skills, matching vocabulary with definitions (p. 33). Another diverse thing probably is working with students acquiring English.

ESL students will neither become familiar with homonyms nor learn the concept of two words with different meanings and spellings, but with the same pronunciation, by using HOMONYMS. Furthermore, users must read, and Hartley states that the reading level is 1-4. Intermediate ESL students from grades 3-8 were able to work some of the lessons. One seventh grader in her third year in the United States characterizes HOMONYMS as "better than a test, but a lot less fun than a party," which places it exactly where most instructional tools fall in the pre-adolescent daily scheme of activities.

HOMONYMS is best used in the ESL classroom with students who constantly misspell words. It does not teach spelling, but it clears up misspellings that are due to not distinguishing among homonyms. This is one of those programs, however, for which it is difficult to justify using the computer. I printed out several lessons, and students did them on paper with as much enthusiasm as they showed for the vertical version. One student who wanted to use the computer is new to computers and always prefers the technological version. If a teacher needs precise records of homonym work, the advantage of the computer is that it keeps records. This is the only advantage because it takes longer to modify a lesson than it would to type it with a word processor.

Record-keeping is, unfortunately, not a good reason, either, for doing homonym drill with HOMONYMS. When users type, whether their names

or responses, only the slowest typists succeed. The program captures only parts of words if one types at normal speed, and then calls these responses wrong. Students who know the answer look at the keyboard and type it. Plain comes out plin. They do not check it on the screen. The program tells them they are wrong. After they understand the problem, they find it a nuisance to slow down and are no longer interested. Their names, which they types faster than their responses, are also wrong. They have to see messages such as, "Good work, Gibrto!"

In class testing with 51 ESL students, those below grade four did not seem to follow the accounting system. Intermediate students reported that they had done well when they had answered correctly only half the time. Intermediate students between grades five and eight liked the program initially. When they discovered they would have to type slowly and deliberately, however, they accused the keyboard of making all their errors for them--even those where they actually chose the wrong word.

Visually impaired students, on the other hand, might enjoy the large type and uncluttered frames. Printing out the lessons, however, gives normal type. A teacher might be tempted to print out the lessons so that several students could practice them at once.

That is back where we started, though, isn't it?

THREE (OR SIX?) FOR ONE...

TALES OF ADVENTURE, TALES OF MYSTERY, and TALES OF DISCOVERY

System Requirements: For IBM PC, XT, or PCjr, DOS 2.0 or 2.1 and color graphics adapter (or BASIC cartridge with PCjr), one disk drive, 128K memory; Also versions for Apple and Commodore 64.

Publisher: Scholastic Software

Price: approx. \$25 each; or \$40 for "school version" with teacher's manual, student handbook, and backup disk.

Audience: Intermediate ESL students or ages 8/9 and up.

By Vance Stevens

Branching adventure stories can be a compelling medium for instruction in ESL; e.g. Baltra's (1984) well-known report on Mystery House, as well as interest shown in adventure games in the CALL-IS Hospitality Rooms at TESOL Conferences. The trouble is that Mystery House is possibly the only item of software appropriate to ESL produced by people whose profession is adventure games, and games conceived by teachers from commercial or

shareware adventure game templates tend to be half-baked and very time consuming to improve or create from scratch.

This is why I have chosen to review a trio of branching adventure stories created with 8 and 9 year old native English-speaking school children in mind, but which can also be useful with classes of intermediate (and also advanced) ESL students. Though on topics of interest to children and adolescents, there is enough madcap humor in the scenarios that the stories should appeal to adult as well as young learners. Also, the adventures are short so that two or three scenarios could be played through in a class hour; yet they are sufficiently varied to invite repeated attempts.

Although the amount and difficulty of reading in these stories may be just manageable for ESL students, the idiomatic nature of the vocabulary and culturally-bound wisecracks and situations threaten comprehension for non-native speakers. On the other hand, the reading itself is not much more difficult than that in an intermediate level graded reader, and what is the purpose of reading anyway if not in part to learn something of a new culture from the idiosyncratic perception of a given author? Because of the cultural bias, ESL students will find these materials challenging, but the opportunities to enjoy language learning and to appreciate humor in the target culture should be well worth the effort. But for these same reasons, the materials may be unfathomable to all but the most advanced students in EFL situations overseas.

Because these stories were not written for ESL, the language used is often inappropriate for foreign students. For example, in Haunted House, there appears a ghost named Murray who fancies himself something of a comic. As one response to his sudden appearance, students can choose to "skip the jokes," but if they opt for Murray's routine, they are treated to a half dozen riddles and one-liners; sample: "Knock knock! Who's there? Boo! Boo hoo? ..." I'm sure you get the idea; the other jokes are similarly culture-specific plays on stereotypical ghosts. Consider too the following dialog in Fossils Alive:

Dyna: Wanna do the project on fossils?

You: The thought never crossed my mind! Sure, why not?

Here, we have not only the American conversational reduction of "Do you want to ...," but an idiom used facetiously. This is not to suggest that there is anything wrong with exposing ESL students to this kind of language; on the contrary, such exposure may help them cope with what they need to know anyway in their everyday linguistic environment. However, ESL teachers need to be aware that there are many nuances in the stories their stu-

dents are going to need help with.

The best story in the lot is Mystery of Pinecrest Manor, in which players must discover who stole a priceless Egyptian statue. The suspects are found in interviews to be in turn greedy, vindictive, jealous, or overly-ambitious--even kindly Uncle Digby has a possible motive for the theft. Through a systematic exploration of rooms and clues (a worksheet could be developed for this purpose) students should be able to solve the mystery in as little as a class period, though the solution is by no means transparent. In the process, students would also have to solve some language puzzles; for example, the fact that Lois Street has been sent to "cover the story" and wants to "write a sensational newspaper article" are the only indications that she is a reporter.

