En Quiroz, Gabriel y Patiño, Pedro, *LSP in Colombia: Advances and Challenges*. Bern (Suiza): Éditions Peter Lang.

Toward the Constitution of a Hybrid Learning Environment for the FFL Teacher's Training in Colombian Universities Based on Text Linguistics.

Molina Mejia, Jorge Mauricio y Antoniadis, Georges.

Cita:

Molina Mejia, Jorge Mauricio y Antoniadis, Georges (2014). Toward the Constitution of a Hybrid Learning Environment for the FFL Teacher's Training in Colombian Universities Based on Text Linguistics. En Quiroz, Gabriel y Patiño, Pedro LSP in Colombia: Advances and Challenges. Bern (Suiza): Éditions Peter Lang.

Dirección estable: https://www.aacademica.org/jorge.mauricio.molina.mejia/4

ARK: https://n2t.net/ark:/13683/pqc6/E2h



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LSP in Colombia: advances and challenges

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Linguistic Insights

Studies in Language and Communication

Edited by Maurizio Gotti, University of Bergamo

Volume 175

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LSP in Colombia: advances and challenges

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Bibliographic information published by die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at (http://dnb.d-nb.de).

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data: A catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library, Great Britain

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

LSP in Colombia : advances and challenges / Gabriel Quiroz & Pedro Patiño (eds.). pages cm. – (Linguistic Insights. Studies in language and communication; Volume 175) Includes bibliographical references and index. ISBN 978-3-0343-1434-3

1. Sublanguage-Columbia. I. Quiroz, Gabriel, editor of compilation. II. Patiño, Pedro, editor of compilation. P120.S9L76 2014

P120.S9L76 2014 401'.47-dc23

2014009801

This work was financed by The University of Antioquia School of Languages, the CODI, Committee for the Development of Investigation, Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia, Act No. 609, August, 2011, project "Recuperación semiautomática de unidades fraseológicas especializadas del área del TLC Colombia-EUA en español e inglés", and FP7, Marie Curie Actions, SP3 People ITN, grant agreement 238405 (project CLARA).

ISSN 1424-8689 pb. ISSN 2235-6371 eBook ISBN 978-3-0343-1434-3 pb. ISBN 978-3-0351-0590-2 eBook

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Printed in Switzerland

Contents

GABRIEL QUIROZ / PEDRO PATIÑO	
Foreword	9
Linguistic Issues	
JOHN JAIRO GIRALDO Some Criteria for a Spanish Initialisms Recognition System	19
OSCAR CALVACHE / MERCEDES SUÁREZ Syntactic Features in Specialized Texts: A Comparison of Two Syntactic Patterns in Texts	
of Different Levels of Specialization	33
BELL MANRIQUE / DIEGO BURGOS / CARLOS ZAPATA Applying Linguistic Methods for a Semiautomatic Analysis	40
of Corporative Documents: Standard Operating Procedure	
Ana María Tangarife / Germán Urrego / Jorge Antonio Mejía Advances and Challenges of an Ontology Focused	
on Verbs Related to Political Violence	6/
Identification of Knowledge Units Contained	0.5
in Spanish Texts	83

Phraseological Issues

Challenges in the Translation of General and Specialized Phraseology
Towards a Definition of Specialized Collocations
GABRIEL QUIROZ / ALEJANDRO ARROYAVE On Premodified Terms in Five Specialized Dictionaries
On Premodified Terms in Five Specialized Dictionaries
An Image-Term Co-occurrence Model for Multilingual Terminology Alignment and Cross-Language Image Indexing
International Terminology Standards into the Export Sector in Colombia
Translation Subcompetences and Terminological
Didactic Issues
NORMAN GÓMEZ
Translating Scientific and Technical Texts: The Translation Workshop as a Didactic Tool

