Using Clickers in the Second-Language Classroom
Teaching the *passé composé* and *imparfait* in French

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I. INTRODUCTION

Although learner response systems, or “clickers” as we shall refer to them, have been around for four decades (Cordoso, 2011, 393) they have only recently become widespread in the academic community. The electronic clicker device allows an individual within a group of respondents to select a single option from a list (“multiple choice” feedback); this data is recorded on a computer for immediate use and can be stored for future analysis. The feedback can be recorded against the particular respondent or kept anonymous. Before my recent introduction to clickers through a workshop last year at the Nanyang Technological University I must admit to never having heard of them as an educational tool. This is due mostly to the fact that their application is more immediately applicable to the lecture theatre and language classes are set in smaller learning environments. Clickers have, in fact, been used extensively in large psychology (Mayer, 2009), physics (Perkins, 2009) and medical classes (Premkumar, 2008) in the aim of ‘conserving time in the classroom’ as one journal title indicates clearly (Anderson, 2011). Not only is there little evidence of their use in smaller settings (Sevian and Robinson did a year-long trial in varied classes including lab and small graduate classes), but there are even fewer references to their use in the second-language classroom.

When reading the literature in online journals, I was struck by the repeated conclusion that the students found that using clickers was “fun”. In fact, since the television show ‘Who Wants to Be a Millionaire’ used such devices to enhance the game by polling the audience, students often equate their usage with an entertaining and jovial atmosphere. This was interesting enough to warrant piloting the technology in my classroom, but furthermore I wondered if the devices could encourage direct responses from my shyer ‘back-row’ students who are typically harder to engage. The only widespread criticism that I could find in most of the articles was the cost of using the clickers. However, since clickers are provided free of charge to any student on Nanyang’s campus, there were no barriers to exploring their use. With a high level of curiosity and little to lose, I set out to apply this clicker technology to my French second-language classroom. I was intrigued to see if my already interactive classes could be improved by this technology or whether it would actually represent a hindrance as one study has found (Morgan, 2008).

II. COMPARATIVE EXAMPLES OF CLICKER USE

Technology is certainly valuable as a pedagogical tool, but cannot replace the pedagogy itself. I first wanted to know how others were using clickers to teach foreign languages, but I found only two such occurrences. The first referenced a graduate student, Ellen Johnson, teaching the two verbs ‘to be’ ser and estar in Spanish at Georgetown University in the US (see reference 8 for blog details). When I first read of Ms. Johnson’s trial I thought the dichotomy of the two verbs lends itself well to the clicker teaching. I quickly envisaged a comparable lesson for my introductory students on the verbs ‘to know’ in French: savoir (to know a fact) and connaître (to know, as in to be familiar with). I did not, however, think that it would be cause for a substantial usage of the clickers (I would not be able to devote an entire lesson to it), so I continued to reflect. The only other immediate dichotomy that came to mind was the two past tenses that I teach in my third-level French course: the *passé composé* and the *imparfait*. I later learned that Ms. Johnson and her colleagues are conducting some clicker research in this area in Spanish. The second documented person using clickers in the foreign language classroom is Walcir Cardoso at Concordia University in Canada. Although he is engaged in a large-scale project, he has thus far only published one article on the use of clickers by
focusing on the students’ perspective (Cardoso 2011). From reading the titles of his upcoming papers I see that they reflect the fact that his study applies clicker use to the acquisition of vocabulary in the ESL classroom. This particular application of clickers to learn vocabulary, while useful in isolated occurrences in my classroom, did not lend itself to a lengthy study because vocabulary acquisition only represents a minute part of our curriculum.

