A Study of the Effectiveness of Arabic CALL: The Learners' Views

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study undertaken to collect data on learner's reactions and attitudes to the use of multimedia for Arabic learning. It is hoped that the data will be used to help in the decision-making process regarding the possibility of integrating a multimedia component in an Arabic language curriculum. Twenty-eight learners of Arabic as a foreign language were observed, interviewed and asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding their attitudes towards the use of an Arabic multimedia program. Results showed favorable attitudes. The learners believed that the program was enjoyable, useful and motivational. They felt strongly for the inclusion of such a component in the curriculum.
1. Introduction

In the literature on CALL evaluation, there is a large number of publications concerning teachers’ evaluation of CALL multimedia programs, applications, projects or activities (Bradin, 1999; Janello, 1984; Lengenhausen and Wolff, 1990). This evaluation is seen as a key part of the development of CALL. CALL programs, like other CALL applications, need to be evaluated by experts, teachers and students. Because these programs are expensive and time-consuming to develop, software developers need as much information and feedback from the end-users as possible.

Belnap (2001) divides Arabic (CALL initiatives into three types: 1) “home-spun” (various attempts by individuals or small groups); 2) “quick cash” (commercially available software) and 3) “big brother” (government/military sponsored projects). According to Belnap, “almost all of these are rather limited in nature and generally suffer from serious problems in design, compatibility, distribution, and maintenance” (367).

The failure of Arabic CALL to reach the expectations of CALL practitioners is attributed to the fact that most CALL evaluations take place before the software reaches the market (Barzangi et al., 1999). This evaluation may not be reliable or appropriate for end-users, especially when taking into account the fact that learners of Arabic have different socio-linguistic backgrounds, learning needs and objectives. Hence, there is a need for information on learners’ use and evaluation of as well as reactions to CALL programs. This type of information on what does and does not work for learners is of great importance for professionals involved in the processes of selecting, using and evaluating commercial software in order to make informed pedagogical decisions. This paper is concerned with the “quick cash” type of programs. Its main interest is to obtain objective data on learners’ views and attitudes regarding commercially available Arabic software.

2. The Study

The study is designed to fulfill the above-mentioned goals. It investigates the potential of using multimedia programs in the context of Arabic language learning from the learners’ point of view. The key question addressed here is “How do learners of Arabic feel about the effectiveness of the use of CALL, namely multimedia programs, in promoting the learning of Arabic?”. In order to be specific and concise, the present study uses only one program from the “quick cash” category. Learn Arabic is considered representative of CALL programs available for Arabic at the present time.
2.1. Participants

A group of 28 learners from 15 different countries volunteered to take part in the study. All students were enrolled in the Arabic for Non-Native Speakers (193) course offered by the Language Center - Kuwait University in the fall and spring of 2001/2002. As shown in Appendix I, they came from countries where Arabic was not the first language. The first languages represented were Pashto, Japanese, Korean, Italian, Polish, Lithuanian, Persian, English, Urdu, Dagomba, Swahili, French, Spanish and Thai. The ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 30. All participants were studying Arabic as a foreign language for an approximate period of eighteen months at Kuwait University. Learners' proficiency level was measured using the Arabic proficiency test prepared by the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. The test followed the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) guidelines (ACTFL guidelines, 1989) which provide a detailed description of the kinds of communication functions, range of vocabulary, degree of accuracy and flexibility that learners of a language are able to control at different levels in each of the four major language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). The learners' proficiency level ranged from Novice High to Intermediate.

The students attended eight hours per week of regular classes and one and a half hours of CALL sessions. Attempts were made to recruit the same number of male and female subjects. However, this proved impossible as participation was on a voluntary basis and more men volunteered to participate in the study. Except for four learners, the rest of the participants reported having good experience in using computers. This was determined through their use of computers for word processing, playing games, chatting, and/or surfing the Internet.

2.2. The software

Learn Arabic is the program chosen for evaluation in this study. This program was selected for a number of reasons. First, the content, not the authoring, of the software was prepared by a team of teachers teaching Arabic as a foreign language at Kuwait University. The close proximity of researchers and program developers made it easy to go back to the development team for clarification when needed.

Second, researching the market on available Arabic software, I found that this software focused on all the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening as well as on grammar. Third, this program was available at five proficiency levels ranging from beginner to advanced. These levels which corresponded to those of ACTEL made it easy to choose a level that matched the learners' level.
2.2.1. Learn Arabic

Learn Arabic is a program (from SakhrMedia) developed for non-native speakers of Arabic. There are twelve lessons with multilevels of difficulty. Each lesson follows the same format and consists of the following components:

- A Dialogue (Fig. 1) which contains the video clip. Students have the choice of watching the video clip with or without the dialogue’s written text.

- A Vocabulary section (Fig. 2) which is divided into five subsections: verbs, nouns, adjectives, particles and phrases. Learners can view the words mentioned in the lesson and their classification and meaning. It is also possible to hear the correct way of pronouncing the written word/phrase. As can be seen from Figure 2, there are some typing errors that will be discussed later in Section 3.2.
A Grammar section (Fig. 3) with explanations of Arabic grammar and its usage. This section makes extensive use of diagrams, illustrations, and animated examples illustrating various grammatical topics.
A section on Drills (Fig. 4) containing more than 10 types of exercises to practice as well as test the learners' language skills. The Drills section consists of different types of exercises where students are asked to:

- rearrange the words to form a complete sentence
- rearrange the sentences by clicking on two sentences at the same time, to switch their places in order to form a correct dialogue
- rearrange letters to form a word
- listen to a sentence or paragraph, then fill in the gaps to complete the sentence/paragraph
- answer multiple-choice questions on plural and negative forms of words
- match picture(s) with appropriate text(s)
- answer true/false questions
- match two lists of words
- do dictation tasks after listening to words
- substitute words with other words to form meaningful sentences
- **Games** section (Fig. 5) consists of a language game similar to Hangman where learners are supposed to listen to a word and then start selecting the letters of the alphabet they have heard in order to form the word.

