

VISL in Danish schools

In memory of John M. Dienhart, associate professor at the University of Southern Denmark and the driving force behind VISL until his all too early death in April 2004

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ABSTRACT: The acronym VISL is short for Visual Interactive Syntax Learning (www.visl.sdu.dk). This article will concentrate on grammar games as one of the teaching aspects of the VISL site. The idea behind the use of VISL in schools is that learning can and should be fun. It is a part of the VISL pedagogy that linguistic and grammatical knowledge and information can be learned by using interactive computer games. On the VISL webpage one finds a number of educational grammar games. Each of these games is designed to give the user a better understanding of the concept of word classes and sentence functions. This article gives information about a number of grammar games and information on how to play the games. There is also information on the use of VISL in Danish schools.

KEYWORDS: Edutainment, grammar and ICT, differentiated teaching, fun way of learning.

BACKGROUND

The acronym VISL is short for Visual Interactive Syntax Learning (www.visl.sdu.dk). VISL is a research and development project at the Institute of Language and Communication at the University of Southern Denmark. The VISL project was launched in 1996, when three language teachers at the Institute (representing English, French, and German) decided to create a sort of “grammar doctor” to give students at the university the opportunity of learning about the grammar of those three languages using Internet tools. Since then a number of tools have been added to the VISL system, so that the system can also be used at primary and secondary school level. In Denmark, the VISL system is used in schools all over the country. Hopefully the system will help address the lack of knowledge about grammar which in Denmark has been developing along similar lines to the ones laid out by Dick Hudson and John Walmsley (2005) in their joint article The English patient: English grammar and teaching in the Twentieth Century.

The teachers and students working together on the VISL project are dedicated to the design and implementation of tools for the teaching of grammar using ICT in a number of languages, currently 27, including all European languages. During the past four years a number of Scandinavian languages have been added to the VISL site, thanks to a grant from the Nordic Language Technology Research Programme. First Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish were added. The latest additions are Faroese, Icelandic and the Sámic language. Greenlandic is on its way.

This article will concentrate on the grammar games as one of the teaching aspects of the VISL site. Some background information about the ideas behind the system may

be useful before readers start playing the games. An important concept of VISL is a common grammatical system, that is, VISL uses the same grammatical system for all pre-analysed sentences in all the VISL languages.

It is a fundamental feature of the VISL system that all VISL languages draw from the same “cafeteria” of form and function labels, with the result that when users have become familiar with the system for one of the VISL languages, they can comprehend the analyses supplied for all VISL languages. Similarly, the colour scheme for the word classes is the same for all VISL languages (Dienhart, 2005, p. 31).

Once one knows the system, one is able to use the tools available in all the VISL-languages.

It is possible to familiarize oneself with all the materials available at the VISL site, but many schools in Denmark choose to send their teachers to a VISL course to help teachers and their pupils/students benefit fully from using all the tools available. The VISL staff do courses, workshops, and demonstrations of the system to language teachers at all levels, and collaborate with various institutions in Denmark and abroad. In the yearbooks for the Nordic Language Technology Research Programme from 2002 and 2003, there are descriptions of how the GREI [Grammatikspill for elever på Internett (Grammar games for students on the Internet)] project at the University of Oslo co-operates with VISL on the use of VISL in Norwegian schools.

GRAMMAR GAMES

The idea behind the use of VISL in schools is that learning can and should be fun. It is a part of the VISL pedagogy that linguistic and grammatical knowledge and information can be learned by using interactive computer games. On the VISL website you find a number of educational grammar games. Each of these games is designed to give the user a better understanding of the concepts of word class and sentence function.

“[Match Form](#)” offers the possibility of learning the names of the word classes used in the VISL system. The next game to try out might be “[Paintbox](#)” where one practises marking the different word classes in either a sentence provided by the system or a sentence of one’s choice. A logical step from that game would be to go to “[WordFall](#)”, where not only one’s grammar skills, but also one’s dexterity, are tested. From a given sentence at the top of the screen the words will fall one by one, and one is supposed to navigate them into the appropriate boxes at the bottom of the screen. That game also offers to give statistics of one’s performance and supply a custom-made game where the user can work with the word classes that he or she is not all too familiar with.

