Are we there yet?

Innovative program reaches teens through drama

breakthrough language program wins students over

My first University French instructor was bright, positive and encouraging during group exercises, but when it came to tests, she was tough. Grammar mistakes cost substantial marks.

BY AMBER MEDYNSKI

I remember studying obsessively, but when those tests rolled around my blossoming memory for French seemed to wither under the pressure. *Le Patron*, a pedagogical website, is helping students to overcome some of the difficulties of learning French, allowing them to move towards the enjoyment of this beautiful language.

Le Patron is a web-based grammar correction program that assists second language learners of French. Since its creation and introduction in 1997 by Terry Nadasdi, Professor of Applied Linguistics, the project has been a tremendous success. Nadasdi created *Le Patron* with the assistance of Terry Butler, Director of Research Computing in the Faculty of Arts. Stefan Sinclair, Assistant Professor in Multimedia Studies at McMaster University, joined Nadasdi as co-director of the project in 2001.

Working on the basis of recognizing common student errors, *Le Patron* highlights mistakes and offers feedback and hints, rather than word or sentence replacement options. Other French grammar programs move through the document word-by-word, much like *Microsoft Word*'s spell checking program, but with *Le Patron*, users must decide what is wrong and correct the error for themselves in a side text box. Resubmitting the corrected text will show whether or not their correction solved the problem. They can resubmit until errors are no longer highlighted.

The system also summarizes and categorizes all the errors throughout the user's document at the bottom of the screen and offers a link to exercises that the user can complete for additional review. "It made me actually look at my work and figure out why [there] was an error," said French student Kaitlan Sommerfeldt, pointing out that it helps her the next time she comes across a similar problem.

Every day, more students are discovering this effective and handy grammar tool that is accessible from any computer with an internet connection (PC or Macintosh). Users can choose French or English as their interface language, and the system uses Standard written (dictionary) French grammar. Any user at any level, whether from Alberta, Québec, France, Spain or Texas, can use this tool to improve his or her written French.

Since the website's official launch in September 2005, *Le Patron* has received well over two million page hits and has been featured in popular radio and TV programs such as Radio One's *C'est la vie* and CBC's *Radio-Canada*.

This tool is truly one of a kind: "No other pedagogical software has been designed strictly aiming at improving students' acquisition of French as a second language," said Rick Grimm, one of three graduate students in the Department of Linguistics who worked on the project.

Grimm has been researching second language acquisition (SLA) and working with *Le Patron* for the last year. He

tirelessly promoted the project leading up to and during the website's official launch and has seen the results first-hand in the classes he has taught. He notes that by identifying errors before they become a habit, reading an explanation of the errors, and then actively correcting it in *Le Patron*, students' understanding and retention of grammar rules increases exponentially.

Other French grammar-checking programs are available, but they have some important differences from *Le Patron*. While helpful for some specific applications, they are costly, designed specifically for native French speakers, and impossible to update without purchasing a new version. *Le Patron*, on the other hand, is updated daily to provide improved and more accurate suggestions, making it truly exceptional.

Jake Prins, a student studying both French and Spanish, appreciates the program's up-to-date error-detection ability that sets it apart from other available language grammar tools: "I was taking both Spanish classes and French classes …. *Le Patron* helped me a lot with French essays, whereas for Spanish, there really wasn't any equivalent."

One of the newest updates to *Le Patron* is an option box which allows the user to determine if the system should interpret a user as male or female. This way, the system can identify errors with first person ("je") subject agreement for both male and female writers.

Le Patron is fast and efficient as well. Thanks to the bandwidth provided on the University of Alberta's colossal TAPoR (Text Analysis Portal for Research) server, results from a submitted text are seen within one second.

With *Le Patron* having such groundbreaking elements, Grimm says that one of the greatest challenges he faced while promoting it across Canada was convincing educators and administrators that there was no cost attached to the program, and that it will continue to be cost-free in the future. It is currently funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and le Ministère du patrimoine canadien / Department of Canadian Heritage.

Le Patron is available at: www.lepatron.ca

Faculty *Achievements*

Congratulations to the following faculty members for their outstanding achievements:

ACADEMIC HONOURS

David Marples (History & Classics) and **Patricia Demers** (English & Film Studies) were recently appointed University Professors.

Daniel Woolf (Faculty of Arts Dean, History & Classics), **Adam Morton** (Philosophy), and **Jonathan Hart** (English & Film Studies), were inducted into the Royal Society of Canada (RSC) in November 2006. The Royal Society of Canada was founded in 1882 and is considered the most prestigious academic organization in Canada. The U of A fared extremely well in this year's RSC elections: out of 82 newly elected Fellows, seven are U of A faculty members.

David Kahane (Philosophy) was awarded one of two 3M Canada Teaching Fellowships at the U of A this year. Since 1986, the 3M Award annually recognizes excellence in teaching, as well as educational leadership. Only 10 Fellowships were awarded across the country this year, out of 47 nominations from 29 universities.

MAJOR EXTERNAL AWARDS

Susan Colberg (Art & Design) won a 2006 Silver Medal from the University & College Designers Association (UCDA) for the catalogue design of *Seeing the World of Sound: The Cover Art of Folkways Records* (University of Alberta, 2005). UCDA, based in the United States, was founded in 1970 as North America's first and only association for professionals involved in the creation of visual communications for educational institutions. There were 1600 entries for this competition, with only five gold, 16 silver and 122 awards of excellence. By winning this award, Professor Colberg placed the University of Alberta in the company of other first rank academic publishers, including the Getty Publication Group, Indiana University, and Penn State University, among other institutions.

Christine Wiesenthal (English & Film Studies) was short-listed for the Governor General's Literary Award for her book, *The Half-Lives of Pat Lowther*—a biography of Canadian poet Pat Lowther. The winner was announced on November 21, 2006, which unfortunately was too late for the printing of this issue of *Work of Arts*. Good luck Dr. Wiesenthal!

Andy Knight (Political Science) was awarded a Scotiabank-AUCC Award for Excellence in Internationalization, created "to promote awareness of good practices in the university Community." This year's focus was "excellence in preparing students for a global future." This was the first time a U of A faculty member was selected for this award.

Isobel Grundy (English & Film Studies) was selected as the Canadian Society for Eighteenth Century Studies' (CSECS) Member of Honour "in recognition of [her] enormous contribution to eighteenth-century studies in Canada and to CSECS."