Review of "Toujours Des Mots"

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1 Overview

Toujours Des Mots, as an online learning object, can be seamlessly, imaginatively and productively incorporated into the French curriculum at various levels to help students improve their French skills via song and music. The learning objective involves drill and practice in the form of a game. The game students play to engage with the material is quite simply a dictation game, a unique one nonetheless, through which participants may sharpen their listening skills – and collaterally, their spelling skills – with the help of songs sung by artists who are among the brightest names in the world of French music. Students focus on brief audio clips of famous French music stars singing some of their most popular songs, and as they listen, they fill in a missing word represented by a blank in the accompanying transcript that appears on their screen. A huge corpus of songs, a galaxy of music stars enlisted to "teach" French that includes classic stalwarts such as Edith Piaf, Jacques Brel and Charles Aznavour, but also more contemporary stars such as Francis Cabrel and Axel Red among others, very good quality audio, a very thoughtful, well developed and sensible methodology – one involving focused listening of highly conventionalized and contextualized sound bites, post-listening verification through spelling attempts and instantaneous feedback, and hyperlinked graphic illustrations to assist with the interpretation of meaning – all combine to make a pedagogical cocktail that will engage even the most recalcitrant learner, promising hours of delightful serendipity and pleasurable hard work.

As a finished product and as a stand-alone learning object, the bank of music-driven dictation exercises that comprise *Toujours Des Mots* is very systematically organized. While the material incorporates a plethora of exercises – 1761 to be exact, all of which are of very high quality – the content is divided into three progressive levels based on an ad hoc system of vocabulary difficulty. The default level is Level 1. Giving control to the learner, instructions posted urge players to switch to a different level if they find that the exercises are too easy for them. Although the primary skill area that this learning object purports to target as stated on its introduction page is listening comprehension, the improvement of spelling is a critical although natural ancillary to this approach which incorporates spelling as a crucial component of task-based listening. Improvement in spelling is then a significant outcome rather than an explicit goal. Instructors teaching French will

value the fact that spelling, vocabulary development, reading and textual decoding, and cultural awareness are other skill areas that are implicitly worked and holistically integrated thanks to the inherent characteristic of such a *dictée* as a multi-skill pedagogical activity involving, but not limited to, auditive, phonemic, morphological, lexical and syntactic cognitive operations. In this unique design, primary linguistic and cultural content and playful practice are brought together in a way that makes the learning object a powerful teaching and learning tool.

Users – instructors and learners of French alike – will find *Toujours Des Mots* to be a very pleasant and user-friendly resource, even though both the content and meta-language are exclusively in French. One notable feature of the site is its free and open access with users having the option of creating profiles and login IDs in order to record their progress and compete with other learners, if desired. Instructors may want to encourage students to avail themselves of this feature which would enable automatic monitoring of progress. A history of the exercises attempted and the scores obtained can be saved on the website itself which makes it easy for users to keep track of their performance and to measure their progress over time. Navigation and operation of this website are highly intuitive, and the layout is clean and unencumbered.

2   Method

A player begins by clicking on the JOUER (play) tab on the left panel and then selecting an appropriate level (niveaux 1, 2 or 3; see Fig. 1 and 2).
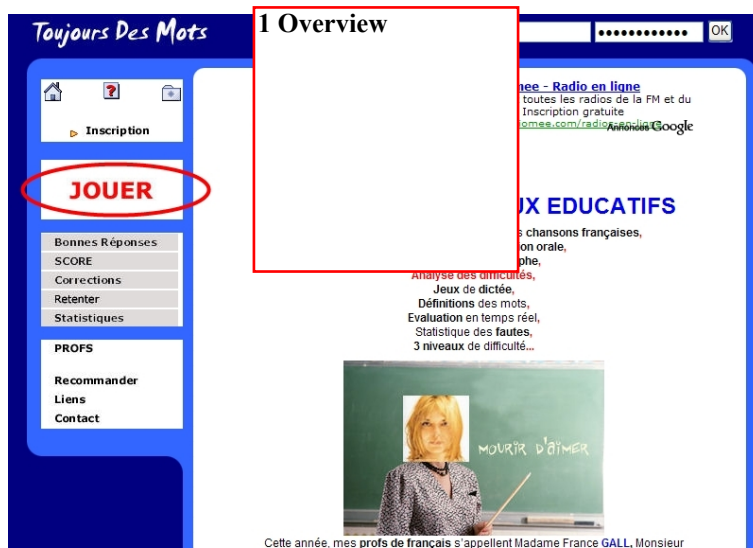

Fig. 1: Starting the game

Fig. 2: Selecting an appropriate level

Bringing the cursor on the photograph of the artist will reveal the name of the artist whose song has been randomly brought up to kick off the game. In order to play the musical excerpt, users must click on the play button or on the speaker icon, both located under the photograph of the artist. Doing so will enable them to hear a short musical piece with the missing word either at the beginning, the middle or the end of the clip. Based on their comprehension, students playing the game must type in the missing word in the space provided and then check their answer by clicking on the "OK" button in order to continue the session.

