Reports

MALTED: Europe's Largest CALL Project at the Language Centre of University College London

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The MALTED (*Multimedia Authoring for Language Tutors and Educational Development*) Project began on 1 September 1998. With a total working budget of over 3 million ECUs, of which over 50% is funded by the European Commission (from the Telematics Applications, Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci programmes), we are embarking on one of the largest and most ambitious language learning projects ever undertaken. The aim of this brief article is to illustrate the rationale behind the project, and describe the outcomes planned and the way we will achieve them.

Why MALTED is needed

Commercial programmes, usually designed for a mass consumer market, are often too general, and rarely address the needs of more advanced learners of languages and those with special purposes. Tutors can indeed create programmes using simple authoring systems devised specifically for language learning, though these are often text-based. Whilst multimedia facilities offer new possibilities for language learning, complemented by superior graphics, video and above all, sound, the average language tutor is rarely able to take advantage of these facilities and create or adapt materials for individual circumstances. MALTED addresses these issues on behalf of teachers, tutors and trainers.

What MALTED will provide

The outcome of MALTED will be the creation, verification and demonstration of new specialised authoring tools, and a system of access to content materials, for several language learning communities, including language tutors in educational establishments, of all levels, vocational trainers, publishers and other language teaching materials designers, with minimum training overhead.

The project is exploiting telematics-based multimedia to make available new sets of tools and templates for courseware as well as a common pool of materials from which participants can draw content and contribute new or re-versioned content. The pedagogic approach is ensured by the large scale of the demonstrator phase, and materials are being constructed in an open framework which allows for multiplicity of instructional design approaches. The dissemination phase aims to set up a viable ongoing system of access by subscribers to the tools and datasets. The system can be used off-line or on-line.

MALTED aims to increase the skills base of language tutors and publishers by providing these tools and access to dynamic sets of materials. This provides maximum re-usability and economies of scale and in turn facilitates the easy creation of materials for minority languages, less frequently demanded levels, and specific vocational sectors' training requirements.

The vision of the system is one in which tutors who wish to develop materials, large or small in scale, can download the range of tools they require to produce pedagogically sound courseware with high production values, and with a minimal training overhead. The tools will be expandable in the future to cover a wide range of the types of activities best done by computers.

But in addition, MALTED will be offering a new element. A sophisticated asset base will store content which can be re-used and re-versioned, thus saving time and effort in re-inventing some of the wheels. The way this is to be done can be summed up as 'marking up' the content with 'metadata' which will enable the database to be consulted as to the suitability of content for the desired purpose,

and will go further, in that automatic links will be created to other content - an example might be that you could find a similar piece of Spanish content to the one you require, but which happens to have its language support in, say, Finnish, instead of German, but which is easily changed. On a micro-level, the database will also handle automatic links between words and required hyperlinked explanations etc.

How MALTED will achieve its goals

The initial approach is drawing from several years of experience in using a 'templated' approach to materials creation. To support this, the project will harvest interest from a peer community prior to the demonstration and dissemination phases. Thus expressions of interest in the system are welcome from the language learning community.

The next steps have involved the creation of a telematics support structure and other systems for the verification of the prototype. A range of learning materials, across several languages and ability levels, is thus being put in place for the large-scale demonstrator phase. This will operate across five countries, including secondary school teachers in Spain, primary school teachers in Portugal, tertiary educators in the UK and France and vocational trainers in France. A commercial publisher will also create learnware material to be tested in a primary school and domestic environment in Ireland. To give an idea of the scope of the trials, over 1,200 teachers will be involved in Spain alone, with the resulting materials being trialled with more than 25,000 learners.

With these aims, MALTED will evolve into an ongoing language learning network for Europe on a fully commercial, though affordable basis. Tutors, authors and publishers will then be able to create materials at sophisticated levels without need for programming training. Re-usability of content will ensure economies of time and cost, and the overall result will be greater availability of improved courseware at lower cost.

Who is involved

The consortium is led by the Language Centre at University College London. Together with our colleagues in the Computer Science Department, the Project boasts a strong team on the technical side, with commercial partners Sema Group (Spain) and Cycnos Systèmes Ouverts (France).

Our educational partners are led by the Spanish Ministry of Education (New Technologies Programme), and include the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Télécommunications de Bretagne, and the Escola Superior de Educação, Bragança, (Portugal).

Vocational training considerations are covered by the National Training Service of France Telecom, and Capture Productions Ltd. (Ireland) are addressing the needs of commercial publishers.

Apart from the Consortium members, we are working closely with other organisations to extend the trialling and to ensure that what we offer conforms to the needs of the language learning community in the widest sense.

The MALTED schedule and outcomes

Once the tools and asset base system are released in the early autumn, 1999, training will begin for the trials, which will take place in the main between January and May of 2000. The results of the trials will be synthesised and published as a "Best Practice" report, and the system will aim to "go live" and commercial shortly afterwards.

Full and regularly updated information will shortly be found on the web site (http://www.malted.com).

Language tutors interested in participating in the project are welcome to get in touch with:

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