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TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

The Newsletter of the Teacher Development Special Interest Group

July 2015 Issue 72

Price: £4.50
Free for TDSIG members

ISSN 2409-2592

Messing about with other people's code and alternative teacher development

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Teachers adapting existing resources for their own purposes is a long, noble and pragmatic tradition. I would like to describe in the following paragraphs my (limited) experience of doing this with computer code resources in the hope of encouraging others to try their hand. Note however I am not cheerleading the current movement which is advocating code in primary and secondary education in certain countries, but more simply describing a modern form of remix that teachers have been practicing forever.

Bingo tropes

It started off innocently enough, in an ELTjam blog post Lindsay Clandfield decried hackneyed phrases or tropes he was getting fed up with listening to at ELT talks and I had just finished reading a Neil Selwyn article called 'Discourses of digital 'disruption' in education: a critical analysis.'

Someone in the comments to the Clandfield blog post suggested a bingo game with the tropes and so I did a search on the net for a bingo game I could adapt. I found one that was hosted on a software code repository called GitHub. Note that often just adding the word GitHub to your keyword searches can payoff.

ELTtalk Bingo elttalkbingo.englishup.me/newcard.html

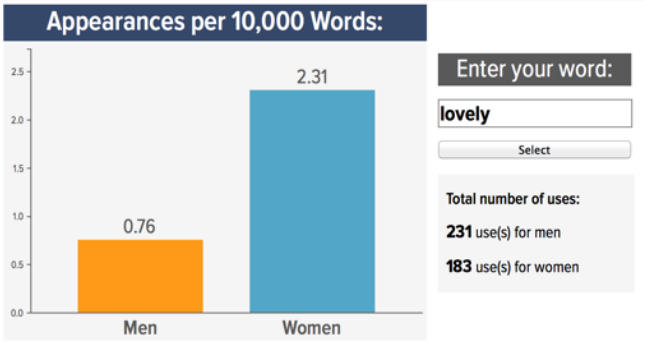
Luckily adding phrases in the code I found, in place of the bingo numbers, was fairly straightforward to do and so was born my occasional hobby with messing about with other people's code.

My only previous experience with coding was with basic html coding for web pages. So I would say that if you are so inclined it does not really take much know how to get stuck in.

Gendered language

The next code was related to doing something with the then newly released to the public British National Corpus (BNC) data. I had read an article, which linked to some code (again on GitHub), that in two bar graphs compared the words used to describe black and white players in NFL sports. I thought this simple visualization could be used to show gender differences in spoken BNC. Now this did involve, in addition to modifying someone else's code, trying to derive my own XML code to extract the relevant data from the BNC files.

The BNC dataset comes with some example XML code to extract various things and I tried to learn from those, a lot of head was scratched, eventually I submitted an attempt to Stack Exchange (a forum to get help about code). I was able to get the help I needed and so managed to extract the gender data I needed. Modifying the bar graph code was fairly straightforward after this.

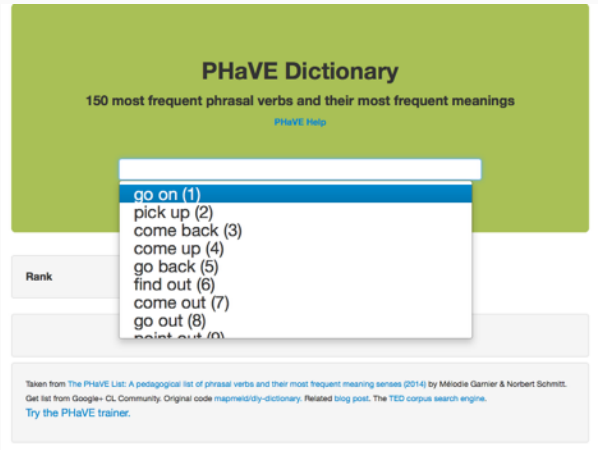


BNCgender http://bncgender.englishup.me/

Phrasal verbs

The next code arose from reading an article on a pedagogical phrasal verb list called the PHaVE list. The list comes in the form of a word file and since the list comprised of 150 items, scrolling through the list was cumbersome, surely there was some code out there that could make it easier to look up and lo GitHub said yes. In fact, I had originally started with a flashcard code (to help in memorizing the list), which was easy to find and only after realized a dictionary type program would be more useful.

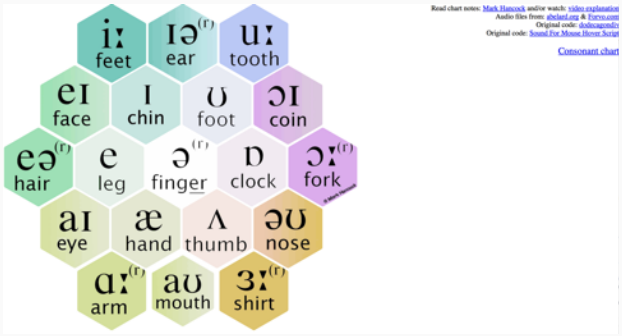
I have also added links to video examples of the primary meanings of the phrasal verbs so that students can get to hear it used in context.



PHaVE dictionary http://phave-dictionary.englishup.me/

Pron chart

My final code thus far arose from a new vowel pronunciation chart by Mark Hancock, which uses a hexagon layout, pretty cool and ripe for implementing in web form. Finding the appropriate code did take some effort; eventually I found a link to the code (again on GitHub) buried in some comments to another program. When Hancock came out with his consonant chart I was able to easily modify the same code.



Phonogon vowel chart http://phonogon-vowel-chart.englishup.me/

Conclusion

What I have found (obviously enough you may remark) is that trying to implement in code language areas such as phrasal verbs and pronunciation charts allowed me to think about such topics in a way that I would not have been able to if I had just read about them.

Previously phrasal verbs seemed to me to be one of those areas where only memorisation was required however in my attempts to see how I could use frequency based lists I learnt about metaphor based approaches to thinking about phrasal verbs.

Here the literal roots of the particles in such verbs help to trace the metaphorical links.

Take for example the most common phrasal verb go on. The literal meaning of the particle on refers to the position of an object in relation to a surface, one metaphorical step away is a reference to the state of something e.g. switch on something. Yet another step is a reference to the continuance of an event such as one meaning of go on. The most common meaning of go on refers not to the continuation but the existence of an event which is close to the on that refers to the state of something.

I have used the PHaVE dictionary in class in a phrasal verb worksheet exercise where instead of using a full blown dictionary they made use of the more restricted verb list. This had the advantage of allowing more focus on the exercise rather than on their dictionary usage skills.

If any ideas come to your mind in using these tools I would love to hear them. I would also be glad to answer any questions you may have. You can read about some other teachers who are taking on such an approach in my series of blog posts on Grassroots Language Technology (https://eflnotes.wordpress.com/category/grassroots-language-technology/).

Muralee Navaratnam teaches university and business adult students in France. He is keen on corpus linguistic applications in teaching and learning, which you can find him writing about on his blog eflnotes.wordpress.com and on the GooglePlus Corpus Linguistics Community. Recently he has been thinking about questions of teacher development and working conditions.