HOT POTATOES – HOW NOT TO GET BURNT

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This article discusses the advantages and disadvantages of Hot Potatoes, the software for creating interactive exercises on the web. Based on the authors' experience, some ideas and tips for using the software effectively, especially with advanced learners, are presented.

Key words - *Hot Potatoes, e-learning, interactive exercises, advanced learners*

INTRODUCTION

Hot Potatoes is software for creating interactive exercises on the web. It is possible to download it "free of charge for those working for publicly-funded non-profit-making educational institutions, who make their pages available on the web" (Hot Potatoes Home Page, online).

The aim of this article is not to give detailed instructions on how to use the software from the very start. Rather than that, we would like to share some of our experience with it and to give the readers tips for using it effectively. We have been working with this software to prepare e-learning language courses for more than a year and although we find it useful, we have come across a number of pitfalls that we would like to warn against. The Hot Potatoes exercises we have created are used as supplementary study material for the language practice course with full-time students (and are ready to be used with distance students as well) at the English Department, Faculty of Education, Palacký University. Since these exercises are meant for university students at the advanced level, we felt Hot Potatoes software has some limitations as it seems to have been formed especially to create rather simple activities. In the following paragraphs we will deal with the applications we have most experience with one by one, discuss their advantages and drawbacks and finally, offer some general pieces of advice.

JCLOZE

JCloze is probably the application we have worked most often with as it is suitable for making different kinds of gap-filling exercises. Since the size of the gap can range from a part of a word to a sentence (even to a paragraph, should you need it), there are countless possibilities to choose from. It is not necessary to prepare a whole text for this exercise (as it would be in the

proper cloze) but individual sentences might be used as well. The advantage of this application, in comparison to JQuiz (see below), is that students can see the whole exercise at once and are not distracted by any extra buttons placed after each single sentence. The "Check" button is situated at the bottom of the exercise.

Exercises in JCloze can therefore be used to practise various grammatical items - students might be asked to fill in the correct prefixes or suffixes of a word, prepositions, articles, verb forms, etc. The task can also be to rewrite the whole sentence in a way specified.

Language in use exercises such as a cloze, a multiple-choice cloze, word formation or error correction might be transformed into an interactive JCloze exercise as well. Besides that, of course, vocabulary exercises or even reading comprehension exercises might be created in JCloze. It is always necessary to decide which word, sentence, or sentence part you want the gap to include. If you, for example, want students to find and correct a misspelt word in a sentence, it is good to write the corrected word at the end of the line and make the gap out of it (compare figures 1 and 2 below; source of the error-correction: Acklam; Burgess, 2001, p. 50).

One of the most unusual marrige ceremonies ever held ... (0) marriage
must surely be the mass wedding that took place in ... (00) OK
midair between, Tokyo and Bangkok in 1972. This was
a publicity stunt organised by the german airline (1) _German_
Lufthansa to launtch the first commercial jumbo jet (2) _launch_
fliht of a European airline. Inviting Japanese couples (3) _flight_

figure 1 – JCloze appearance

One of the most unusual marrige ceremonies ever held ... (0) marriage
must surely be the mass wedding that took place in ... (00) OK
midair between, Tokyo and Bangkok in 1972. This was

a publicity stunt organised by the german airline (1) [   ]

Lufthansa to launtch the first commercial jumbo jet (2) [   ]

fliht of a European airline. Inviting Japanese couples (3) [   ]

figure 2 – web page appearance

Instead of leaving the task completely open-ended, it is possible to include either a word list with the text or a drop-down list. Both options can be found in the configuration (last but one icon from the right on the toolbar) under the button "Other". The drop-down list is particularly helpful if you use a long text and leave out a lot of words or, also, for so-called "gapped-text" language in use exercises. This is the type of exercise where students must choose from several sentence endings/beginnings to complete the gaps in a text. It is also possible to place the list of the missing sentence parts after the text, marked by letters or numbers and to include these letters/numbers in a drop-down list. However, we would strongly recommend making the drop-down list out of the whole missing sentence parts; it is definitely much more user-friendly for students than when they are forced to roll the web page up and down to see what they should be filling in.

What is important to bear in mind when creating the gaps, is all the possible answers that fit the gap. It is vital to include them among alternative correct answers. When creating exercises on verb forms, you have to take into account possible contracted forms as well. If the given correct answer is only e.g. *Tom is coming tomorrow*, the programme will consider a student's answer *Tom's coming tomorrow* incorrect, which may of course confuse the student considerably.

