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Managing Large Foreign Language Classes at University

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Abstract

The rationalisation of class sizes and subject offerings in majors, and the implementation of workloads models establishing parity in teaching hours and in student load per staff member across Faculty have created considerable challenges for tertiary foreign-language teaching over the past decade. This paper presents one way of responding to the imperatives of the new order, involving the adaptation and management of traditional class activities so that they remain valid in a group of 60 or more students, and the development and delivery of computer-based activities to allow students to receive as much (or as little) individualised instruction as they need outside of class. It reflects on principles and practices which, although not new, have assumed particular importance in the new environment, and analyses the impact of the changes on the dynamic of the class.

This article is adapted from a paper entitled 'Teaching Language in Large Groups' presented by invitation at the National Language Workshop on 'Teaching and Research in University Language Programs: Successful Practices, Creative Strategies', organised by the Deans of the Faculties of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities in Australasia (DASSH), Griffith University, Brisbane, 14-16 June, 2002)

The shift to large classes

The structuro-global audio-visual approaches to foreign language teaching in the 60s and 70s were originally designed to be used in an intensive mode. Their syllabus of basic language skills was typically covered in a 10-week course of 20-25 hrs per week. These methods were conceived and developed principally in the country of the target language, and built on the dynamics of small group interactions focusing on a shared linguistic experience in the miniature world created by audio-visual materials in a teacher-managed environment. Classes were seen as 'laboratories' in the sense that, as with Chemistry or Music, and whether or not an actual language laboratory was used, the overall progress made by students was expected to be roughly proportional to the amount of structured, hands-on, supervised, practical experience that could be integrated into their academic training. When these approaches were first introduced into Australia, times were relatively good in the sphere of tertiary education, and there was little financial obstacle to creating structures that supported the academically driven model of discrete, 'semi-intensive' (6 hrs per week) classes of approximately 20 students.

The past decade has seen a shift from the methodology-driven budget to the budget-driven methodology. Large-group teaching of foreign languages is essentially the result of a requirement that foreign language instruction be delivered on the same resourcing model as traditional humanities subjects. The classic pattern for Arts faculties is either 2 hours per week of plenary lectures accompanied by a 1-hour tutorial in groups of 15, or 1 hour per week in a plenary lecture with 2 hours of seminars in groups of 20. For a class of 60 students, the first of these models requires a total of 6 hours of instruction (2 hrs of lectures, 4 hrs of tutorials), and the second, 7 hours of instruction (1 hr of lectures, 6 hours of seminars). This clearly presents a challenge for foreign language departments. If the retention of discrete groups of 20 students remains the top priority, then a cohort of 60 students could only be provided with 2 or, at the outside, 3 hours per week of instruction per student (i.e. 2 hrs per week for 3 groups of 20 students requires a total of 6 hours of instruction, 3 hours per week of instruction for 3 groups of 20 students requires a total of 9 hours of instruction). It could be argued that such a model not only halves the time available to cover the formal instruction of basic language skills (i.e. the equivalent of a full secondary school foreign language syllabus), but it creates a situation in which the instruction is so 'unintensive' that it is impractical to persevere with the teaching approach which produced the need for discrete small groups in the first place.

Different Modern Languages programs and individual foreign language coordinators around Australia have responded to the imperatives of the new order in different ways. The challenge has been met at Wollongong by adopting a radical change of approach to teaching in order to retain the same maximum contact hours (i.e. 6 hrs per week) as in other academic disciplines with a strong practical component such as Science, Informatics, Creative Arts and Engineering. In the context of a Faculty rationalisation of class sizes and subject offerings in majors, and the implementation of a workloads model establishing parity in teaching hours and student load per staff member across the Faculty, the corollary of maximising the number of hours of instruction received by each student is an increase in class size.

The main planks of the new approach have been the adaptation and management of traditional class activities so that they remain valid in a class of 60 or more students, and the provision of integrated computer-based activities to allow students to receive as much (or as little) individualised instruction as they need outside of the class. These two areas are dealt with in the sections 'Classroom principles and practices' and 'Computer support'. The syllabus content and the aspects assessed are unchanged. The objective remains to cover the 6-year secondary school syllabus in one academic year, thus enabling post-secondary students to enter the language component of their major in the subject taken by beginners in their third semester.