In the “[Shooting Gallery](#)”, sentences enter the screen from the right and one is supposed to shoot the correct word classes before the sentence has left the screen. One will be punished for being trigger happy, but also the number of escapees will influence badly on one’s score. For those who think they have mastered word classes, “[Labyrinth](#)” is the ultimate test of one’s abilities. Here the machine has complete

control – no choice of reducing the number of word classes or choosing a suitable level. Once the game has started, one can do nothing but try to follow “grammar man” through the labyrinth by choosing the correct word classes in a given sentence. If one is too slow, a ghost will be at one’s heels and eventually swallow one if one does not get a move on. This game appears to be the favourite of even 16 to 18-year-old students and also of adults at teacher training colleges.

Similarly, “[Match Function](#)” offers the possibility of familiarizing oneself with the labels for constituents used in the VISL system (see Dienhart, 2004, p. 28). From there, one can go to “[Syntris](#)”. The layout of that game matches the layout of “[Wordfall](#)”. One is supposed to find the proper constituents for a given sentence at the bottom of the screen by choosing from a number of options in a box above the sentence. If one makes mistakes, the sentence will sit below a new sentence to practise on. If one succeeds with sentence number two, one can have another go with sentence number one. The most complicated game, at least to play, is “[Space Rescue](#)”. Here a sentence is supplied at the top of the screen and one is supposed to analyze the sentence by choosing the correct labels from the “cafeteria” at the right-hand side of the screen. That is not all, however, because extraterrestrials will try to prevent one from succeeding. To win one can use only the number of rescue ships and fighters provided.

The games are programmed so that the user is not allowed to move on, if he or she makes any errors. One gets immediate feedback on one’s performance, and the risk of learning something which is not correct is minimized, considering the generally acknowledged idea that “de-learning” is more difficult than learning.

VISL PROJECTS IN COLLABORATION WITH DANISH SCHOOLS

At secondary-school level, the system is widely used. Denmark has three “branches” of secondary education: sixth-form colleges, business colleges and technical colleges. Sixth-form colleges offer three years of study in a wide range of subjects, preparing students for studying at university and other further education institutions. Business colleges at secondary-school level also offer three years of study in a wide range of subjects, primarily languages and business-related subjects such as economics and company law, preparing students for studying at university or business schools. Similarly, technical colleges offer three years of study in a wide range of subjects, primarily science, technology and IT, preparing students for study at a technical university.

In October 2001, VISL started a project in collaboration with the ministerial advisers for the ten languages taught at sixth-form colleges. Those languages are Danish, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Latin, Ancient Greek, Russian and Spanish. The project was supported by the Danish Ministry of Education and aimed at compiling and analyzing about 200 sentences for each of these languages. The sentences were compiled by secondary-school teachers from various schools in Denmark. Some of the teachers also analysed the sentences in a number of the languages. Other sentences were analyzed using student help at the VISL centre. The pre-analyzed sentences can be found under an icon depicting a special hat, which graduates from the international branch of sixth-form colleges in Denmark wear.

during the summer after their graduation. Under that hat, the sentences are organized progressively from simple to complex analyses. Clicking on one of the ten languages under “Languages” on the VISL home page will lead to a line of icons of which the “[international hat](#)” will be one of many icons each leading to a set of pre-analyzed sentences. The user can choose to analyze a sentence in any of the ten languages under that hat.

When the sentences were made available at the VISL site, so that they could also be used in the games, we started doing courses for sixth-form college teachers from all over Denmark. During the autumn of 2002, eight courses were held, with the participation of 125 teachers in all, from 67 different sixth-form colleges. Since that time, we have done a number of similar courses at sixth-form colleges all over Denmark. The aim of these VISL courses is to teach teachers how to use VISL tools in their own teaching. As we learned from John Dewey, “learning by doing” is a very useful concept, even when teaching adults, so there is a lot of hands-on engagement during a VISL course of six hours. The course is a mix of demonstrations on how to play the language games and hands-on sessions following the demonstrations.