ALEJANDRO ARROYAVE / GABRIEL QUIROZ Some Didactic Strategies for the Teaching of Noun Phrases with Complex Premodification from English into Spanish
JORGE M. MOLINA / GEORGES ANTONIADIS Toward the Design of a Hybrid Learning Environment Based on Text Linguistics for Teacher Training in French as a Foreign Language (FFL) in Colombian Universities
Textual Issues
JUAN DAVID MARTÍNEZ Rhetorical Description of the PhD History Thesis Genre: an Analysis from two Discourse Communities on the Basis of the Corpus TeDiCE-2010
JUAN MANUEL PÉREZ Metaphor in Colombian Slang: a Quantitative Analysis
RAFAEL ZAPATA DEDERLE Variation of Metaphor Use across Rhetorical Structure in two Genres
CARLOS MUÑOZ TORRES Text Functions and Citation Patterns in Specialized Texts: A Contrastive Study of the Case Report Genre
MERCEDES SUÁREZ Explicit Denominative Variation Markers and their Implications in Translation
Notes on Contributors 333

Toward the Design of a Hybrid Learning Environment Based on Text Linguistics for Teacher Training in French as a Foreign Language (FFL) in Colombian Universities

1. Introduction

It is only since a few years ago that computer systems for learning/teaching languages based on the procedures and the results of Natural Language Processing (NLP)² became available (Antoniadis *et al.*, 2006; Chaudiron, 2007). There are also several recent researches (Le Bray, 2007³; Lundquist, 1990, 2013) which have contributed to the field of teaching and learning of French as a Foreign Language based on Text Linguistics. However, the subject that we address here, the formation of teachers through educational software based on corpora derived from Text Linguistics has not been, to the best of our knowledge, really investigated so far⁴.

The text linguistics-based system described here, that is in the design stage, is derived from our approach and uses a corpus of texts created and exploited by means of NLP techniques. The system is

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² In particular for the written form of languages.

We cite here the courses of Jean-Emmanuel Le Bray, published by University of Stendhal and the CNED in 2007, about text linguistics in the FFL teacher formation.

We have the project "Français en Première Ligne" developed by C. Develotte and F. Mangenot from 2002 to 2007. That project wanted to help to improve FFL teachers' performance through the use of ICTs.

intended for the formation of teachers in FFL in the Colombian universities. Its objective is the improvement of the linguistic level of future teachers of French as a Foreign Language, taking advantage of the various areas akin to text linguistics. Although known since the 1950s, text linguistics had its greatest development in the 1970s. It advocates the analysis of language from context and co-text (Adam, 2011a) and raises the concept of discursivity (Maingueneau, 1991; Pop, 2000; Adam, 2011a).

Our system, stemming from an interdisciplinary project, aims to be a helping tool for teachers' formation. It aims to become a contribution in the domain of learning tools based on Text Linguistics, where research and especially systems are relatively scarce (Mangenot, 1998; Couto *et al.*, 2005).

2. Research context: the formation of FFL teachers in Colombia

In 2010 we began to think about a project for the formation of future teachers of FFL. Our framework is grounded on our experience of teaching in the University of Antioquia, a Colombian higher learning institution located in Medellin, which offers a training program for teachers in foreign languages (English and French). We decided to use this university as an observation field for several years. From these first observations, we proposed a doctoral thesis project in the field of computational linguistics, financed by the *Ministerio de Tecnologías de la Información y de la Comunicación de la República de Colombia*⁵. Sometime after the beginning of our project, another higher education institution, the *Universidad Nacional de Colombia*, with its main campus in Bogotá also showed interest in our project.

⁵ Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies from the Republic of Colombia. Site: http://www.mintic.gov.co/index.php.

Our work within the Laboratory of Linguistics and Didactics of Foreign and Mother Languages, University of Grenoble (LIDILEM Laboratory), allowed us to further delimit our initial project, and to give shape to our current PhD thesis project at the end of 2010. Since then, several exchanges with universities in Colombia made it possible to better adapt our project to the peculiarities and the requirements of the target population.

3. Problem and working hypotheses

Our problem arises from the question that we posed: How can the linguistic level of future teachers of FFL be improved by means of computing tools through a hybrid device that can be used in initial formation in face-to-face classes as well as virtual autonomous classes? As it is defined by Charlier *et al.* (2006), the idea is to develop a device that "conjugates the innovative dimensions connected to distance education forms of training and the use of a techno-educational environment based on complex forms of mediatization and mediation" (Charlier *et al.*, 2006: 481)⁶, and to propose, at the same time, a new approach for the formation of language skills of future FFL teachers.

