[Review]

Language Learning Express (Lex): A Software Review

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Software

Language Learning Express (Lex) 1.0	Minimum System Requirements
- Author: LearnWare - Web Address: http://www.learnware.se - Download URL: http://www.learnware.se/download_intro.htm - E-mail: info@learnware.se - Snail Mail: Barrstigen 41, 16731 Bromma, Sweden. - Phone: +46-8-266490 - Price: 29 euro, single license (see the website for other license type)	- CPU: Pentium 3 (500 MHz) - Memory: 256 - OS: Windows (XP/Vista) - Screen: 1024x768 - Internet Connection: 0.5 MB/s - Additional: Sound Card and Headphones or Speakers

Introduction

Serious language learners have to start reading books or passages in the target language and most of the time they get started by reading special readers that are adapted for language learning; however, generally, it is difficult to find one that will interest learners. To overcome this problem, learners try to read authentic materials within their scope of interest and naturally, which are not adapted for language learning. Some of the implications of SLA research for the use of authentic texts show that authentic texts are the best resource of rich and comprehensive input, which affects affective factors such as motivation and particularly important in terms of top-down processing (Mishan, 2005).

While language learners try to read authentic materials, they come face to face with another problem: the mismatch between their level and that of the book and the tedious process of repeatedly interrupting the reading to look up words, which takes away the pleasure of reading. Richards (2001) points out authentic materials often contain difficult language, unneeded vocabulary items, and complex language structures, which causes a burden for the teacher in lower-level classes. However, there are some tools and websites to overcome these issues, one of which is Language Learning Express (Lex).

What is Language Learning Express (Lex)?

Language Learning Express (Lex) is a Windows-based language-learning tool by which a language learner can use authentic material that interests him/her on the net such as passages or articles in the electronic journals or newspapers. Below is the main screen of the software when it is run (Figure 1).
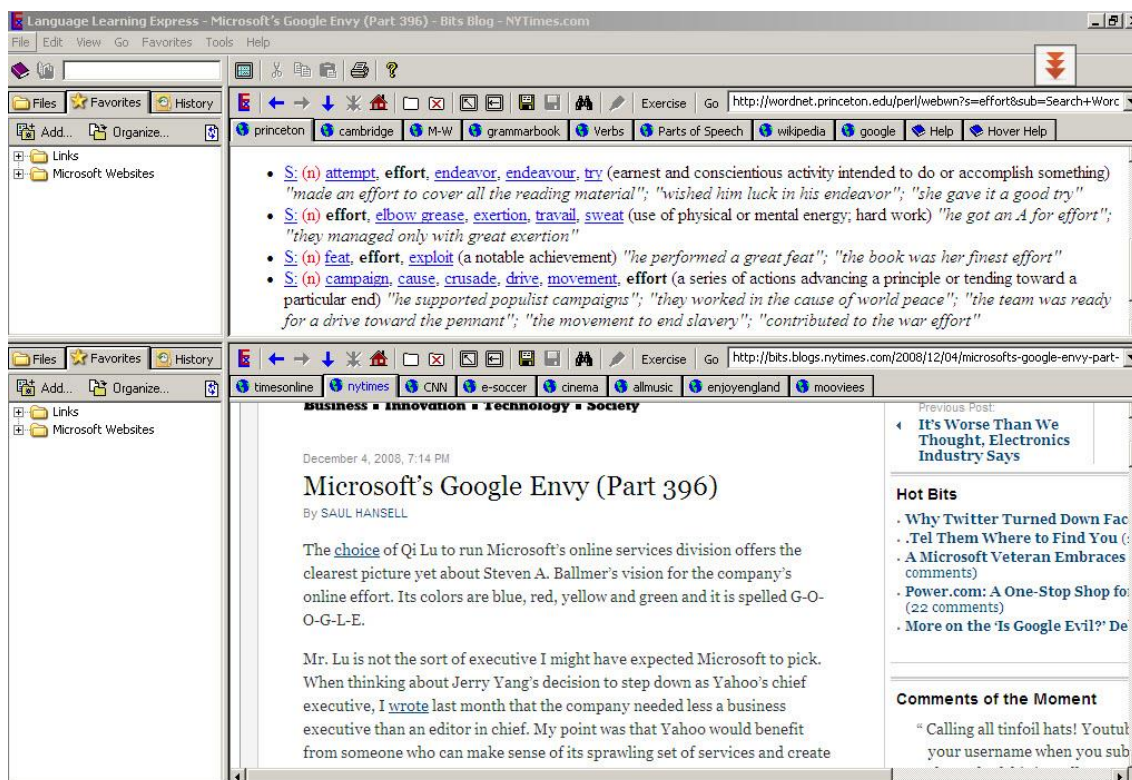

Figure 1. Main Screen of Language Learning Express (Lex)

Lex is written in English (commands, menus, and help texts are provided in English). It contains built-in Web browsers called tabs by which interesting reading materials can be found on the Web. Lex comes with predefined language sessions (changing the language and the websites accessed is called a session) where English is the source language and French, Spanish, Italian, German, Portuguese, and Russian are the target languages. New sessions can be easily set up by the user for other languages provided that there are resources available on the Web. Doing a Google search for dictionary sites, grammar sites and the material to work on in the form of ordinary Web pages will bring the resources for the target language and the links can be easily imported to the software.