Key elements of the syllabus are: the linguistic knowledge and skills of a contemporary commercial coursebook developed by a team of native-speaker experts in foreign language teaching methodology following a functional, communicative approach and supported by a range of audio and audio-visual resources; a thorough grounding in the grammar of the language so that students will have a tool for subsequent independent language analysis and a platform on which to build an academic specialisation in the target language; contextualisation of linguistic skills in the culture of the target language; sensitivity to the social issues and the perspective on current affairs of the foreign culture; and an initiation into the literature of the foreign language.

Classroom principles and practices

It is not only the syllabus and the emphasis on the communicative aspects of the language that have remained constant. The new situation has not meant the rejection of conventional activities such as explanation, question-and-answer, pairwork, information-gap activities, traditional pattern drills, and exploitation of video material, recordings and realia. A number of principles and practices, however, have assumed particular importance in the new environment. It is acknowledged that the lists that follows are not exhaustive, and, more importantly, that the principles are very definitely not exclusive to large-group teaching. In fact, most would be stock items in any compendium of sound teaching practice. But whereas they could be dealt with casually in small groups, in the context of large-group foreign-language teaching, student dependence on their obvious presence and clear articulation is greatly increased and the capacity of the teacher to detect and compensate for any fuzziness by one-to-one interaction with any student who may be encountering difficulty is correspondingly reduced. The challenge lies in effective management of familiar processes and activities in an unfamiliar environment. The inventory is presented in the categories: Syllabus, Assessment, Resources and Crowd Control.

Syllabus

Treat beginners as beginners. A beginner course should genuinely assume no prior knowledge. Focus on detail, which formerly manifested itself in personalised attention to each student's needs, must be compensated for in the careful sequencing, dosage and reinforcement of each new element.

Set realistic goals for the students and the teacher. This involves recognising that in 156 hours of class (6 hrs per week, 13 weeks, 2 semesters) over 1 year, whether in a class of 20 or 120, beginner students will not emerge from the course with native-speaker fluency. And **make students aware of those goals**.

Have objectives that are consistent with student expectations. In 2004, that means a focus on the capacity to communicate productively with native speakers in the country of the target language, coupled with sufficient knowledge of the grammar of the target language to construct meaning accurately in unfamiliar situations.

Construct a clear, balanced, thorough syllabus around those objectives, and teach to the syllabus established.

Expect that **structures and procedures for covering the syllabus will be radically different from those operating in secondary schools** where students typically have some 500 hours of instruction spread over 5 or 6 years. Apart from the need to collapse content and accelerate presentation as in any beginner course, the teacher cannot assume that familiar procedures will work just because they always have – even the most 'accepted' practices must be tested empirically in the new environment.

Ensure that **listening, speaking, reading and writing** skills all feature prominently throughout the course. If any activity or syllabus component is emended, it should be on the basis of relevance rather than expediency.

Assessment

Spell out the various assessment components clearly in the Subject Outline.

For each assessment task, provide details of exactly what will be assessed and how.

Make marking of assessment tasks objective, consistent and transparent.

Ensure that all work has been covered clearly and thoroughly in class well before the date of the assessment task.

Assess only what has been taught (no curly balls). Acknowledge that if a genuine beginner student fully masters the work covered, they have performed a remarkable feat.

Assess smart. Committed teachers want their students to learn. Most sense that in foreign-language learning, students learn by doing. Teachers want their students to learn as much as possible, and hence, to do as much work as possible. No matter how well-intentioned they may be at the outset, in the end students only do compulsory assessment tasks that have marks attached. If work has marks attached to it, it has to be marked. The amount of marking is proportional to the number of students. To avoid the predicament of the drudgery of marking being directly proportional to commitment to teaching, large-class teachers must find ways of assessing the syllabus more economically but no less thoroughly.

Resources

Ensure that students are aware of the resources available (print, computer, audio, etc) and of their relevance to the course.

Ensure that students know **how to use the resources and have ready access** to them.

Make sure that **use of out-of-class resources is thoroughly integrated** into the syllabus (McCarthy, 1996, 1999).

Insure against obsolescence by investing effort in developing resources that do not need changing if there is a change in textbook (McCarthy, 2002) .

Use resources as a two-edged sword. For students it means that they have all the necessary opportunity and materials to master the syllabus. For teachers it means that it is reasonable to conduct a rigorous assessment of that syllabus.

One of the biggest single factors in the capacity to manage large classes at Wollongong has been the existence of extensive tailor-made **computer-based materials** for grammar maintenance and review, and for basic situational dialogues. Further information on these resources and their integration is given in the section 'Computer Resources' below.