The following are the hypotheses of our approach.

- 1) There is a kind of feeling of linguistic insecurity displayed by Colombian future teachers of FFL after graduation; we consider that this insecurity can be lessened by using ICT's to help their formation.
- 2) The teaching of languages has to contain, at the same time, communicative skills and elements aiming at the formation of future FFL teachers in the field of language skills competence. This competence could be acquired using the text linguistics approach.
- 3) We consider text linguistics as an important approach, capable of helping the future FFL teachers to improve their writing level for comprehension and production and, this way, their oral production as

⁶ Our translation from French.

well. It is important to develop this writing competence in students under formation; it contributes, thanks to the discursive character of language, to improve the communicative skills of future trainers.

4) An education center on computing support that aims at the same time to face-to-face classes and distance formation. This makes it possible to work in the autonomous learning interests of the institutions that form future teachers of FFL in Colombia because the increase in the learner's autonomy leads to an amelioration of the problem (Hypotheses 1).

	TeachTrain	StForm	FFLTeach
Writing didactics	94.8%	77.3%	83.4%
Oral didactics	100%	86.2%	75%
Evaluation didactics	78.9%	54.7%	66.6%
Grammar didactics	84.2%	77%	66.7%
Working-Group didactics	63.2%	56.3%	25%

Table 1. Aspects of didactic formation.

There is an increasing interest in employing the new technologies for the formation on FFL teaching. We noticed that teachers-trainers and students in formation have a knowledge of these technologies and can use them with ease.

We tried to validate our hypotheses by means of interviews and one on-line questionnaire. The on-line questionnaire was answered by 172 persons. This questionnaire was addressed to three different kinds of audience:

- Teacher-trainers, 12.8% of the participants;
- Students in formation, 72.7% of the participants;
- FFL teachers which already have a formation in a Colombian university, 14.5% of the participants.

The questions proposed the following topics to the participants:

- Aspects concerning the didactic formation;
- Aspects concerning the linguistic formation;
- Knowledge and utilization of text linguistics;
- The use of ICT made in Education regarding the formation of future FFL teachers.

Table 1, shows the results obtained for three target public groups (TeachTrain: teachers-trainers; StForm: students in formation; FFL-Teach: FFL teachers) in the question concerning the type of competence favoured in the formation. We must note that the oral competence comes in first place as well for the teachers-trainers as the students. This opinion is not shared by the FFL teachers. In parallel, 94.7% of teachers-trainers, 77% of students and 91.7% of teachers of FFL recognize the communicative approach as the theoretical approach to be favoured. These results show that the main objectives during the formation are the comprehension and the production skills.

Language skills favoured during the formation of the future teachers are shown in Table 2. The grammatical competence scored the highest; nevertheless, the other skills are globally considered important, in particular by the students and the FFL teachers.

	TeachTrain	StForm	FFLTeach
Lexical competence	57.9%	72.6%	40%
Grammatical competence	79%	86.3%	60%
Semantic competence	47.4%	69.8%	70%
Phonological competence	47.4%	69.9%	40%
Orthographical competence	42.1%	74%	60%

Table 2. Aspects of the linguistic competence.

	TeachTrain	StForm	FFLTeach
Knowledge	89.5%	49.3%	70%
Use in classes	68.4%	78.9%	80%
Utility	100%	97.2%	100%

Table 3. Use and utility of text linguistics in the formation of teachers.

Table 3 shows the judgment of the people polled concerning text linguistics. If the teachers-trainers have only some global knowledge in the domain of Text Linguistics, students' corresponding percentage is much lower. This is understandable by the fact that less than 70% of teachers use it in their courses. On the other hand almost all of the pollees approve its importance and its contribution to FFL education.

Let us note finally that almost all of the subjects in the polls show certain interest in the use of ICT in Education during the formation: 100% of TeachTrain and FFLTeach, and 98.6 % of the StForm. Among them, 89.5 % of TeachTrain, 76.8 % of the StForm, and 66.7 % of FFLTeach assure to have already used them in a setting of formation.

