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AUTHOR Flewelling, Janet
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ABSTRACT

The process used for evaluating computer software before it reaches the market may not be reliable or appropriate for the end user. School boards often develop their own evaluation procedures for teachers, but they may also be too technical, too long, or irrelevant to the teacher's purposes, and they may be too general for the discipline area in which the software will be used. A form appropriate for use by second language teachers should specify: lesson type; level(s) for which the materials are suitable; main topic; vocabulary and structures treated; whether accents can be input; appropriateness of cultural references; suitability of sound and graphics; quality of student instructions; quality of teacher documentation; feedback to student; recordkeeping capabilities; and communicative uses suggested. The form should be brief and concise. In addition, teachers need to be trained in critical software evaluation that reflects targeted subject areas and teaching methodologies. A sample form is included here, with specific questions for the evaluator to ask about the materials and format. (Contains 11 references.) (MSE)

Teacher Evaluation of Foreign Language Software

Janet Flewelling

Janet Flewelling (Ed.D., Toronto) is an assistant professor of preservice and inservice French at the Faculty of Education, University of Windsor. Prior to this appointment, she taught Core French for the Etobicoke Board of Education for 15 years. Her interests include second language methodology, teacher training and computers in education.

The current evaluation process

Software should go through a series of evaluations prior to being made available for purchase. In some cases, however, these evaluations can be superficial and unreliable. (Owston, 1985; Allesi and Trollip, 1985; Lillie, Hannum and Stuck, 1989). It is vital, therefore, that software destined for use in the school system be evaluated before it is catalogued for general use by teachers. Frequently boards of education will ask interested teachers to evaluate software they have purchased so that descriptions and comments about the usefulness of the software may be made available to other teachers. In addition, classroom teachers often preview, and therefore, at least subjectively evaluate software in order to make sure that it is suitable for their students.

Many boards of education have developed their own software evaluation forms for use by teachers. The best of these forms are concise and provide only the information that teachers really need to know in order to

determine whether software would be suitable for use by their students. Some boards, however, have made the mistake of patterning their evaluation form too closely after the forms used by professional evaluators. This results in teachers being faced with an evaluation scheme that can be too technical, too long and asking for information which is irrelevant to the classroom teacher's needs.

What should teacher evaluation forms look like?

A number of articles have addressed this question. (Bitter and Gore 1984; Alessi and Trollip, 1985; Lockard, Abrams and Many, 1987; Lillie, Hannum and Stuck, 1989). Flewelling (1989) made the following recommendations regarding the development of software evaluation forms for teacher use:

-the form should not be too long

-the form should not be cluttered

-the print should be of such a size that it can be easily read

-an overly complicated checklist should not be used. It should be sufficient to ask for yes/no or agree/disagree answers

-use of jargon should be avoided

-adequate room should be provided beside each question for comments

-questions which are subject specific should be included

-questions should be divided into categories in order to make the form easier to follow

Software evaluation and second language teachers

As was previously stated, many boards of education provide teachers who wish to preview software with board-designed software evaluation forms. Typically, these forms are generalized so that software representing any subject area can be evaluated on that form. The question therefore arises: do these generalized forms meet the needs of second language (SL) teachers or would they benefit from a form designed to answer questions specifically related to SL study? The latter viewpoint seems to be advocated by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (1981) which states that evaluation must serve the practical needs of a given audience. Lockard, Abrams and Many (1987) agree. They comment: "Our experience is that the most useful form for evaluating courseware is the one that speaks directly to the primary concerns of the evaluator (...) Therefore, we recommend that anyone setting out to evaluate courseware begin by developing a personal (...) form for that purpose".

The logical outcome of this position is to develop an evaluation form specifically for SL teachers. In order to do so, one needs to draw up a list

of questions and criteria for SL software. SL teachers will need to know the following:

-type of lesson

-level(s) for which it is suitable

-main topic

-vocabulary and structures reflected

-can accents be inputted?

-are cultural references appropriate?

-are sound effects and graphics suitable?

-quality of the instructions to the student

-quality of the teacher documentation

-feedback provided for the student

-does the program keep a record of student scores?

-does the program suggest communicative uses?

In developing an evaluation format for SL teachers, the challenge is to include the above information without making the form too long or too complicated. It is clear that a number of other questions need to be addressed. It would be hoped, however, that an initial evaluation of all software purchased would be done by the board's computer resource personnel in order to weed out any software unsuitable by the more generalized criteria of the board's standardized evaluation form. This would then allow SL teachers to concentrate on evaluating the software

according to their more specialized criteria.

Simply providing teachers with a form designed for the evaluation of SL software, however, is not sufficient. The majority of teachers have not been taught how to evaluate software. Unless they know what to look for and why, they will probably not be able to evaluate software in an informed and critical manner and their evaluations are likely to be less than reliable. A number of researchers stress the need for teachers to be trained to evaluate software (Ragsdale 1983; Caldwell 1983; Jones 1984). They should receive training on how to critically evaluate software and to recognize quality software. Moreover, the training should reflect the teaching methodologies associated with specific subject areas and grade levels.

Many teachers, may feel that they do not have the time to take a course in software evaluation, or they may believe that since they are only reviewing software in order to determine whether it is suitable for use in their own teaching program, a training program is not necessary. For these teachers it is imperative that, along with the software evaluation form, they be provided with a guideline on how to evaluate software. The guideline should be subject specific, short and concise so that the teacher will be less tempted to put it aside without reading it.