Crowd control

Use clear definition of syllabus, assessment processes, resources and class activities as a means of **eliminating** potential anxiety and dissatisfaction stemming from **fear of the unknown**.

In class, **leave nothing to chance**. For each class, have a detailed lesson register, and follow it.

Make it a high priority to **know each student by name** as soon as possible. This facilitates personalised teacher-student interaction in the target language and reduces the student's sense of anonymity.

Carefully **structure, explain and demonstrate classroom activities,** particularly speaking activities.

Circulate an **attendance sheet** each hour. It reinforces the idea that attendance matters, and means that students are aware that their absence does not go undetected.

Do not confuse noise with lack of discipline **or communicative chaos.**

Develop **techniques for avoiding having to fight noise** at inappropriate stages of the class. Even such a simple device as a very clear 'Silence, s'il vous plaît!' transparency, totally unnecessary in a group of 20, can be used to great effect in a large group.

Do not feel you have to monitor every spoken exchange between students.

Encourage students to ask questions.

Foster a **culture of students helping each other**.

Foster a **culture of dedication to the subject**. The fact that 2 of the lecture hours have been on a Friday afternoon has gone a long way towards eliminating the less dedicated early on. In-class assessment tasks are routinely conducted in the Friday timeslot.

Make sure that all projected **images**, boardwork, etc are **large scale** and clearly visible from everywhere in the room, and all **audio clear**.

Set relevant **homework** for every class.

Tap into the single strongest motivating factor for students: their own confidence that they are making **genuine progress**.

Computer support

Two suites of computer-based materials were developed in the 1990s as a means of enriching the learning of beginner French students. They are an extensive and comprehensive set of drills for grammar review and maintenance, and an audio-supported set of 300 cued situational dialogues. These materials are unique, and their linguistic and pedagogical rationale has been discussed at length in a series of published research articles, a small selection of which is given below under 'References'. Although it would be gratifying to pretend that they are testimony to great prescience on the part of the developers, these materials, begun in 1990, and some 8,000 hours in the making, were created in response to the perceived needs of students more than a decade ago. However, their instructional value increases exponentially with an increase in class size, and the fact that their completion occurred at the same time as the move to large classes was a very happy coincidence. It must be emphasised that the value of the materials remains in the domain of the potential until they are fully integrated as an assessable component of the curriculum. A brief description of each is provided below, followed by details of the procedures required to ensure that every student in a large class can derive maximum benefit from them.

Grammar review

The grammar materials are a suite of Hypercard-based exercises (currently being converted to WebCT delivery) designed to give students the opportunity to master, and to maintain mastery of, basic French grammar points outside of the classroom, and at the same time relieve some of the pressure on class time in a seriously overloaded teaching program.

The topics covered are: *Adjectives*, Adverbs, *Articles*, Comparison, Future Tense, Infinitives and Participles, Infinitive Government, *Passé Composé, Passé Composé/Imparfait*, Present Subjunctive, *Present Tense Verb*s, *Pronoun Objects*, Relative Pronouns, *Reported Speech*, Translation Traps, Verb Kit (all verb tenses), Verb Tense Recognition, Relative Pronouns. Modules used in the beginner course have been presented in italics.

In each module, the grammar point is broached in stages so that students do not have to have covered every aspect of it before beginning revision. For example, the Pronoun Objects module covers *me* and *nous* with the imperative; *me, te nous, vous* with the present tense; *me, te, nous, vous* with the interrogative; *le, la, l', les* with the present tense; *lui, leur* with the present; *le, la, l', les, lui, leur* with the present; *le, la, l', les* with the passé composé, *lui, leur* with the passé composé; *le, la, l', les, lui, leur* with the passé composé; *lui, leur, y* with the present; *lui, leur, y* with the passé composé; *lui, leur, y* with the present and passé composé; *en, le, la, l', les* with the present; position and order of pronoun objects with the present; position and order of pronoun objects with the passé composé; position and order of pronoun objects with the imperative. Items contain vocabulary appropriate to the stage of the course at which the grammar point is normally encountered. Online support is provided in the form of grammar notes (and, where required, mini grammar tutorials), operating instructions, and assistance for key strokes used in typing accented characters. It is possible to stop the activity at any point, and students are always fully in control of the pace and pattern of their work. Feedback is instantaneous. Students may attempt comprehensive review exercises once they have mastered the all the component exercises. A record is kept of incorrect answers, allowing students to compare their incorrect responses to the correct answers stored by the computer. All grammar exercises are scored, and a record of student ID, date, and score is available to the teacher (password-protected). Activities contain extensive wells of items (all review exercises are compiled from wells of over 1000 items), ensuring that students master the principle rather than memorise the answers, and these items are presented randomly from the wells so that students never encounter the same set of questions. All materials are textbook-independent – this is important in view of the time and resources invested in developing the material, the fact that the material is intended to be support for the course rather than the course proper, and the tendency for course textbooks to change every 5 years or so.

