

Researchers update French language learning

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Mastering verbal conjugations in French or being able to ask directions to the library is one thing, but expressing yourself on paper in that language brings a new, daunting set of challenges. An online tool developed at the University of Alberta will make that task much easier.

"Le Patron" (www.lepatron.ca) is a website developed by Dr. Terry Nadasdi and Dr. Stefan Sinclair that helps second-language learners write in French. Available to anyone with an Internet connection, the technology scans your written submission for common errors and provides advice for improving the text. For example, if you enter "...une petit maison," Le Patron will highlight the phrase and tell you that the adjective in front of maison should be feminine (petite).

Not only does it save language teachers from having to repeatedly correct and comment on errors, says Nadasdi, it teaches students to recognize their own mistakes and understand them. The technology has come a long way from the days of sitting in a language lab, answering repetitive questions without any feedback.

"The goal of the website is not simply to provide a quick checking mechanism, but to ensure that students learn from interacting with the site," said Nadasdi, a sociolinguist in the Faculty of Arts. "The project is exciting for me since in this way I can actually help millions of people learn, which is far beyond what I can do with classroom teaching alone."

The idea was first created as a tool for U of A students studying French and since then, it has grown into a global project. Since its launch in

September, thousands of people around the globe have already accessed the site--it had hits from 75 countries in November 2005 and is averaging about 7000 per day--and Nadasdi is aware of its use in several public school divisions across the country. He has heard from university professors in Iowa and high school teachers in California who are guiding their students to the site.

He has presented the site to educators across Alberta and at a recent session, one teacher told Nadasdi the site changed the way she teaches French. He has also heard from a number of francophones using the site in France.

Nadasdi is looking at using the technology to help second-language learners in other languages such as Spanish.

Source: University of Alberta

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