If the answer is correct, students will see the message "Bravo" and will be required to hit "Continuer" in order to proceed (see Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Confirmation of correct answer and the cue to continue

This will bring up the next audio clip with its accompanying dictation text onto the screen. Conversely, if there has been an error in their spelling, it is at this point that they will be given

automatically generated feedback about the problem word (accents marks, wrong letter, plurals, double consonants etc.; see Fig. 4).
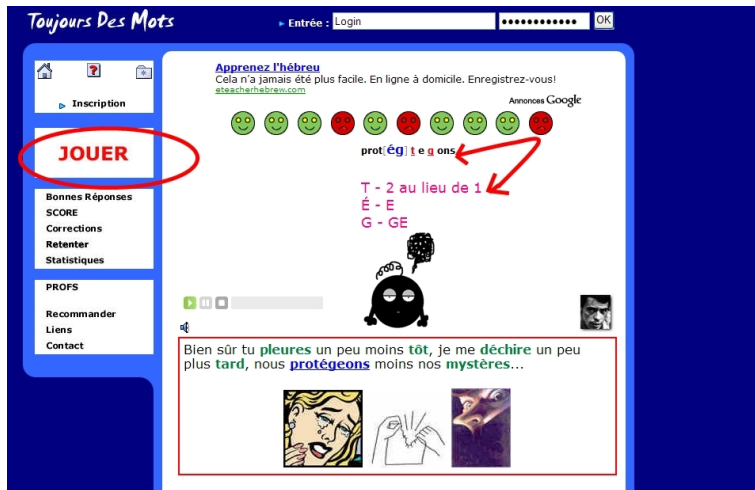
Fig. 4: Feedback and error analysis

At this point, students may elect to go forward with the game or they may opt to make another attempt to catch the missing word by clicking "Retenter" in the left panel. This option is meant to give them another chance to listen and spell out the same word in a different context. They will be offered a selection of various other dictation-songs, alternatives to the original piece that they got wrong. They may then select one, listen to its audio clip, and retype the problem word correctly in the corresponding blank. The potential for free-ranging exploration is thus considerable and a learner can get very thorough hands-on vocabulary-focused contextual practice with the language. For diacritical marks, users simply select from the buttons on the right to get the accented characters without which their spellings will be considered incorrect.

Several other actions can be taken at any point within a specific game or at any point during the general gaming session: Clicking on "SCORE" in the left panel will generate the score made by the user in terms of the number of correct answers, wrong answers, and the success rate. Registered users can also compete against one another for the highest scores. Clicking on "Corrections" will bring up a cumulative list of the wrong answers/errors along with the correct answer (see Fig. 5). Each error element is distinctly indicated and can therefore be easily understood by the learner. Diagnostic error statistics can be accessed by clicking on "Statistiques."
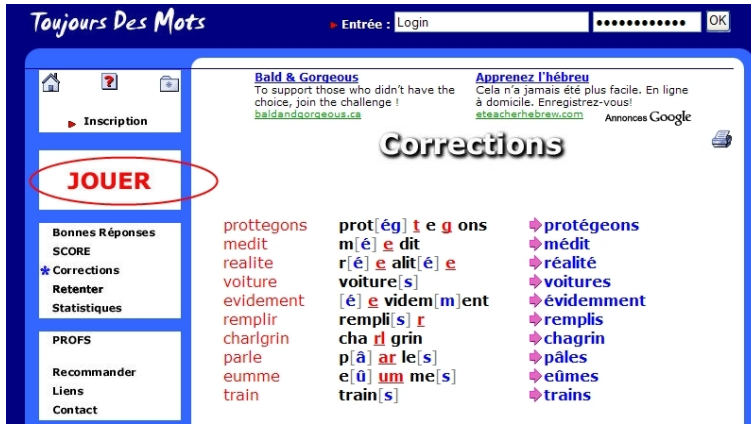
Fig. 5: Log of mistakes made during a session with corresponding corrections

While the focus of the action during a game is on the missing word that the player must catch, all important lexical items are highlighted in the transcript. Illustrations and graphics accompany each transcript and serve as thematically integrated visual clues to facilitate comprehension of the target word(s) which in turn occur in bold-colored font in the text and are additionally hyperlinked to their definitions (see Fig. 6).

