Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to provide an evaluation of the effectiveness of Système-D, a composition resource tool, in a first-year university level advanced language classroom environment, incorporating a simple text editor, a small bidirectional French-English dictionary, a lexicon of thematically related vocabulary and phrases, and elementary grammar notes. Système-D has great potential to enhance basic writing skills. Unfortunately, on their own, few students show themselves willing or able to profit from what Système-D has to offer. Maximum exploitation of the program requires its integration into the curriculum and the classroom. When used as a vehicle for directed text manipulation exercises. In combination with peer group teaching, Système-D can lead to welcome improvements in grammatical accuracy. The active involvement of the instructor in the process, however, is crucial to its success. Complete control of Système-D’s functions and a thorough knowledge of the contents of its data bases are a sine qua non for the selection of topics, preparation of exercise texts, and provision of supplementary pedagogical materials.
Keywords: Système-D, foreign language word processing, text manipulation exercises, peer group teaching, CALT classroom integration

INTRODUCTION

As its name indicates, Système-D: Writing Assistant for French, is a resource tool intended to enable students to fend for themselves when confronted with the challenge of producing written French. An innovative departure from the all too familiar CALL drill programs, it is one of a new breed of word processor/data bases specifically designed for pedagogical purposes. In addition to a simple text editor, the package incorporates a small (4440 item) bidirectional French-English dictionary, a lexicon of thematically related vocabulary and phrases, and elementary grammar notes. Système-D was initially reviewed by Garrett (1988) Barson (1989) and Pederson (1989), which may be consulted for further details of its features. The purpose of this paper is to provide an evaluation of Système-D based on two semesters’ practical experience with advanced first-year students of French at Monash University.

Voluntary Student Usage
Judging by experience at Monash, left to their own devices none but the keenest students can be expected to voluntarily exploit the resources of Système-D. During the first semester of the program’s introduction, a tutorial group in the first-year post high school stream was given a general description of its features and invited to be shown how to use it for their composition assignments. Out of some 25 students, all of whom were quite accustomed to computer utilization, about half responded to the invitation. Of these, only a couple persevered beyond the orientation session; not a one submitted homework prepared with Système-D. Which is not to say that those who took the trouble to try the program felt it was of no use. On the contrary, spontaneous reaction was quite positive, even from learners considerably further advanced than the intermediate level which Système-D was designed to serve. Aside from the obvious problem of lack of enthusiasm for optional course materials, the main factor impeding use of Système-D was that of practicality. In an academic setting like Monash where most students live off campus, working with any lab-bound aid necessarily entails squeezing it into an existing schedule or making a special trip into the university. Needless to say, whatever the potential benefits, few indeed are the language learners prepared to make that kind of
commitment to their studies.

**Assessed Student Usage**

Having introduced into the French Department four years earlier voluntary computer-aided grammar review lessons, with a similarly disappointing lack of utilization, the initial results with Système-D were not totally unexpected. As our previous experience, echoed elsewhere (Jones and O'Shea 1982; Church 1988; Burston, et al 1988), had shown, transforming positive student attitudes towards the usefulness of CALL materials into actual usage requires incorporation of these programs into the curriculum. It is notable that well over 90% of students, including those for whom Système-D exerted so little attraction, regularly complete their assigned computer lab grammar review exercises—now an integrated and assessed part of the syllabus.

A high failure rate on the mid-term language test in the first-year course last year provided a willing source of weak advanced level students for a special second semester class designed around Système-D. Enticed by the opportunity of substituting the marks on a half-dozen short compositions (150-200 words) for that of the failed test, two groups of ten students met in the computer lab once a week for a one hour tutorial intended to improve grammatical correctness in written expression. To this end, a variety of text manipulation tasks were assigned fort-nightly: imitations of advertisements, letters of protest against false-advertising promises, transformations of dialogue into discourse form, etc. All exercises were based on authentic French documents, which were accessible on screen through Système-D as well as in printed form. Working together at the computer in randomly selected pairs, students spent the first session of every fortnight exchanging ideas and sketching out a solution to the writing task. Each then returned the following week with a preliminary version of an individually completed exercise, which during the interval could either be composed directly with Système-D or hand written and copied over into the editor. These first drafts formed the basis of a mutual correction exercise, which was again done in pairs at the keyboard, after which a final version was submitted for assessment.

Methodologically, on or off the computer, there is much to recommend having language learners undertake together the preparation and correction of written compositions. In theory, the major advantage of doing so using Système-D lies in the resources it makes available at the touch of a key. In actual practice, it was quite surprising to observe how little spontaneous use was made of what the program had to offer. Whether originally created with Système-D or simply copied in, early preliminary drafts abounded with the kind of avoidable errors which are the despair of language teachers: spelling, accents, gender, agreement,
verbal conjugation. In large measure, the failure to utilize Système-D to verify linguistic details stemmed from a fundamental lack of concern for these kinds of mistakes. Although carelessness was certainly involved, it was not the only factor, nor necessarily the most significant. Even when correcting in pairs under the guidance of an instructor, students often remained blind to the most elementary faults. Moreover, unless prompted, they at first rarely sought to enlist the resources of Système-D to weed out the problem. Similarly, despite constant reminders in class to consult the User's Guide or on-line help, requests for operational information were almost invariably directed in the first instance to other students or the instructor.