A proposed software evaluation form and guideline for SL teachers

Based on the questions that researchers suggest need to be asked about SL software and software evaluation theory , the following evaluation form is suggested for use by SL teachers. It should always be accompanied by the software evaluation guideline included herein.

SECOND LANGUAGE SOFTWARE EVALUATION GUIDELINES

The purpose of this guideline is to clarify some of the terms used in the evaluation form. You are encouraged to read the guidelines before evaluating any SL software. When responding to questions, please use the back of the page if insufficient space is available on the front of the evaluation sheets. Ideally, your evaluation should reflect the reactions of students using the software as well as your own reactions to it.

General Information

Lesson type: is the program drill and practice, tutorial, simulation, adventure game or some other form? (specify)

Year of language study: since different school boards begin their SL programs at different grade levels, in addition to indicating the grade level(s) for which the program would be suitable, also indicate what year of SL study the grade(s) would represent.

Main topic: indicate the central theme of the program

Peripherals: is any equipment other than the computer required to run the program? (ie. printer, koala pad, joy stick, etc.)

Description: briefly describe what the program allows the student to do. Use the back of the page, if necessary.

Content

Vocabulary: the vocabulary used throughout the program should be neither too difficult nor too easy for the students. Any first/SL equivalents should be accurate.

Structures: the structures used throughout the program should not be too difficult for the students. If the main theme of the program is a specific structure, indicate whether it is being taught or reviewed.

Accents: it is highly important that SL software should allow students to add the required accents and diacritical marks to their work. Explanations of how to do this should be clear and the accents should look realistic.

Culture: some software may deal specifically with a cultural theme. It should represent the culture accurately, in a modern light and without stereotyping. Culture may also be included incidentally and should adhere to the same criteria.

Technical aspects

Sound effects: sound effects can be fun but they can also overwhelm a program, becoming more important than the lesson itself. This is not desirable. Nor should they be too childish for the intended user age level. It is advantageous if the sound effects can be turned down or off, especially if the computer is to be used in the classroom while a lesson is being taught.

Graphics: graphics as well can dominate a program to the extent that the students forget about the lesson at hand. They should add to the program without overwhelming it.

Instructions: instructions should be clear enough to allow students to work independently. A help option should be available.

Documentation: documentation should provide information about the goals of the program, details of how the program works, a complete description of what the program allows the student to do, an indication of what age/grade level the program is intended for, an explanation of how the program is intended to be used and what equipment is required to run the program, as well as any other details needed to enable the teacher to feel confident about using the program with students.

Feedback: feedback should never be negative or insulting to the student. It should be age appropriate. A characteristic of a superior program is that not only will it inform students of when they have made a mistake, but it will also indicate what the mistake is.

Scoring: It is desirable that the program indicates to the students their level of performance through some sort of scoring mechanism. Ideally, these scores could be retained for teacher reference.

Overall: the program should adhere to good SL teaching pedagogy. It should enhance student learning, not just entertain. It should be fun for the students. It should not crash through an inadvertent mistake on the user's part. Preferably, it should integrate with some aspect of the classroom curriculum and should encourage in some way communication in and/or about the target language. Software which allows teachers to input their own information can be particularly useful since this facilitates the integration of the program with the curriculum materials being used in class.

Comments: provide your reaction to the program. Would you recommend it to other teachers? How would you suggest that it be incorporated into the classroom program? What communicative activities could it generate? Use the back of the page if necessary.

SECOND LANGUAGE SOFTWARE EVALUATION FORM

Teacher: _____ School: _____

General Information

Program name: _____ Catalogue number # _____

Language: _____

Lesson type (Please check): -Drill and practice
-Tutorial
-Simulation
-Game
- Other (Please specify) _____

Grade level: _____ Year of language study: _____

Main topic(s): _____

Make of computer: _____

Peripherals: -Printer
- Koala pad
- Joy stick

Brief description: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Content

Vocabulary - does it reflect a theme? _____
- are the equivalents accurate? _____
- is it suitable for the grade level? _____

Structures - is a particular structure stressed? _____
- is it suitable for the grade level? _____

Accents - do accents need to be created? _____
- can they be created easily? How? _____
- are the instructions clear on how to make them? _____

Culture: - is it presented in an accurate and up to date manner? _____
- is it free of stereotypes? _____

Technical aspects

Sound effects: - are they an asset or irritating? _____
- can they be turned down or off? _____

Graphics: - do they add or detract? _____

Instructions: - are they clear? _____
- can the student work independently? _____
- are help options available? _____

Documentation: - is it adequate? _____

Feedback: - is it positive and free from insult? _____
- is error analysis provided? _____

Scoring: - does the program keep student scores? _____
- can they be stored for teacher re ieval? _____

Overall: - is the program pedagogically sound? _____
- does it enhance learning? _____
- is it fun for the students? _____
- is it crash proof? _____
- does it integrate with your program? _____
- can you input your own information? _____
- does it encourage communication? _____

Summary

Comments: _____
_____
_____
_____

Recommendations

The use of computers in SL programs is still in its infancy. Their potential as motivators, tools and tutors, however, is high. Research indicates that computer-assisted instruction (CAI) can have a very positive effect on student motivation and learning. (Patterson and Smith, 1986; Lockhard, Abrams, and Many, 1987). But CAI can only be as effective as the software used in the process. It therefore is important that SL teachers make every attempt to find good quality software which can be used to enhance their teaching program and facilitate learning on the part of their students. Use of the software evaluation form and guideline proposed in this paper may facilitate this task.

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