ELTAO Seminar in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Summary of an Experiment

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INTRODUCTION

From 29 June to 3 July 1992 a seminar devoted to computer assisted language and translation teaching (ELTAO) was held in Las Palmas. It focused on the CALIS authoring language and was attended by 45 secondary and university language and/or translation teachers.

Within the framework of the educational reforms which are being implemented in Spain, the teaching of foreign languages has gained importance. This means that not only has the number of class hours increased; the range of languages taught in schools has also broadened. Moreover, the educational authorities are promoting the application of new technologies to teaching and most educational centers already have computer classrooms which can be used both for the study of informatics and for self-accessed learning. Against this background, computer programs which help the teacher to prepare material are acquiring ever-increasing importance.

ELTAO AT THE FACILITY OF TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA (UAB)

The use of computers to teach language and translation at UAB dates back to 1977/78 when two teachers at the center helped to draft their own authoring language for teaching spelling in Catalan.

A group of teachers from the German Department worked on the development of the METAL German-Spanish automatic translation program under the aegis of an agreement between the UAB and the Siemens company.
In March 1990, a seminar to explore state-of-the-art technology in the field of informatics as applied to teaching was organized. Preben Späth presented the various authoring programs. The seminar revealed to possibilities of computer-based approaches for drafting complementary lesson material teaching both language and translation. As a result, the ELTAO group was constituted. Later on, the Group was joined by teachers at the School of Translators and Interpreters of the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Since then the ELTAO group has subsidized a pack of exercises for teaching basic Catalan which have been written using CALIS. In response to the interest shown by language teachers, the ELTAO Group decided to organize occasional seminars to make language teachers familiar with computers and, in particular, with CALIS.

THE FIRST ELTAO SEMINAR

Objectives

The primary objective was to set up a forum where language and/or translation teachers could learn and exchange ideas within the ELTAO field. The second—closely linked with the first—was to create a workshop for analysis, research and experiment with the application of computer tools to the teaching of language and translation. From this point of view, it seemed that Las Palmas provided ideal conditions, which would guarantee a suitable infrastructure, arouse sufficient interest and ensure contact and cooperation among the participants at a later stage.

Work guidelines and development of the seminar

The seminar was organized around four spheres of activity: approaches to methodology, the presentation of authoring techniques, practical workshops supervised by tutors and discussions about teaching material prepared for computer.

Approaches to methodology

As the seminar was aimed at professional teachers, the approaches to methodology had to concentrate on the application of informatics to didactics, its objectives, its possibilities and its limitations. At the beginning of the daily sessions, theoretical-methodological lectures and discussions were scheduled. Their aim was to act as an introduction to authoring concepts which would be treated theoretically and practically
that same day. In this field the aid of Professor Frank L. Borchardt and Preben Späh was invaluable. This session was completed with the organization of a colloquy followed by a debate on the subject “ELTAO: Experiments, Limits and Prospects.”

**PRESENTATION OF CALIS TECHNIQUES**

The presentation of the basic authoring concepts and commands was arranged in blocks which were independent of one another, but nevertheless constituted a progression, in such a way that in the practical workshops that followed them the participants were already able to do their own exercises and were not restricted to the mechanical practice of commands. It should be pointed out that the most characteristic authoring commands were presented with the intention of allowing the participants to learn the remaining ones easily for themselves with the help of the manual which was handed out.

The first block was given over to presenting the error analyzer and the “seven basic authoring commands.” An ASCII editor was also demonstrated during the first session.

The second block dealt with the organization of windows and the position of the cursor (<Q>, <T>, <D>, and <CUR>), the teaching commands (<PASS>/<NOPASS>, <GIVEUP>, etc.), the spelling commands <CAP>/<NOCAP> and the “cosmetic” commands such as <BO> and <TYPE>.

The third block consisted of the commands which provide access to other archives such as <IMPORT> or <ADD>, the corresponding cosmetic commands <POPUP> and <SIZE> and the analyzing command <SPELLCHECK>.

In the fourth block, for information only, the possibilities of the hypertext, LINKWAY, ToolBook, WinCALIS, and syntactic analyzer programs were presented.
PRACTICAL WORKSHOPS

The aim of the practical workshops was for the participants to experiment with the use of the commands which had been presented, but most of all for them to discover for themselves the possibilities of applying CALL in their own field. The role of the tutors was limited to providing support for the students at the seminar while they were implementing their ideas; in no case did they direct their activity. In this way there was a guarantee that each student would finish a complete exercise whose degree of elaboration would depend, naturally, on a set of conditions: familiarity with the text processors and other self-access programs, pedagogic experience, understanding of the CALIS philosophy, and personal creativity. The participants had an opportunity to present their own work at the last session of the seminar.

PRESENTATION OF SELF-ACCESS EXERCISES

As the seminar was short and there was no time to experiment in depth with the whole range of possibilities of CALIS, teachers who had already authored exercises using the language were invited to present their work. The idea was to provide as wide a range as possible, from practice for beginners to translation exercises prepared with CALIS, WinCALIS and hypertext.

CONCLUSIONS

1. In general, the way the seminar was planned — a balance between theoretical and practical classes, workshops and lectures — produced good results in terms of the students’ understanding, attention and work produced.
2. For future seminars the possibility of requiring previous knowledge of informatics at user level, or at least an introduction for students who need one to operating systems, text editors and Windows should be considered.
3. The methodology of language and translation teaching could be examined in greater depth and more emphasis could be placed on this aspect as opposed to the purely technical ones.
4. It is important to situate ELTAO within a wider pedagogic framework, which included the use and exploitation of the new technologies alongside traditional tools. In this respect, the introduction to methodology session and the colloquy-debate, in which the participants and tutors at the seminar—all language teaching professionals—had a chance to exchange points of view, were highly positive, as they provoked a reflection along these lines and placed the issues of computer use in the proper context.

5. The experience of the first ELTAO seminar in Spain leads us to make an observation: by its nature the goal of an introductory seminar is to encourage the participants to continue to use the tools presented in their everyday work. Therefore, what could be more suitable than providing exercises written with CALIS for perfecting the use of CALIS?

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