Mining Message Menus for Meaningful Activities

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Communication experts suggest that talking on the telephone can be a very challenging task which often produces anxiety (Hopper, Doany, Johnson, & Drummond, 1991). Initiating and maintaining telephone conversations is particularly difficult when the task must be accomplished in a language other than the native tongue. Not only do telephone behaviors differ from country to county but so many of the non-verbal signals normally relied on for negotiating meaning are missing in telephonic communication (Harmantz-Levin, 1986; Hopper, 1989; Reitzel, 1986; Schegloff, 1979; Sifianou, 1989). Thus, it is no wonder that language learners often express great fears about using the telephone to communicate in their non-native language. One student from our ESL program wrote about such fears in a recent entry in her journal. Her comments exemplify the sentiments often expressed by our language learners:

> I lost my checkbook today. I was so surprised and upset. I called a bank
> and stopped my checks. But at that time, I realized that it's so hard to talk
> in English on the phone. Especially, if that person is who I don't know.
> Sometimes they understand that I can't speak English well and talk very
> slow, but sometimes they don't care . . . . I feel different if I talk in English
> on the phone. I always feel pressure that I really need to improve my
> English.

ESL and EFL materials writers are well aware of learners' fears of using the telephone in a second or foreign language and many have included telephone speaking and listening activities in their textbooks (See Tanka & Baker, 1996, for example). Generally, these exercises involve role play or actual use of the telephone to get information or leave a message. Such activities allow students to develop and practice verbal strategies for accomplishing tasks on the telephone. While many of these activities provide good preparation for the activity we describe here, they don't take into account the increasing use, even the prevalence, of message menus in telephonic communication. Government agencies, airlines, public utilities, and private businesses, for example, have all begun to employ voice menu systems as part of their routine telephone communications.

A cartoon by thaves (1996) published in our local newspaper highlighted the frustration felt by many telephone users when they encounter the "ubiquitous" voice menu systems.

Figure 1
Frank and Ernest message menu cartoon

FRANK AND ERNEST
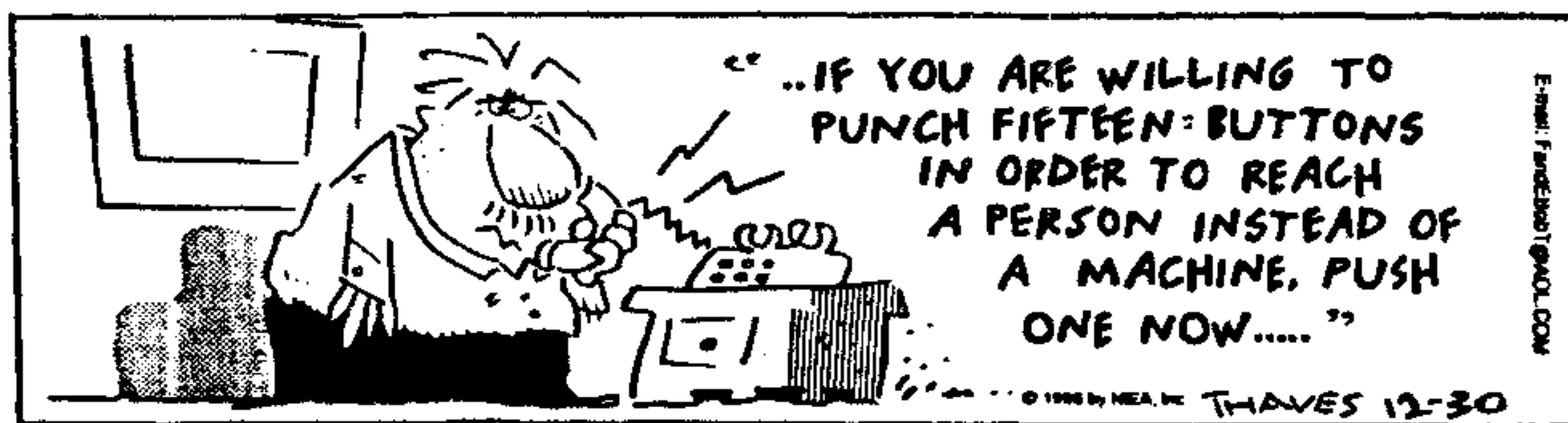
When we showed this cartoon to our students, the giggles and nods of recognition sug-gested that voice menu systems would be good fodder for the classroom. Using only a tape recorder, a copy of our area yellow pages, and voice menus from local businesses, we developed a voice menu unit which has proven to be very helpful to our ESL learn-ers. The process is extraordinarily simple and can be easily duplicated with only a tape recorder, a little time, and a bit of patience.

Designing a Voice Menu Unit

The voice menu unit is a multi-step process which begins with defining voice menus for students. The best way we have found to help students understand exactly what a voice menu entails is to record and play one for them in class. We chose our uni-versity's telephonic registration system called "TOUCH" because it is one that they will use regularly when they complete their ESL studies. After listening to the recording made with the use of a speaker phone, we transcribed the contents of the voice menu. This listening activity was very useful because it allowed the students to see on paper the logic used in constructing voice menus. After spending some time analyzing the TOUCH message menu, students were sent off on their own to conduct mock registra-

tions using TOUCH. In the next class, they shared their experiences and frustrations. We learned that students found the system to be "too fast," and that it had "so many instructions, I can't remember them all." Many students reported having to call back and start over a number of times, writing down instructions on paper as they listened. One student suggested that a "pause" function would be helpful in negotiating TOUCH!