4. Project foundations

4.1. A project based on text linguistics

Text Linguistics is a rather recent theoretical approach. Charaudeau and Maingueneau (2002) maintain that it emerged in the 1960s. It does not claim to be a textual grammar neither a generativist epistemology. Indeed, it does not appear as a theory of the sentence extended to the text, but as a "translinguistics" (Bakhtine, 1981 and Benveniste, 1974) "which, close to the linguistics of the language, deals with text cohesion and coherence" (Charaudeau/Maingueneau,

2002: 345). Maingueneau (2009) groups coherence and cohesion under the name of "connexity".

By adopting Text Linguistics tenets, our choice for the project aims to favour a theoretical approach that focuses on texts (with all their characteristics) and not on isolated sentences, out of any kind of context.

4.2. CALL and NLP

We notice that the existing CALL systems are not particularly interested in the formation of future teachers; generally they are intended for general learners learning a second language. There have been some accomplishments by teachers in this sense intended for future teachers (of the type "blended learning device" or "pedagogical scenario") and that are used in their teaching activity.

This lack of material dedicated to the formation of teachers should not amaze us because as Guir (2002: 9) claims:

The school does not like all which could substitute itself to the teacher's word, all which could suggest that it is not the unique agent of knowledge, all which could steal him his image of nourishing mother, of Alma Mater, regarding knowledge.

According to this author, it is difficult to propose, especially at the level of the formation of future teachers, a formation other than the one that is not conceived from the background knowledge of teachers. A formation which would be proposed within the framework of computing tools field would be considered away from the norm.

Even though the first attempts of integration of the results and the procedures of NLP date back to the 1980s, just a handful of systems at present have integrated this technology. It can be explained possibly by the misconceptions and their costs. Nevertheless, as Antoniadis (2010) argues, only NLP tackle both, the morphosyntactic and semantic aspects of texts; computing, in essence, can only handle the texts forms, without other semantics than that of the concatenation. Leaning on the NLP research of the LIDILEM laboratory, our system

will benefit from NLP the processing and results, as well as from conception and its exploitation.⁷

4.3. Towards a blended learning environment

In the questionnaire that our target public filled out, the great majority of the pollees prefer a face-to-face working computer system during their courses, and when taking distance classes, in order to use it in an autonomous way. This leads us to opt for the development of a formation system of a hybrid type; a system conceived from the modules of formation which the teachers-trainers could integrate directly into their lectures as well as in distance education scenarios. Some examples of these scenarios are for example the courses that try to offer a little more autonomy to the future FFL teachers, or courses which take place in other campuses of universities that cannot be accessed easily.

Hybrid formation can be defined as Nissen (2009: 199):

[...] a formation in which the pedagogical scenario leans on the use of an online digital environment and in which the fulfilment of tasks and the interaction have partially on-line place; the proportion and the articulation of both modalities "face-to-face" and "at a distance" being variable and diverse in the existing hybrid devices.

Currently, this type of formation has the peculiarity of, often, having an appeal for computing tools and to be very mediatized which means that we try to mimic in a computerized way what we usually do in the classroom. However, other authors such as Mangenot (1998) consider a hybrid or mixed formation device as a kind of teaching or learning system which does not rely, in an exclusive way, on three classic units of time (the duration of the class), of place (the classroom) and the actors (the learners and their teacher). This author also argues that thanks to this definition we could classify with this label, for example, any given project designed for a group of learners outside the classroom.

The conception and the exploitation of our system are based on Antoniadis works on LIDILEM, especially MIRTO project (Antoniadis *et al.*, 2005).

Other authors such as Charlier *et al.* (2006) consider that in the field of higher education, since a few years ago some devices have been developed that articulate, in various degrees, phases of formation in face-to-face classes and phases of distance training. These phases are supported by ICTs, as for example formation platforms.

5. Project actions

Now we present in this last part the actions (stages) of elaboration of the proposed system. The system is still under development but certain actions have already been carried out. Other actions are in the course of elaboration or are planned to be executed at a later stage. As we said above, the results of the questionnaire are one of the guides for the execution of the various parts of the system. The various stages include building a corpus and its annotation, the definition of appropriate educational tasks, and arranging the corresponding computer system. Concerning computing, our guideline is the construction of a system not intended for computer specialists, which should offer the possibility of manipulating and treating concepts from the domain language didactics, commanded only by its potential users: teacherstrainers and their students.