As a matter of necessity, linguistic consciousness raising became the primary pedagogical aim of the initial written exercises. While rough drafts continued to manifest substantial numbers of elementary morphological errors, by the third composition final versions submitted after peer group correction showed a marked improvement in this regard. Encouragingly, so, too, did first drafts turned in during the latter part of the course. In the process, student initiated recourse to the Système-D data base became much more spontaneous. By far, the most frequently consulted resource was the French portion of the bilingual dictionary, which proved useful as a basic gender/spelling checker. The verb conjugating facility, likewise, found ready favor. Not unsurprisingly, considering the relatively advanced level of the class, the restricted lexical inventory of the program was quickly discovered; as a consequence, unknown words were rarely sought on-line. Since the source documents for the text manipulation exercises themselves contained most of the essential vocabulary, the presence in the lab of a standard bilingual desk top dictionary sufficed to meet student requirements. As with searches for unknown vocabulary, few calls were ever made upon Système-D's other materials: thematic lexicon, phrasal expressions, grammar notes. In part, this again followed from the difference in ability between our tutorial groups and the intermediate level targeted by Système-D. While undoubtedly helpful at elementary stages, basic lists of colors, body parts, family members, meals, etc., held no attraction for advanced language learners. Intrinsic inappropriateness rather than linguistic competence, on the other hand, precluded the use of the phrasal inventories. Given their natural conversational bias, they are liable to remain of marginal value for written compositions, whatever the linguistic level. So, too, the usefulness of the on-call grammar review, which consists predominately of morphological summaries, is effectively limited to the verification of grammatical forms. Offering only the most cursory guidance to proper usage, it
is unlikely to ever see much service, even with beginners.

**The Role of the Instructor**

If the writing tasks undertaken during the Monash course demonstrated the progress that could be made in utilizing Système-D to improve grammatical accuracy, they also amply attested to the crucial role of the instructor in the process. To begin with, the person responsible for the class must have complete mastery over the operation of this resource: little could be more counter-productive than a fumbling supervisor. Furthermore, however it is used, maximum exploitation of Système-D requires that the teacher have a very good idea of the contents of its data bases. Knowing what is there, and what is not, is essential in deciding when to send students off to find answers for themselves and when direct intervention, or the provision of supplemental materials, is needed. Such knowledge is also of great importance in the selection of topics and preparation of texts intended for use with Système-D. Naturally, the program being totally non-evaluative, correction of whatever is ultimately produced must, in the final analysis, be performed by the teacher.

As experience in other domains of CAI confirm (Wyatt 1988), it is wise to guard against unrealistic expectations of self-motivated exploration and discovery. On its own, Système-D can assist conscientious language learners in avoiding the most obvious pitfalls of written expression by reinforcing what has already been taught. Even more than the self-help it affords, however, the greatest potential of Système-D is to be found in the excellent tutorial environment it provides to set tasks that require the acquisition of new linguistic knowledge. By handling on its own the most basic and, alas, most persistent, grammatical and orthographic difficulties, Système-D frees the instructor to concentrate upon those emerging, relatively unpredictable, language points students need to learn.

**Areas for Improvement**

Over-all, Système-D is a well conceived and thoroughly tested package. During the more than 250 hours of closely supervised classroom use, not a single operational bug materialized. Similarly, typographical errors, in print or on the screen, are very few and far between. Nonetheless, keeping in mind the program’s original intent, there are some areas where it is to be hoped improvements might be forthcoming in future versions.

Firstly, within the editor, text manipulation would be greatly enhanced by the addition of basic copy/move/delete block functions. The dictionary facility, too, could profit from substantial pruning of deadwood to make room for more useful entries. Even for the most rank beginners, nothing is gained by defining or exemplifying such
obvious cognates as "cigarette, table; continuer, dîner, etc.". Considering the elementary nature of these items, a straightforward listing of their correspondences showing essential information (e.g. gender, accompanying prepositions) would suffice. Simple non-cognate vocabulary such as "chat, maison, etc.", could benefit from the same kind of streamlining. Similarly, removing the superfluous mention of self-evident reflexive verbal forms like "se brûler, se détacher, etc." could free up valuable space in the program. With regard to Système-D's verb conjugation algorithm, considerably more would be gained than lost by the total elimination of its reflexivizing option. Informing students (as a warning tucked away in the notes does) that some of the forms generated may be rarely or never employed, is at best pedagogically dubious. Utilizing precious computer resources to display entire reflexive paradigms based on the likes of "se déjeuner, se dormir, etc." certainly merits reconsideration.

Assuming the proposed purging of the data base were to happen, the question of what might be added to it then arises. Without a doubt, the single most effective enhancement would be the addition of a teacher controllable on-line lexicon. Even the existence of a modest 100 item modifiable glossary, would substantially increase the range of language learners and materials with which Système-D could be used. In the absence of such a facility, just reducing the memory requirements of the program would be beneficial. Preliminary experimentation (in a 640 kb environment) has shown Système-D to be tolerant of the presence of the MTX driven on-line Harrap's English-French and bilingual Collin's dictionaries. However, though Système-D continues to operate, the external lexifiles can eventually cease to function for want of available RAM.
REFERENCES


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