The second activity in the unit built on skills developed in the first activity but provided a more challenging listening and critical thinking task. Recordings of message menus from the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) and the Citizens' Area Transit (CAT) were played in the classroom. We chose these agencies because of the complexity of their voice menus and because of their usefulness to our learners. While listening to the message menus, students completed exercises we had made up ahead of time. These exercises involved open-ended questions, cloze exercises, and other sorts of listening and comprehension checks. Figure 2 illustrates the sorts of questions which provided students the opportunity to "gear-up" their listening for message menus.

Figure 2

CAT Bus Message Menu

DIRECTIONS: Listen carefully to the message menu. Follow the directions for each section.

1. What agency's recording are you listening to?_____

2. Listen to the options of the main voice menu and fill in the missing information.

For regular bus transportation on Citizen's Area Transit, press_____.

For CAT Paratransit Services, press_____.

If you_____, please_____.

3. You are now in *option one* of the menu choices listed above. Listen and answer the
   following question:

There is a "two for one" special fare available right now. What is it?

_____

4. The sub-menu in option one of the main menu lists four options. Write in the options by
   the menu numbers below.

_____   __1__

_____   __2__

_____   __3__

_____   __4__

5. You are now in *option one of the sub-menu* above. Fill in the missing information from
   the recorded messages found in this option.

The CAT full-fare, one-way price for adults, 18 years and older, is_____on residential routes.

The CAT full-fare, one-way price for adults, 18 years and older, is_____on the Las Vegas Strip.

The route numbers of the $1.50 fare are_____and_____. The reduced fare for children and

youth, 5 to 17 years old, senior citizens,_____, and riders with_____is_____

on_____routes_____.

Although the questions appear to be rather simple, students had to listen repeatedly to complete the exercises. But having done so, they were armed with an intuitive understanding of the logic and construction of voice mail systems.

Now students were ready to write their own voice menus, the final step in the unit. To prepare for this culminating assignment, students browsed through yellow pages in the local telephone directory looking for an agency or business that drew their attention. After selecting a business based on an advertisement, students then called that business and asked various questions, the answers to which were to be incorporated in their voice message designs. Students then set about writing up their voice message menu scripts. Some students worked in pairs while others chose to work alone. Even for those working alone, the process was highly collaborative because students tested each instruction in their menus on the teacher and on other students in the class. Instructions that were not clear were rewritten with the help of peers and the teacher.

Students were given complete freedom to use their imaginations, humor, and good sense in developing their scripts. Basing his voice menu on an advertisement for a divorce attorney, Arturo, an advanced ESL learner from Mexico, wrote a particularly clever script:

Arturo's Voice Menu

- Thank you for calling the divorce clinic where everyone gets divorced. If you speak English, press 1. If you speak Spanish, press 2. If you speak French, press 3. Any other languages, please hang up and call your mother for advice. (Beep)

- You have selected the English menu. For office hours and location, press number 1. For counseling, press 2. For legal fees and concerns, press 3. If you are thinking about reconciliation, please remain on the line and our next available agent priest will be right with you shortly. (Beep)

- Counseling. If you are divorcing your spouse, press 1. If you are divorcing your children, press 2. If you are divorcing your mother-in-law, good luck, and press 3. (Beep)

- Spouse. If this is your first divorce, press one now. If this is your second divorce, press 2. If you want to divorce more than 3, take our special, divorce 3 and just pay 2. (Beep)

- You selected first divorce. For scheduling prices of divorce, press 1. For drive-thru divorce, press 2. To divorce by phone, press 3. (Beep)

- You selected divorce by phone. Please, all of the agents are busy at this moment. Please, leave your name and number, message, and we'll give you a call as soon as we can. Thank you and thanks for being divorced.

Although Arturo's script uses humor and irony not typically found in voice menus, it displays the logic and all of the necessary elements of a typical voice menu system. His script demonstrates that he understood the purpose of menus and how they are constructed. This understanding was gleaned from the multiple, laddered exercises included in our voice menu unit.

Once the scripts were completed and tested for logic, students recorded them using their own voices or the voices of peers and/or family members. The final presentations of the recordings were given in groups of four to five students who participated in peer critiquing. Some criteria for the peer evaluation included: Is the name of the agency clearly identified? Is the language of the script clear and easy to understand? Are the steps in selecting specific options easy to follow? This final peer evaluation process capped off the unit, allowing students to compare their scripts and learn from each others' creations.

Implications for Teaching

Our experience with the voice menu unit was very positive. Our students were focused and absorbed during the project and openly enthusiastic about the scripts they produced. They also reported being able to understand and use voice menus more confidently after completing the voice menu activities in our unit.

Although designed for use in an advanced speaking and listening class, the unit required students to use all of their linguistic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. What is more, the tasks involved in completing their message menus called on students to engage their critical thinking skills and involved them in a purposeful, "real-world" activity. As Dale (1969) suggested, direct, purposeful experiences are the most powerful learning experiences because they require learners to engage with material not only at a cognitive but also an affective level. For our program, the voice menu unit, although somewhat time consuming, was just such an activity.

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