5.1. Corpus compilation

Our project uses a corpus of texts made up of representative documents of the level which the future teachers will have to reach by the end of their studies.

The texts that make up the corpus are authentic documents with the aim of teaching in agreement with the university students' level that they have to achieve when they finish their studies. This level is B2/C1 from the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR). That is why we decided to work with texts regarding B1/B2 levels and preparing an evaluation at the end with C1 texts.

Texts in general include newspaper and journal articles, extracts from novels, etc.

The texts of the corpus are enriched with morphological and syntactic information and other sources, stemming from text linguistics, as reference chains, logic-temporal and argumentative connectors, etc. These annotations are inserted automatically by means of NLP procedures for the morphological and syntactic information and essentially are inserted manually for the rest. Figure 1 shows the sequence related to the constitution of the annotated corpus.

5.2. Elaboration of pedagogical sequences

The structure of the designed tasks is based on the model of tasks presented by Cuq (2003), which contains three phases: discovery tasks, systematization tasks, and tasks of use. Figure 2 shows the structure of the tasks which our system is supposed to carry out, as well as the necessary data. For our system, an activity is divided into four phases: Finding or discovery exercises, explanations of theoretical conceptualizations, systematization exercises, and practical knowledge exercises. The texts used are drawn from the corpus of annotated texts mentioned above; the explanations of theoretical conceptualizations are drawn from a specific database.

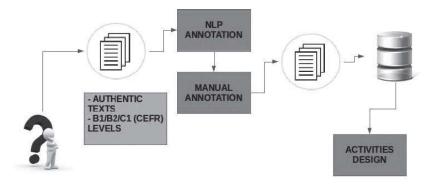


Figure 1: Diagram for the corpus treatment.

5.2.1. Phases included in the sequences

- Phase 1. Finding or discovery exercises: in this phase the students in formation will be confronted with tasks of a deductive type, in which they discover rules of grammar or textual analysis by means of authentic texts that their teachers will have chosen from the database thanks to an appropriate interface. As Robert (2002) notes, we assume that this type of exercises corresponds to techniques that allow to explore texts. These techniques, according to the same author, involve "glancing through" the text to have a first idea of its contents, "to sweep" it (browse it) repeatedly to pick up from it (Moirand, 1982): iconic indications (photos, images, layout, etc.); formal indications (in particular connectors); semantic indicators (those that relate to the notions as well as to speech acts); enunciative indications (that make reference to the enunciation situation) (Robert, 2002: 191).
- Phase 2. Explanations of theoretical conceptualizations: in this phase the teacher-trainer will clarify the rule or the theoretical concept taught thanks to a computer theoretical support and to examples giving rather an inductive aspect in order to achieve a better appropriation of rules and concepts. The instructor will teach aspects connected to the linguistic and/or textual use.
- Phase 3. Systematization exercises: in this phase, and through practical exercises of the theoretical concepts learned in the previous phase, the students in formation can train for more specific aspects of the subject in question.
- Phase 4. Practical knowledge exercises: this last phase is created from the tasks which have been developed in face-to-face classes, conducted by the teacher-trainer. In this way, the teacher-trainer can make *in situ* corrections. We also investigate the possibility of doing this type of exercises autonomously. For this purpose, automatic correction is necessary. As these exercises use annotated texts, the implementation of an automatic correction of true/false type with indication of the solution should not raise particular problems; nevertheless, such an approach, without explanations of the errors, is not very relevant educationally. A "personalized" explanation of the errors made brings a certain pedagogical capital gain, but its implementation is complicated and demands more thorough research.

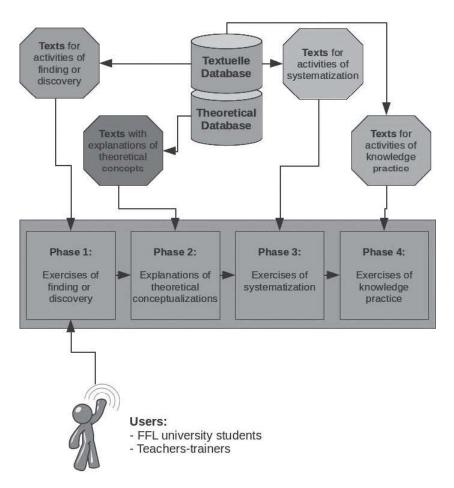


Figure 2: Diagram of the phases in the didactic sequences.