III. DEVELOPING A CLICKER LESSON

As mentioned, the duality of these two past tenses continued to attract as an application for clicker implementation. However, it was important that the class could focus on the language theory primarily and not get distracted by too many options, so I wanted the choices for response to be limited. The usage of the clickers needed to be simple because the grammar point is complicated. Here is the Shakespearean rub: The passé composé is the equivalent in English to both the simple past and present perfect tenses. For example, j’ai étudié can be translated as ‘I studied’ or ‘I have studied’. While there is this distinction to make, students generally grasp the usage of this tense quite quickly, as they understand its perfective nature in aspectual terms (Ayoun 2011, 232), being a completed action. It should also be noted that the conjugation of this verb is what presents the biggest problem, as the student must choose between two auxiliary verbs (être and avoir) and whether to make the past participle verbs (être and avoir) and whether to make the past participle agree in gender and number with the subject. This issue is not central to our study, though, as our students have already studied this aspect of the passé composé before arriving at the level in which the clicker course is taking place. The passé composé is contrasted with the imperfective nature of the imparfait, which expresses a past action without regard to its beginning or end. The imperfect tense is often translated by was ___ing : in the case of j’étudiais, for example, ‘I was studying’, in which the durative nature of this example is evident. As if this were not complicated enough to grasp with a cursory knowledge of a language, insult is added to injury as there is also the iterative aspect to consider: the imparfait can refer to repeated events in the past, often expressed in English by ‘used to’ or ‘would’, as in: Quand j’étais jeune, je jouais avec des poupées (When I was young, I used to play with dolls). The complication with this tense for the second-language learner is grasping its usage in relation to the passé composé, as the two are not interchangeable, but are often used in tandem. The key to this understanding is the context of the utterance and knowing the cases where the two apply. Building on the studies of Carroll and Swain who determined that “indirect as well as direct forms of feedback can help adult second language learners learn abstract linguistic generalizations” (373) (a conclusion that Ayoun arrives at in her later study in 2004) and of Dalila Ayoun from the University of Arizona whose analysis is partially able to support her hypothesis that negative feedback in the form of recasting (defined as the corrective reformulation of an erroneous utterance (2004, 31)) is the most effective form of feedback for the acquisition of the passé composé and imparfait (Ayoun 2001), I hoped that clicker technology offered another effective feedback solution to be explored.

The present study represents a preliminary trial for use of clickers in the second-language classroom. It uses a small focus group (one level 3 French class of seventeen students) as a sample and a similar class taught without clickers as a control group. The goal of this initial study was to see whether clicker use was warranted in further more comprehensive studies in our French program. There were constraints dictated by our course materials and schedule. As mentioned, the passé composé is taught in the previous level (generally the previous semester in the case of most of our students). This means that there is a varied understanding of the tense when they start the acquisition of the imperfect. Because of this, I decided to administer an anonymous pretest to the students to gauge their understanding of the two tenses from the start. The short test was administered prior to the discussion of the distinction between the two tenses, but after an introduction to the conjugation of the new imperfect tense. A post-test was administered to gauge efficacy of the technique (also using the clickers). The control group was taught this concept without the use of the clickers. I was only able to teach one of these classes; another instructor taught the control group. Of course, this introduced factors that I would have liked to control such as slight variations in teaching style and will be factored in when drawing our final conclusions.

IV. EXECUTING THE LESSON

The trial represents a single 90-minute lecture in which the clicker responses played a central role. It has been shown that 3-4 questions in a 60-minute seminar are adequate to keep students stimulated (Premkumar 147). Since the clicker questions were at the heart of my lesson, I would not space them out for integration into an already formed lesson for preassessment, or checking if they had done the assigned reading or attendance or other of the many uses of clicker devices (See Roberta Sullivan, 343 for a list of what clickers can do). I opted for six clicker response questions in the 90-minute class. The preamble to the lesson in question was a review of the conjugation of the passé composé, an introduction to the imparfait and an explanation of the general cases in which the imparfait is used.

