

FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Stay Tooned for better language learning

Stanford University

Students typically learn a foreign language by studying grammar rules and applying them through translation or rote practice. It's not surprising, then, that most computer software applications developed to help students master a second language emphasize extensive drills and repetition.

John Barson, professor of French at Stanford University, created Stay Tooned—a NeXT-based multimedia language-learning application—because he wanted to move beyond using computers solely as “drill masters.”

“With computers,” he says, “I felt that students could be constructively coached on a wide range of language concerns. I wanted students to be able to explore the language, experiment with it, and create with it rather than just be corrected with respect to grammatical accuracy or pronunciation in the abstract.”

Stay Tooned is designed for presenting and creating talking comic books or picture story books. The application displays pictures and text, plays recordings, and lets users enter new text, record their own voices, play back their voices, connect the recordings with text, and annotate a pictorial story.

Barson says creating Stay Tooned would have been impractical without NeXTSTEP. “NeXT provided a number of new standards that were necessary for this application to be effective, including a large, clear screen, the capacity to store hours of speech on a single computer, built-in recording and sound playback, and a library of software objects that saved many months of programming time. NeXT is the first machine to make such capabilities standard—and at a reasonable cost—and that helped to inspire the project.”

“The object-oriented programming environment dramatically reduced programming time and effort,” says Brodie Lockard, Stay Tooned programmer and member of Stanford's Academic Software Development group. “Because programming with software objects lets one programmer reuse pieces of programs already written and tested by others, we were able to reduce errors and duplication of effort.”

To use a Stay Tooned document, students click speech balloons in the document's picture to see and hear what the story's characters are saying. By continuing to click the speech and narrative balloons for a given

document, students hear and see the story unfold both in the target language and in translation. Students can also access glossaries connected to each document by highlighting words they want to look up. The dictionary mechanism also includes a more global user dictionary in which students can place all vocabulary of interest to them.

In addition, a comments panel in the form of a pop-up window attaches to any narrative frame or dialogue balloon so the instructor has a highly interactive way to critique students' work. Comments can be oral, written, or a combination of both. Creation of a comment automatically highlights the portion commented on, so students know which part of their work needs further attention.

^aUsing Stay Tooned, students study and produce the foreign language in a meaningful context with attention to broader discourse features, including attention to style, dramatic veracity, idiomatic appropriateness, and artistic effectiveness of both narrative and dialogue,^o says Barson. ^aThis is far more in keeping with 'real language use' than filling in blanks, repeating sentence fragments mindlessly, or memorizing trivial dialogue written expressly for the presentation of specific grammar or vocabulary.^o

Currently, Stay Tooned is being used at Stanford in the instruction of several languages, including French, German, Spanish, and Polish. Materials for Russian and Czech versions of the application are being developed.

According to Barson, ^aStudent response to Stay Tooned has been very positive. They point repeatedly to the excitement they experience from creating a story and watching it play out in front of their eyes. They appreciate the opportunity provided for reading dramatically, with emphasis on appropriate intonation. Students also enjoy the collaborative group-oriented atmosphere in which the stories are put together.^o

In the future, Barson hopes to use Stay Tooned to set up an interactive collaborative learning experiment among students in various universities. The students would prepare stories, swap them via e-mail, and critique one another's work.

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