5.2.2. Types of tasks

The system has to propose tasks that capture the notions connected to text linguistics and to the analysis of discourse. In a first version, three classes of tasks will be developed: those around textual coherence and cohesion, tasks on the textual coreference, and tasks relative to thematic progression.

- Tasks around textual coherence and cohesion: the textual notions of coherence and cohesion are very important in text linguistics. They

provide the text as well as speech with the unity and the consistency that allows the receiver to follow the sense of what the speaker wants to express, without constraints. We decided to work on two types of tasks, those that focus on the use of the co-reference networks, and the tasks which have the use of connectors and textual markers as targets.

- Tasks on textual coreference: the use of endophora (anaphoras and cataphoras) allows to avoid the repetition of the same words or the same expressions in speech; with the use of this type of textual elements, the speaker can enrich his speech maintaining at the same time a logic of the language. The study of endophora allows to overtake the stage of the analysis to go on into the intra and inter-phrasal analysis.
- Tasks on the use of connectors and logic-temporal and discursive markers: the use of this type of linguistic elements allows to give cohesion to the text and coherence conveyed by speech. In the same way as the co-referents, the connectors and the logic-temporal and discursive markers allow to establish the relations among the sentences, the paragraphs, and the texts.
- Tasks around the textual structuring: there are certain tasks which allow to structure the thought and the ideas in a text.
- Tasks of analysis of the main sentences: the analysis of the main sentences allows to structure the concepts and to analyze the contents of texts better.
- Tasks for the logical structure analysis of texts: in the case of argumentative or explanatory texts, there is a structure which follows a logic. This structure is given, normally, by a main title, one or several subtitles, an introduction, one or several aspects (paragraphs of development or argumentation), a conclusion, a signature, a source, and a date. To locate these elements helps the students in formation to better structure their texts and their speeches in a more logical and coherent way.
- Tasks of analysis of the text genre or the textual sequences: the type or sequences of a text is a subject very much studied in text linguistics (Adam, 2011b). This type of activity allows to carry out textual analysis according to its structure and to its drafting; this allows to determine the possible stand of the author. The tasks aiming at this type of analysis seem very relevant to us; indeed the future trainers, during their teachers' activity of FFL, will have to have their learners study

the characteristics of texts from the types or the sequences the texts carry.

- Tasks around the thematic progression: the notions of theme and rheme are the key notions at the level of the thematic progression. Theme is that content we speak about, rheme is what we say about the theme. There are in particular three types of thematic progression: the progression with constant theme; the simple linear progression; the progression with derived themes. We plan to work on tasks focused on the thematic progression, to have the students in formation learn the way of building a text, its internal logic at the intra-phrasal and interphrasal level.

5.2.3. Design and computer implementation

The design of our system is based on the model of "incremental design" (or incremental-iterative model; Depover et al., 2011). This model contains five stages: Preliminary study of the project; analysis and structuring of the contents; elaboration of the pedagogical scenario and the interfaces; conception of the multimedia supports and the supervision system; and production and insertion of the learning environment.

The first version of the system should be tested in two Colombian universities that have shown interest in our project. After the modifications and further tests, the product should be proposed for implementation in other Colombian universities interested in the subject.

6. Conclusion

The design of our system is the product of implementation of knowledge and skills derived from several disciplines or domains: foreign language didactics, general linguistics, text linguistics, NLP, computing and educational engineering. It aims to be mainly an educational tool for language learning and teaching. As Antoniadis (2010) suggests, we aspire to provide students with a formation tool that is conceived according to their needs and to their learning objectives. In this way, the idea with this CALL system is to try to solve a problem which is essentially didactic, and not just through educational functions given through a kind of computer gadget. We consider its future users without knowledge other than that of their domain of learning not as computers experts. Because of this, the use of our system comes from the educational capital gain which it brings. Finally, its only validation can be done only on the grounds of its effective use.

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