My approach to the first clicker question was somewhat unconventional, as it was purposefully ambiguous. One technique proven useful in the clicker literature is to pose a controversial question to incite dialogue from the students (Premkumar 146) and this is the response I was seeking. At the same time, it is suggested to make sure that only one of the listed choices is the right answer and to ‘avoid trick items’ (Sullivan 340). While normally two excellent suggestions, I intentionally overlooked these guidelines to spark the controversy. Since the students were given a sentence out of context in which they had to decide on the use of the passé composé or the imparfait (both of which could be acceptable under certain circumstances), I was teaching the students to find the proper context for the conjugation instead of simply inserting the correct verb as they would in a written exercise. By the anonymous clicker responses, which were projected immediately in the class, the results of the poll were 45% passé composé and 55% imparfait. This was the ideal jumping off platform for a peer discussion. I asked the students to discuss
with their neighbor why they answered the way they did to try and get a class consensus and then we would poll again. A surprisingly heated discussion ensued. The quieter students were engaged in the activity because they were discussing the topic with their non-threatening neighbor and those who usually are less passionate about French grammar also shared their opinion, as they had nothing to lose, since their clicker responses had been anonymous. After repeating the poll, the results were still split, so we discussed the circumstances for which the passé composé was possible and the kinds of words we should look for to choose this tense as an option. After doing the same with the imparfait, the students figured out that there was not enough information in the sentence itself to distinguish between the two tenses. This also served as a review of the general cases in which each verb should be used.

Clicker questions two, three and four were much more straightforward: Slide two contained an example of an interrupted action in which the durative aspect of the imparfait is interrupted by a perfective action in the passé composé. The students had previously reminded themselves of this case and so were unanimously able to provide the correct response, as confirmed immediately by the clicker responses. This was also the case with slides three and four in which a specific case that had been previously modeled was presented: the iterative aspect of the imparfait demonstrated in a repeated action during one’s childhood and the imperfective aspect of the imparfait as seen in a description.

Our fifth question posed a few students a problem because it evoked a state of mind. Generally this type of occurrence would generate a response of the imparfait, but if the beginning or the end of the action is known then the imperfective aspect no longer applies and it is perfective. Since there were only 3 students that were unsure of the passé composé / imparfait distinction in this case, we were able to once again use peer discussion to convince everyone that this was a case of the general usage of the imparfait showing neither beginning nor end to the state of mind, so the whole class provided the correct answer for the re-poll.

As this is a very hard distinction for students to grasp, I planned for the last slide to show the state of mind from the other angle (that of the passé composé). It surprised me that 46% of the class still voted for the imparfait even though it was clear when the start of the state of mind started. Even after just discussing the application of the two verb tenses in the case of states of mind, only 54% of the students were able to actually apply the ‘rule’ when presented with the situation. I might not have been aware of this confusion without the immediate feedback that the clicker responses provided. We were able to deepen our discussion of which trigger words lead to the use of the passé composé (those evoking a sudden onset, for example) and delve more into the context for a fuller understanding. This example shows how clickers can enable the instructor to address the issues of a particular class on the spot and spend time where it is necessary even if this was not factored in when planning the lesson.

V. CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions can we draw from this experiment? In order to be able to gauge the evolution in the thought process of my students I asked them to complete a pretest and a post-test (in which they had to determine whether to use the passé composé or the imparfait throughout a paragraph with a clear context). The same tests were given to the control group to compare findings. In the clicker group, there was a clear improvement in grades in all cases (except in the case of three students who scored 100% on both tests). It is notable that in one of these cases, the student wrote next to an answer on the post-test how she could envisage the other tense being correct and giving valid reasons for it – evidence of the level of understanding gained by the deep discussions. The average grade for the clicker group was 90% on the post-test (up from 65% on the pretest) and no student received less than 70%. As a result for a whole class I thought this would be higher than the norm, but the control group proved me wrong with an average of 86% on the post-test (up from 58% on the pretest) and a similar result of no student having below 70%. The only notable difference between the groups is that while showing overall similar results, the control group did not show the same universal mark evolution, as one student had the same grade (90%) on both tests and two students’ marks were actually ten percent lower that on the pretest (dropping from 80% to 70%). So, do clickers improve grades? Kathy Kenwright has noted that the reviews are mixed in this area (2009, 75), but in this particular case, there was no significant difference. In any case, given the small sample size and the inherent variations, such as the different instructors between the control group and clicker group, one would never draw objective statistical conclusions from this study. Ours is a more subjective assessment of the technology.