Successful integration of this suite of CALL (Computer Aided Language Learning) grammar review and maintenance materials is a complex task. It involves preparing and presenting handouts on the rationale behind CALL use for distribution at the beginning of the course; preparing a schedule detailing the content of the each computer-based grammar module and students' required level of achievement in the various compulsory computer exercises (varying from 5 to 20, depending on the course); and providing compulsory initiation sessions of 30 minutes in the self-access computer laboratory for all students at the beginning of the course, in groups of 15. The teacher must ensure that work has been covered in class at the appropriate stage, and that ample relevant homework has been set and corrected. The need to complete compulsory computer preparation must be emphasised regularly, and the teacher must prepare, post and check the sign-up sheets on which students indicate that they have completed the preparation.

Where necessary (i.e. where there is any doubt that the information supplied by students on the sign-up sheet may not match their actual performance on the computers – e.g. in the early stages of first-year courses) the teacher must check the scores on all 15 computers in the private study laboratory and keep a record of the (fortunately very rare) students who fail to complete the computer preparation on time and ensuring that no result is declared at the end of session until the requirement has been met. The teacher must reproduce on-paper tests and administer them in an agreed timeslot out of normal lecture time (the tests, generated by the computer, correspond in scope and depth to the various compulsory preparation exercises completed by the students), grade them and keep a record of the marks. The teacher also has the responsibility of overseeing maintenance of the equipment.

‘En tête-à-tête’ situational dialogues

‘En tête-à-tête’ is a combination of a lecture-room activity whose efficacy is not affected by class size (paired-speaking cue cards) with audio-supported computer backup. Neither the technology nor the activity is new. What is new is the articulation of the media (print, electronic and traditional classroom interactions) in the teaching/learning environment.

The print materials of 'En tête-à-tête' consist of 300 pairs of cards (Fig. 1) , each containing:

(a) A cue or series of cues in English which the speaker is required to communicate to his/her partner at the appropriate point in the dialogue;

(b) The text of what the speaker is most likely to hear from his/her interlocutor at each stage of the dialogue. Wherever possible, variants consistent with the expected level of students' linguistic proficiency are supplied.

All items contain speech acts likely to be of use in everyday communication. Collectively they represent a distillation of the notions, structures, functions, situations, grammar, register and vocabulary found in a range of contemporary textbooks and manuals. They are graded into 3 levels.

The software backup in the computer laboratory contains text and audio versions of all 300 dialogues. For each item (Fig. 2) the computer displays the cues in sequence. Students click to hear any line of dialogue (and variants where applicable), and can choose to view or conceal the corresponding lines of text. They may also choose to play the full dialogue. Incentive, other than what remains untainted of the original motivation that inspired the student to enrol in the subject, is in the knowledge that the bulk of their marks in the end-of-session oral examination will come from their proficiency in performing a selection of 'En tête-à-tête' items.

Integration of the ‘En tête-à-tête’ cued speaking materials (with a class of 60 or more) requires heavy teacher participation. The course has to be structured in such a way as to ensure that students have encountered the necessary communicative situations, vocabulary and grammar in the course of lectures (through dialogue presentation, speaking activities, grammar presentation and homework exercises). Classroom work with ‘En tête-à-tête’ involves presenting the cues and responses to the class as a whole via overhead transparencies – usually 10 dialogues per session; distributing sets of cards to the class for pair work (to set this activity up involved a one-off preparation and collation of over 20,000 slips of paper: 300 dialogues, 2 cue cards (1 for each speaker) per dialogue, 40 sets of cards); and supervising a class in which 60 or more students are engaged in a speaking activity simultaneously. After all items for the semester have been treated in class, students are provided with a full set of cues and responses as a take-home private study resource. Time must be taken to make students aware of the existence and operation of the CD ROM activity with full audio support which enables them to work on the material privately outside of class. The final task is the preparation, conduct and grading of the cassette-based end-of-session oral examination by means of which student mastery of the speaking skills is assessed.