Next in cognitive load would be the Pirates of the Soft Seas, where students have to solve various word puzzles for clues to the whereabouts of treasure hidden somewhere on an island. The puzzles are all preceded by directions on how to solve them, which for ESL students would themselves be reading comprehension puzzles. The solutions to the puzzles are meant to challenge young native-speaking readers, and ESL students may lack the vocabulary needed to make the logical leaps to solve them (however, a little help should put them on track). The pirates incidentally, are software pirates, and only by eschewing the urge to walk off with their purloined software can players emerge unscathed from the game; if you yield to temptation, you walk a worm-wood plank, directing your token character with arrow keys.

The character directed by arrow keys figures into many of these games, sometimes tediously so, especially if a player is trying to regain a juncture where a disastrous decision was previously made in order to try out another option. Sometimes you have to direct your character from one side of the screen to the other simply to choose which fork in the road or stream you wish to follow; while in Fossils Alive, in at least two instances you negotiate a dark cave by moving your cursor whichever way it will go over a blank screen. In one of these instances, you are looking for one of two exits to a cave where obstacles are cleverly indicated by flashing Ouch!es, but in the other instance, moving the cursor seems nothing more than a drag on time.

In Northwoods Adventure, you can direct your character along a trail and either pass a flashing noise source or direct the character off the trail to see what is causing the ruckus. Here, the code for the sound and visual effects interferes with the cursor movement, so that to get across the screen takes longer than usual. In Haunted House, on the other hand, escape from the kitchen by directing the token is a disappointedly straightforward beeline; however, in exploring the house (in the dark), it is possible to

fall into the invisible hole in the living room, and so move from haunted to haunter status. In Microzone, one scenario places you in a maze which you have to negotiate very painstakingly in order to achieve the goal at the end; and some of the pitfalls are both lethal and invisible, sending you back to the start of the story after much wasted effort. Of course, mine is the adult view; young readers probably appreciate the degree of involvement with the story that moving a token cursor gives them.

For some reason, our college-aged Arab students gravitate toward Adventures in the Microzone in preference to the other adventures. The story line is somewhat whimsical: after being awakened by Yonkers, the cat, bouncing on your chest, you go downstairs and fix yourself breakfast (choice of goopy glumpy candy or eggs, toast, milk and orange juice; later, how well you eat figures into the story). You then take the opportunity of your parents being out to fly solo on the family computer. Unfortunately, the bad guys have infected it with a virus that turns users into micro-midgets, and your only hope for restoration is to negotiate your way through a shag rug to the workshop where your grandfather drills holes in straws and find the computer manual which you hope will suggest an antidote before your parents get home and scold you for being tiny. Despite involving experiences to which our Arab students wouldn't appear to relate (and no one ever knows what a shag rug is), this story is inexplicably more popular than the others.

The occasional illustrations are quite nice in this series; they are appropriate, enhance interest, facilitate comprehension, and sometimes incorporate quick animation. The programming is also competent. The escape key works almost anywhere in the programs to return students to the beginning, and text is meted out in large letters and small doses. I did find two bugs: in Haunted House, if you type FLASH to get your flashlight to work and then press ENTER once too often, before the flashlight actually lights up the room you are in, then you get a message to the effect that there is something wrong with your disk, and the program reverts to the beginning. It then takes a few minutes to regain from scratch the point where the accident occurred. The other bug, in Fossils Alive, is more serious. On the other side of the mountain, a few text frames come out garbled and illogical elements creep into the story.

One distracting anomaly in this software is that each story in the program pair resides on different sides of the disk. Therefore, students have to flip the disk before they can explore the other story--a simple operation, but one that MS-DOS users are not used to. Also, when students exit the program, they are instructed to remove the disk and turn the computer off. This works, of course, but may not be exactly what you want your students to do.

None of these relatively minor criticisms erode the fact that ESL students (and their teachers) should find this software fun (if that is allowed) and possibly even useful. In our own Student Resource Centre, the programs are used voluntarily by students on a self-access basis. I would certainly recommend them for self-access use, and particularly in the case of Mystery at Pinecrest Manor, as worthy of some focused attention in an ESL setting.

REFERENCE

Balra, Armando. 1984. An EFL classroom in a Mystery House. TESOL Newsletter 18,6:15.

[Ed. Note: I have had great success with Infocom's less esoteric offerings, such as DEADLINE, and most of all, with SUSPENDED. Peter Lee has used SEASTALKER, an easier Infocom game, and Nancy Jones, with some complaints, has found the graphics adventure, MASK OF THE SUN worth-while. For the younger set, we have WIZARD OF OZ. There is a huge amount of interactive fiction.]

LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Publisher: MicroEd, PO Box 24750, Edina, MN 55424. (612) 929-2242.

System: Amiga 500 with one drive.

Level: Beginners

Ages: Elementary through Adult

Skills: Listening, Vocabulary, Structure, Word Order and Reading.

Reviewed by Macey Taylor

An interesting new program on the CALL scene is this 11-disk set of lessons for beginners which contains listening comprehension lessons and tests, along with two reading disks which reinforce the material taught aurally (and physically). As usual, I am pushing for digitized speech instead of synthesized, and again the publisher is receptively considering the idea (and also using MICROTTEXT to make more interesting programs and interactive videos). According to Michael L. Wilson (Speech and ESL, Mississippi Co. Community College, in Blytheville, AR), this series has been found satisfactory (even "exciting") and has become the primary method of instruction of entry-level students in the first three weeks. He also reports the flight to Arkansas of the President of a Japanese business, now considering the purchase of Amigas in order to use this software.