It provides easy access (separate built-in browsers) to widely known online newspapers such as *Timesonline* and *NYtimes* and other websites dealing with music and movies. Other interesting websites can be easily added to Lex.

When an interesting site/news/passage is found, words on the material can be easily looked up using the online dictionaries such as the ones provided by Princeton and Cambridge. Learners can also listen to the pronunciations of the words (text-to-speech

output, not a native speaker pronouncing it) and create their own glossary. Moreover, vocabulary exercises (gap-filling) can be created from the words marked or in the glossary, and by running the exercises, new vocabulary can be repeated entertainingly.

Personal Experience

I tried the software choosing the session French, which is the language I have been learning for a short time. When I ran it, it provided me with access to widely known online newspapers such as Le Monde and Liberation, and online dictionaries and grammar sites dealing with French. At the very beginning, I was a little bit confused with the layout and the buttons, but after a while, I got used to it. I tried to read an article on Le Monde, but it was beyond my level and my knowledge of grammar was limited. Therefore, I added one of my favorite websites that offers pre-intermediate level reading passages in French. There were some unknown words to me on the reading passage and I clicked on these words. Then, the software looked up these words using the online bilingual and monolingual dictionaries an in less than a few seconds, the definitions with examples appeared in front of me though some were in French. I added them to my glossary on the software and wanted to listen to the pronunciations of the words. However, I found out that Lex comes only with English voices and I had to install a trial voice for French. Moreover, I found creating vocabulary exercises complex and difficult and I spent a considerable amount of time finding out how it worked. Later, I could not understand some of the grammatical structures on the reading passage; therefore, using the software, I visited the predefined websites dealing with grammar with explanations in French and English, which I think was very handy.

  The main problem I had while using the French session was that some of the resources were beyond my level and I needed to be guided on finding suitable websites. The software could have arranged the sessions according to the level of the user and expanded the resources.

Evaluation

Lex is not a tool just for the learner and its aim is not to replace the teacher. The teacher plays a key and active role in the language learning process and he/she can use this tool by preparing texts and making them available on the Web. The learners can access and work on them on their computers along with other material that they find on their own. The main problem is that predefined sessions are more suitable for advanced learners. Another problem is that the vocabulary exercises are only testing a specific micro-skill. The learner is only required to recognize words from the material (as in gap-filling exercises.) The exercises created can be said to be only testing what learners can remember from passages, which does not make them fully effective. Furthermore, exercise creation is a little bit confusing, or better to say complex. This process can be made simpler and more exercise types (flashcards, multiple-choice, choosing the definition, or choosing the words according to definition) can be added. It would be very beneficial if the definitions and pronunciations of the words could also be added to the

glossary. Gerry's Vocabulary Teacher (for the English Language) (Kilickaya, 2007a) and the website http://www.wordchamp.com (Kilickaya, 2007b) can be used together this tool. Another problem with the tool, or maybe a lacking feature, is that PDF or Microsoft Word Document files cannot be opened and added as a tab. However, if these documents are converted to Text, this problem is solved.

In short, the main features of the software can be summarized as follows:

- It can be used in conjunction with various languages and language websites.
- It encourages the learner to play an active role in which the learner can explore and study on his/her own. However, it does not replace the teacher. Learners will benefit more from the software if it is used in cooperation with a teacher.
- It makes learners' life easier by providing resources while they are reading any authentic material. They do not have to spend a great amount of time searching in dictionaries or grammar books as Lex can do the tedious searching, which means that learners can focus their efforts on the language issues.
- It is not just limited to current websites or materials on the internet. As different sources for different languages are likely to appear as time passes, they can be easily imported to the software.

Considering all the features that are provided by this tool, I believe that Language Learning Express (Lex) is not only a self-study tool for reading L2 materials but also a supplement to the language-learning classroom. I encourage all the learners and teachers of any language to give a try to this tool, which I believe will be further improved with the help of the useful comments and suggestions by its users.

References

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Richard, J.C. (2001). *Curriculum development in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.