Changes in class dynamic

The following set of tables summarises constants and changes in class dynamic with the shift from small to large groups of the various interactions typically occurring in the foreign language class.

TEACHER-TO-ALL CLASS (e.g. instructions, presentation of new material, explanation, listening comprehension)	
NO CHANGE… as long as the teacher has the attention of the class, and visual information can be seen clearly and audio information heard clearly.	
ALL CLASS-TO-TEACHER (e.g. repetition, chorus reading)	
NO CHANGE: …although (i) non-participants find it easier to hide in the crowd, (ii) teacher finds it harder to detect the problems of individuals.	
TEACHER-TO-INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS (e.g. formal questioning, informal communication, exchanges during exploitation of audio-visual course book material, demonstration of activity before pairwork, etc)	
NO CHANGE: …in the sense that all students still hear. If students don't know who is being addressed until after the question has been phrased, or, if they are genuinely diligent, they will in any case be formulating an answer in their own minds.	CHANGE: The number of students whose involvement is passive or whose time may be being wasted for sake of one student is increased.
INDIVIDUAL STUDENT-TO-TEACHER	
NO CHANGE: …in opportunity for student to ask questions. All students hear both the student's question and the teacher's response. There is a strong chance that other students will be interested in same information (i.e. the student is asking on behalf of a greater number, but teacher would still have to take the same time to answer in a small group).	CHANGE: the opportunity for each student to interact directly with the teacher is 'diluted' as class numbers increase. CHANGE: The shy are even less inclined to speak out. Nuisance or exhibitionist students have the potential to irritate a greater number of students.
INDIVIDUAL STUDENT-TO-STUDENT (individual or small group)	
NO CHANGE: there is virtually no limit to the number of students who can participate in a carefully constructed paired speaking or small group activity.	CHANGE: the teacher's capacity to monitor systematically the performance of individual students is diluted. This has meant, for example, that it is no longer really possible to award a meaningful class participation mark. It has been replaced by a vocabulary component.

Disadvantages

There are a number of disadvantages associated with the shift to large-group foreign-language teaching:

The larger the class, the more important the role of relevant, integrated, and structured out-of-class materials. They are hard to find, and expensive and time-consuming to develop.

Teaching on the large-group model is relentless hard work for the teacher. If the system works, it's because the lecturer works.

There is frequently a mismatch between the training or the methodological orientation of academic staff and the teaching tasks that large classes require them to perform.

Many materials and activities, particularly communicative speaking activities, have to be adapted to make them work in a large class. This requires time and expertise.

The larger the class, the more heterogeneous the student population, and the harder it is to meet individual students' needs.

Any attempt to lighten the load by outsourcing marking has the disadvantage of depriving the lecturer of the detailed awareness of problems faced by individual students gained in the course of marking. Such awareness is a vital reality check that informs many small but important processes and comments in the day-to-day running of the class.

Because syllabus design, course structure, lesson planning and materials preparation are complex and closely interconnected processes in foreign language teaching, it is impracticable to change lecture and tutorial configurations from year to year or from semester to semester in response to enrolment numbers. And bedding down of any new pattern requires at least 2 years and a great investment of time and expertise.

Conclusion

It has not been the author's intention to suggest or imply that foreign languages are better taught in large groups. It is hoped, however, that this article has provided sufficient evidence to show that, should institutional constraints make it impossible to continue to teach foreign languages in small groups, the option should not be dismissed out of hand. Statistical records of comparable assessment tasks in beginner French classes since 1995 (when each beginner class had fewer than 15 students) show no decline in student performance, in spite of the steady increase in class size (65 students 2003, 70 in 2004). Neither do students completing the beginner course appear to be disadvantaged in comparison to their fellows entering university with a sound HSC pass in French.

The solution, however, has not been found in blindly trying to teach a large group as though it was a small one. What has been required is a fundamental change in teaching approach and classroom practices, and provision of comprehensive banks of resources, including computer-based activities, to support students outside of the class.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to acknowledge the major contribution of Mr Ray Stace (CEDIR, University of Wollongong) in the development and ongoing support over more than 14 years of the computer-based resources which underpin so many facets of the large-group teaching practices cited in this article.

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Card 22 • Speaker A

You point someone out to the person with you. Ask them if they know that boy. [Hint: Use the 'tu' form]

Oui, je le connais.
Oui, je connais ce garçon.

Ask his name.