JMATCH

Matching exercises can be created in two different ways - in a drop-down-list format and drag-and-drop format. The drag-and-drop format is very handy as students can actually move the items around. What might be a drawback is that you have to limit the number of items to about 6-8 in an exercise to fit them onto the computer screen. If the list of the matching pairs is too long, it might be difficult to drag one piece from the bottom part of the web page and place it correctly. A definite drawback, from the methodological point of view, is that it is impossible to let students choose from a larger number of items to match to a smaller number, which, of course, would be more challenging and demanding. The application only allows for the same number of items on the left as well as right side. The good thing is, however, that you can set the configuration so that the items are shuffled each time the page loads and thus students cannot do the exercise just mechanically if they choose to do it repeatedly.

If you have a long list of items to be matched, a particularly useful approach is to limit the number of items that appear on the page (again, configuration file – "Other"). Make the items shuffle each time the page loads and link the exercise to itself. You have to include "Next exercise" button in the "Buttons" choice in the configuration file and fill in the URL of the very same exercise. In this way, students will be able to always view a limited set of items and by pressing "Next" they will get to a (slightly) different set of items and can continue doing the exercise almost endlessly.

JMIX

This application enables teachers to create exercises with "jumbled sentences" which give students excellent opportunity to practise English word order. However, as it is possible to put only one sentence into one JMix exercise, to make it challenging for advanced learners requires a lot of effort. What we did to overcome this obstacle was create a number of separate sentences/exercises and link them together in a chain following the procedure explained in the preceding paragraph (i.e. Exercise 1 links to Exercise 2 which links to Exercise 3, ... , until the last exercise links to the first one).

JQUIZ

Basically, there are two options in JQuiz. You can create either multiple-choice exercises or short-answer exercises.

Multiple choice exercises are user-friendly and easy-to-do as students instantly understand the task and all they have to do is click on the correct answer buttons. As far as the creators are concerned, we recommend you consider the distractors for each item carefully to ensure only one correct answer is included.

If you want to make your students come up with an answer of their own, you can choose the short-answer variety of JQuiz. This alternative makes the exercise immediately more demanding for students. From the technical point of view, however, JQuiz does not allow for the exercise to be checked as a whole after completing it, but the "Check" button needs to be pushed after each single question, which can easily become tiring or irritating. Therefore, it is wise to reserve the use of the short-answer JQuiz alternative for short exercises (up to twenty items).

GENERAL ADVICE

The following tips and ideas are more of general nature and can be applied to any (or more than one) of the applications discussed above:

- Hot Potatoes software does not check spelling automatically. You have to select the part of a text you want checked and choose "Edit" and then "Spell check" on the toolbar.

- The font cannot be changed the same way as in Word. It is only possible to change the font type of the whole text. If you need to highlight only a part of your text, the only possible way is to use capital letters.

- Each application gives preset instructions. You should always adapt them to suit each specific exercise, e.g. instead of *"Match the items on the right to the items on the left"* it is more appropriate to say *"Match the nouns on the right to the adjectives on the left"*.

  In addition to this, the preset instructions contain the information on the use of "Hint" and "Clue" buttons. If you decide not to use them in the exercise, you should exclude this information from the instructions.

- Buttons such as "Next Exercise", "Back" or "Go to Contents" are preset and you have to delete the tick in the "Buttons" configuration file if you have not created any links to other exercises, etc. Non-functioning buttons can be misleading and distracting.

  Do not activate the "Make answer-checking case-sensitive" option in the configuration file under "Other" unless students are required to use capital letters in the answers. If activated, e.g. *"THIS", "This",* or *"thiS"* will be taken as incorrect answers although *"this"* is the correct one.

- Do not underestimate the importance of the exercise appearance; it influences one's concentration a great deal. Colours on the screen should attract the eye, not exhaust it. It might be a good idea for you to always try the exercise out yourself once it is complete to see if it is pleasant enough for the eyes.

- In case you link one exercise to another, do not forget to keep both the file names and URLs constant, otherwise your link will cease functioning.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Hot Potatoes software is surely a helpful electronic tool for those who wish to create their own interactive exercises. This article has attempted to spare potential Hot Potatoes users the trouble of following possible dead-end paths on the road to success. Based on our experience, it can be stated that, with a few tricks and improvements, Hot Potatoes exercises can be used with advanced learners in a feasible way. Occasionally, it requires your mind wide open, tons of creativity and heaps of patience. All in all, it is obvious that you have to learn your way through all the options gradually, discover the possibilities the software offers and adapt them to your and your students' needs.

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