Evaluations from teachers after these courses confirm that the system is excellent for teaching and learning. The individual student can work at his or her own pace and also work on individual problems at a level suited to the individual student. The teachers also regard the VISL tools as excellent for use in conjunction with the reform of the secondary school system in Denmark, which was launched in August 2005, where a new topic “Introduction to general linguistics” was introduced into the curriculum. One of the aims of the reform has been to focus more on the teaching of grammar both in foreign language teaching and in the teaching of Danish language and literature. Here VISL is seen as a very useful tool by both teachers and students. So it seems fair to claim that the VISL system is used in teaching and learning at a large number of Danish, sixth-form colleges.

Business colleges have also expressed a great interest in the system. At these colleges, we ran a project for teachers of Danish and English from the autumn of 2001 to the spring of 2003. The project offered continuing education for teachers on how to use VISL in the classroom. The participants were 11 teachers of Danish and 18 teachers of English from 12 different business colleges. The teachers had various reasons for signing up for that course. One teacher said that, “It is difficult to teach grammar because the students today see grammar as boring and unnecessary.” The comment brings to mind the famous remark of Quintilian, who died in 98 A.D., who said that “Grammar is an art which is necessary to the young, pleasing to the old, and an agreeable companion in retirement” (cited in Robins, 1966, p. 3). What this teacher particularly liked about the VISL system was that “students can work individually at their own level and at their own pace.” She also said that maybe the “aspect of edutainment” would appeal to many students.

The teachers of Danish and English at business colleges also compiled about 200 sentences in those two languages – to be found under an icon with the symbol “[h](#)” in a special font (“h” being the initial letter of the Danish word for business [“handel”]). Those sentences give examples of common phrases used in business communication.

A part of this project also involved members of the VISL group visiting individual business colleges to see how VISL tools were used by teachers and how the VISL system was received by students. Those visits turned out to be very positive and encouraging events for us. Both teachers and students were extremely enthusiastic. The students were asked to evaluate the system. Student comments included: "It is much more fun than ordinary grammar." "It is good that you can choose your own level and minimize the number of word classes." "You learn better when you have some fun, instead of listening to a teacher talking for two hours." "You have to work yourself. You cannot hide behind a classmate."

So, on the basis of these and many other comments we draw the conclusion that the VISL system seems to motivate students. Students also seem to learn when they work with the system and, last but not least, they find it fun to learn grammar this way.

Some business-school teachers have indicated an interest in participating in future VISL projects. Further, after the end of that project, we were invited to do courses for language teachers in their schools. Teachers of Danish and English at some of the schools invited colleagues who taught other languages. Such a spin-off effect has been very encouraging for VISL staff.

A current VISL-related project is aimed at language teachers in Danish, teacher-training colleges. At these colleges, students are trained to become primary-school teachers. That project was launched in August 2004 with participants from seven out of the 18 teacher-training colleges in Denmark. The teachers represent Danish (from one teacher training college all of the teachers of Danish participate), Danish as a foreign language, English and French. This project gives the participants the opportunity for developing their own VISL-related teaching materials for use in their own classrooms.

In primary schools, the VISL-system is not used very much yet, but a small group of teachers are working on a voluntary basis to compile and analyze sentences in Danish, English, French and German. So far, sentences in Danish can be found under the icon of an [owl](#) at the VISL site. Those sentences have also been compiled so that pupils can start working with easy sentences and work progressively to a more difficult level.

CONCLUSION

In this brief narrative, I hope to have demonstrated that the VISL system is widely used in Danish schools at all levels. What began as a university system is now freely available as an educational tool for various levels to be used around the clock – also at home, wherever one lives.

The VISL group will continue to work on teaching projects with VISL as a core instrument. In the autumn of 2005, we developed – with funding from the Danish Ministry of Education – a course on written proficiency in Danish in cooperation with a group of secondary-school teachers. This course was offered, not only to language teachers, but also to teachers of science and technology, to try to give teachers some tools with which to help their students write better essays and reports. During the

spring of 2006, a new course is going to be developed – also funded by the Danish Ministry of Education. This course is aimed at teachers of English at business colleges and technical colleges. The purpose of this course is to provide teachers with materials that will help them teach English grammar in accordance with the requirements set up in the new curriculum for secondary schools in Denmark.

We will, of course, continue to develop the VISL site and add new features, such as new games or testing materials. So if readers are on the lookout for a bit of edutainment, it is always a good idea to visit [Visual Interactive Syntax Learning \(VISL\)](http://visl.sdu.dk).

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