Il s'appelle Robert Picon.

Ask where he lives.

Il habite à Rouen.

Card 22 • Speaker B

Tu connais ce garçon?
Est-ce que tu connais ce garçon?

Indicate that you know him.

Comment s'appelle-t-il?
Il s'appelle comment?

Tell the person his name (Robert Picon).

Où est-ce qu'il habite?
Où habite-t-il?
Il habite où?

Say he lives in Rouen.

Card 221 • Speaker A

You go into a shop to ask directions. Tell the shopkeeper [male] you are looking for the Bon Séjour hotel.

Vous prenez à gauche en sortant…
Vous sortez, vous tournez à gauche…

…vous traversez le parc…

…puis vous tournez à droite, et l'hôtel est au coin de la rue à côté du fleuriste.

Card 221 • Speaker B

Excusez-moi, Monsieur, je cherche l'hôtel Bon Séjour.
Excusez-moi, je cherche l'hôtel Bon Séjour.
Je cherche l'hôtel Bon Séjour.

Tell them to turn left when they get out of the shop…

… to cross the park…

…then turn right, and the hotel is on the corner next to the florist's.

Figure 1: Sample 'En tête-à-tête' paired-speaking cue cards for use in class

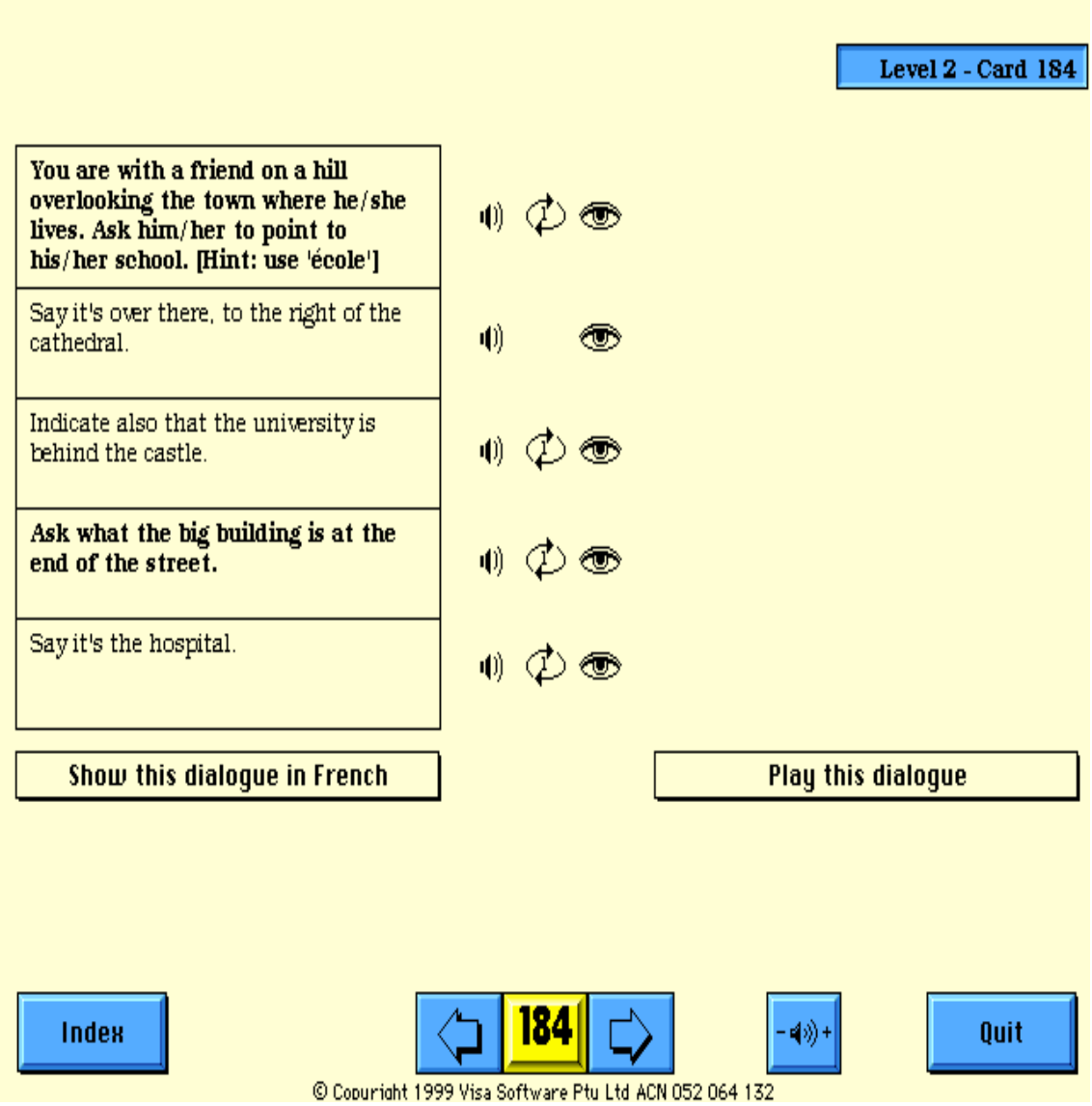

Figure 2: Sample 'En tête-à-tête' computer-support screen dumps - Level 2 - card 184