VI. STUDENT EVALUATION

The students were given a questionnaire about the clicker usage to gauge their appreciation of the technology. While two students gave a neutral answer when asked if they found clickers effective as compared to other activities in class and whether they enjoyed the clicker usage, the rest of the class answered 4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5 where 5 was very effective and enjoyed very much. 23% of the class did not think that their performance improved using the clickers, but the rest did. 18% of the class still rated their knowledge of the passé composé and the imparfait as average (the rest rated it as good or high). This shows that not everyone was won over by the clickers and convinced of a possible difference that they made in the class. This could be due to a few difficulties encountered. With technology comes the occasional glitch and I did find that from time we were slowed down because the system was not recording the answers or someone had forgotten a clicker. These problems were soon dealt with, but merit mention all the same. However, it is notable that every student said that they enjoyed the immediate feedback afforded by the clickers and that they all thought we should continue the use of the clickers in our French classes.
VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the instructor’s perspective this project was well worth the time and effort. A lot of time and effort goes into formulating the right questions, as there is no fixed approach to the clicker questions — but this flexibility is exactly part of the attraction of the technology. This is also a function of being an “early adopter” within this context and not having a catalogue of prior uses to rely on. I had to do a few classes where clickers were not the focus, so that the students and I could get used to them before they were integral to the lesson. There are several helpful articles that one can use as a guideline, such as Sullivan’s “Principles for Constructing Good Clicker Questions: Going Beyond Rote Learning and Stimulating Active Engagement with Course Content” (2009), but such articles need to stay on a general level to apply to many disciplines. Perhaps clickers are time-savers when used in large classrooms to gauge how much time to spend on certain material, but this was definitely not the case with the way I structured my class. Premkumar suggests that one should allow about 5 minutes per question (1-48) when using clickers, but the most useful slides can take much longer for discussion. I did make sure that I did not let preparing for the polling take extra class time, as I used TurningPoint on my laptop and integrated the slides seamlessly into my PowerPoint presentation. One surprise for me was seeing the inability for half of my class to apply a rule when it was previously discussed, knowing that they were all actively participating. This opened my eyes to the fact that even in a small class the instructor may not be able to determine exactly what has been understood if a student does not verbalize an issue.

The students overwhelmingly agreed that they like the immediate feedback afforded by the clickers. In addition, all but two students felt they participated more because of the anonymity offered by the clickers. This type of feedback coupled with the discussion sessions involved in peer instruction goes beyond the typical implicit and explicit negative feedback afforded to second-language learners. I believe this is why the student who provided an alternate answer in addition to all the correct answers on the post-test was able to fathom that there were more possibilities than just right or wrong.

I started this project with the promise of ‘fun’ that clickers could bring. Did they deliver? I think the reason that all the students said that we should keep using the clickers in our French program was that the clickers did make for an enjoyable class. Perhaps my definition of ‘enjoyment’ and that of a student might differ in regards to the use of the passé composé and the imparfait, as there were two students who had a neutral answer when asked if they enjoyed using the clickers. Perhaps I should have asked if they enjoyed the class in which the clickers were used. I did note, however, that every single student participated actively and I must say that I have never since seen the class so animated as compared to the moments when they had to convince each other that their answer was correct. An animated class with full participation is enough to constitute ‘fun’ in my book, as well as satisfy every instructor’s longing for full engagement. This illustrates that the clicker technology warrants further application trials in the second-language classroom.

REFERENCES

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