Fig. 6: A well developed hyperlink-based virtual immersion system

These hyperlinked lexical items can be clicked anytime to not only access a definition in French whenever semantic clarification may be needed, but also to listen to other clips of music containing the same vocabulary item. While playing a game, a user may thus find himself/herself researching and exploring a reticulated network of referenced sounds, words and meanings constituting a virtual immersion system coalesced around the theme of the song.

3 Suggestions for use

As rich as it is, the material has been designed for the development of linguistic competency in general, with special emphasis on listening comprehension skills. A second objective is the improvement of dictation (spelling) abilities in French. The material is systematically structured into

three incremental levels of difficulty. This resource is appropriate for learners at the school and university levels, and may be used by both native and non-native speaker student populations, individually or collectively, inside or outside of class.

The material may be used as hands-on self-paced listening comprehension/spelling practice. Predicated on authentic linguistic input, such work would be of great value just for that reason alone. The material can also be used for constructive "filler" activities during a light class period. The material is also an ideal substitute for conventional lab work and can help bring variation into a lesson plan. Another possible use would be to use it as a rounding-off activity after a lesson on French phonetics and pronunciation, or after a session of pronunciation drills. The material may also be used for informal quizzing and self-testing thanks to its score calculation feature. It also offers an excellent introduction to French music and artists, and expands cultural knowledge. Instructors may want to remember that from a cultural standpoint, the cultural scope is somewhat narrow, given that the "étoiles de la chanson française" featured are all from France and that there is no representation of other Francophone regions, such as Africa and Quebec, which have extremely vibrant modern chanson traditions. The material is still an excellent resource. The high quality content is set in a very pleasant and user-friendly learning environment with design and sequencing that are consistent and pedagogically effective. The resource introduces the learner to new vocabulary and structures in a highly contextualized manner. Important vocabulary items are glossed and hyperlinked to definitions in the target language to give learners independent control over the learning process and a holistic learning experience.

Some other considerations that an instructor may want to be aware of: The linguistic content (vocabulary and structures) that the third level is predicated on is suitable for advanced learners only and presupposes a certain degree of mastery over French. Proficiency in basic French, especially the ability to read French, is required in order to understand the contextual elements while playing the game. Basic keyboard skills are required, as well as an Internet browser and a multimedia computer with audio capability. Plug-in software such as Real Player is essential.

4   Conclusion

Toujours Des Mots is an engaging and effective game site that can be seamlessly incorporated into the French curriculum at any level for developing linguistic competency in general. While the website identifies its intended audience as "Francophone as well as non-Francophone individuals of all ages," adult learners of French will find it especially relevant to their needs. Although the material is of the drill and practice type, and the declared pedagogical focus is on listening comprehension, this resource lends itself amply to the development of multiple skills, spelling in particular. The exercises foster reading skills simultaneously. This learning object also opens up an introductory vista to the world of French music for learners of French, apart from helping them sharpen their listening comprehension and spelling skills. The material is very user-friendly and uncluttered, and includes interesting and helpful graphics related to the theme of the song that serve as thematically integrated visual clues to facilitate the linguistic process. The music selection is varied and interesting. As a language learning tool, the site collaterally helps familiarize students with the musical culture of the France. Another noteworthy element is that the transcript accompanying each excerpt hyperlinks all the important vocabulary items to their definitions, a feature that will surely help learners expand their personal lexicon without formal effort. Lexical development is reinforced by the possibility of a reticulated recycling of these vocabulary items. The site provides a link to download Real Player which is the recommended free plug-in for those who may not have it on their computers. The material is appropriate for school or university-level practitioners/learners of French and may be used individually or collectively, in or out of the classroom. In a survey of students in their fourth semester of college French, 100 percent of the respondents reported that their experience with the learning object was positive and that they found the activities both engaging and beneficial to their learning. Instructors of French will be sure to find *Toujours Des Mots* a learning object that enlivens and enriches their courses and instruction.