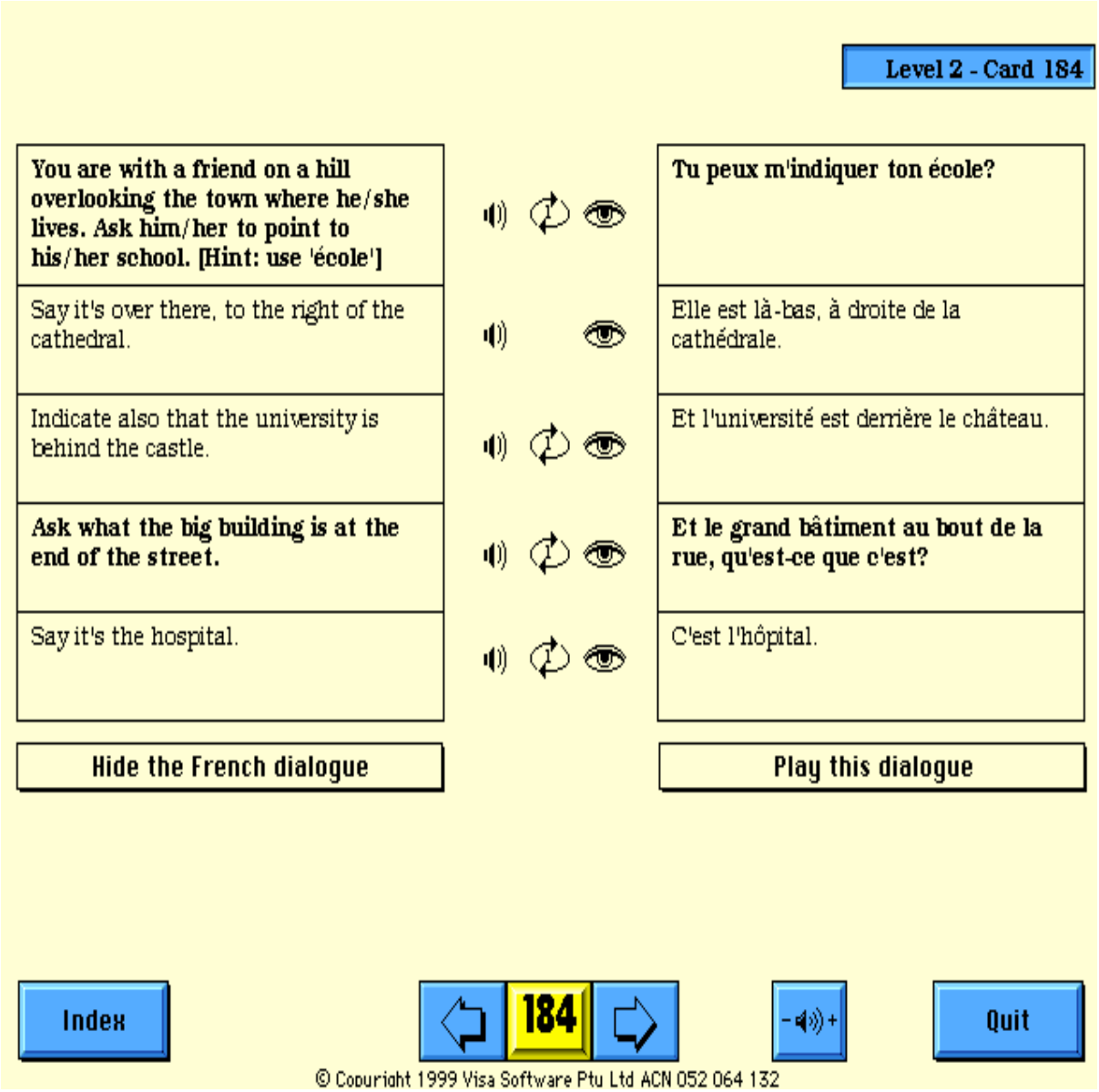

Figure 3: Screen dump of 'En tête-à-tête' card 184 with text of French displayed

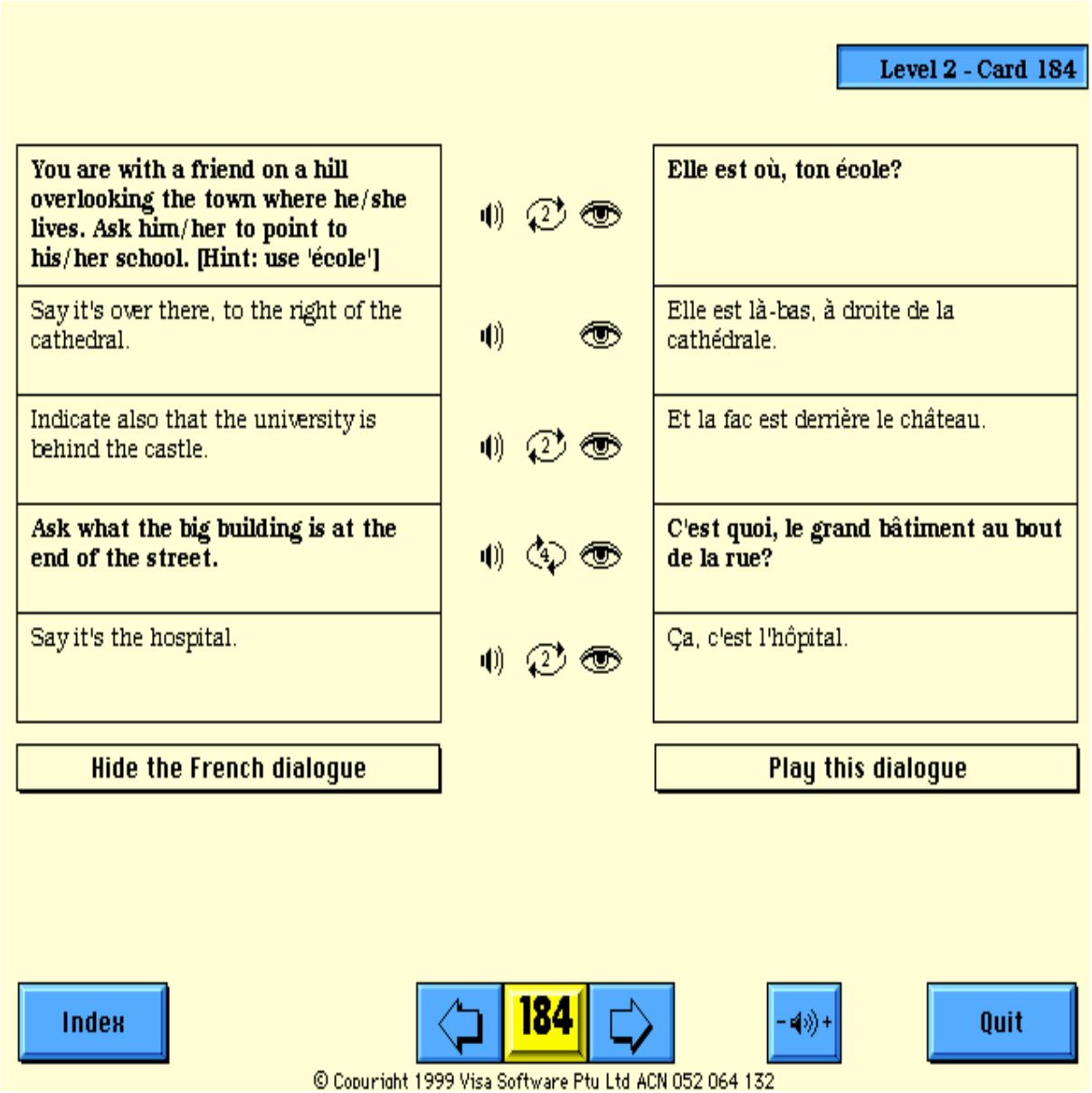

Figure 4: Screen dump of 'En tête-à-tête' card 184 showing selected variants