- The **Activity** section (Fig. 6) focuses on several Arabic styles related to a variety of genres, for instance, information about countries, how to write a letter, calculating different dimensions, writing the dates, recipes, etc.
• An online bi-directional Arabic/English Dictionary (Fig. 7) is available for learners’ reference.

![online dictionary](image)

Fig. 7

2.3. Procedure

All participants attended a one-hour orientation session before working on the program. The purpose of the training session was a) for the author to obtain knowledge about the participants’ level of computer skills and b) to familiarize learners with the software program under evaluation.

The author, being uncertain of the learners’ familiarity with computer skills, distributed a questionnaire which aimed at finding information on learners’ knowledge of computer skills and their general attitude to working with CALL materials. Analyzing learners’ responses to items in the questionnaire showed that twenty-four of the learners (85.7%) had a very good knowledge about computers. They reported using computers frequently for word-processing, surfing the Internet, emailing, chatting and playing computer games. The remaining four students (14.3%) reported not having a computer skill as they had never used a computer before. The analysis also showed that all learners believe in the value of using computers for learning purposes and that the main reason behind their volunteering to take part in the study was this belief.

Despite the fact that the majority of the learners had stated that they had good knowledge about computers and that they used them often, it was important to familiarize the learners with the software. One purpose of the training session was to introduce the learners to the software and to provide them with an opportunity for hands-on practice prior to data
collection. During the orientation session, the computer non-skilled students were briefed on how to operate the computer, access the program and click on items. Features of the software were explained to all participants and they had a chance to browse through the software, try the headsets and test the sound quality. They were also instructed on how to play, rewind and pause the video-clips in the software.

The learners attended a total of ten CALL sessions excluding the initial orientation session. They reported to the CALL lab once a week and worked on an individual basis. They were instructed to begin with lesson one and then to move to the next lesson in the next CALL session. The students completed ten lessons out of the 12 available in the program because of time constraints. The learners were asked to respond to a questionnaire at the end of each CALL session.

2.4. Data Collection

In order to achieve the goal of the study, the author used two methods of data collection: the use of learners’ questionnaire and observation of the CALL sessions. The students were also interviewed in semi-structured groups at the end of the study. Because the study did not form an integral part of the participants’ Arabic course, they could not devote more than 1½ hours per week to it. Indeed, it was not possible to interview each one of them after completing a CALL session as they had other courses to attend.

2.4.1. The Questionnaire

The questionnaire aimed at finding out learners’ views and attitudes about the multimedia program in general and also to identify the parts of the program they preferred to work on. The questions centered around two essential points: the parts of the program they worked on and their reactions/attitudes to the parts studied. The researcher was interested in finding out whether the activities were enjoyable/boring, useful/ordinary and difficult/easy to handle as well as whether the level of learners’ engagement with the software remained the same throughout the course of the study.

2.4.2. Observation of the CALL sessions

Observing the CALL sessions was regarded as useful in obtaining information about students’ work in the computer lab which could not have been obtained from the learners’ responses to the questionnaire. Because the students had no chance to expand their answers to questions of
particular interest or importance, observing the learners allowed the researcher to take notes of learners' strategies or techniques used to cover the material presented to them. Also, there was a concern that when responding to the questionnaire at the end of the CALL session, learners might not be fully conscious of what they did or how they reacted to a particular lesson or activity. Hence being present at the CALL sessions, the researcher was able to take notes of learners' interactions with each other, the way they dealt with a technical or language problem and the degree of their involvement in the multimedia lesson. The researcher's presence at the lab gave a feeling of reassurance to the learners. It also gave the students an impression of the importance of the study.

3. Discussion

The present section discusses findings of the data analysis. As mentioned earlier, the main interest of the study is to find out learners' general views and attitudes regarding commercially available Arabic software. Hence the approach used here to analyze the data is not statistically-based. Also, the small number of participants and the type of statements and questions used to find the participants' views are geared towards qualitative rather than quantitative findings as will be seen in this section. The findings are divided into: a) those which are considered positive features of the program specifically and b) those which are seen as negative features. In addition, general remarks on observing learners' work on the Learn Arabic program are discussed.

3.1. Positive features of the program

Data analysis of learners' responses to the questionnaire and transcripts of learners; input in the semi-structured interview shows that all 28 learners believed that the program was very useful, interesting and that they would like to use it on a regular basis as part of their Arabic language learning course. Reasons for such belief are detailed below.

3.1.1. Choice of exercises

The participants pointed out that the activities (drills) included in the program were far from conventional. In particular, the activities were regarded as being novel, different and challenging. Despite the fact that there were more than ten different types of exercises in each lesson, when asked about the most preferred exercise, most learners stated that the rearranging of letters and words exercises (Fig. 4) were the most favorable. One reason for this may be the fact that this type of exercises is done
easily with the computer rather than with a pen and paper. Another reason could be that with the computer, learners had instant feedback which is often favored by students. The participants were also observed spending a longer time doing the dictation activity. This could also be attributed to the inherent advantage of the computer for allowing the replay of the dictated word for as many times as the learner feels necessary. When asked to elaborate on this, some of the learners stated that instant feedback on their performance was useful in improving their spelling as they could see immediately their mistakes and where they misspelled words.

3.1.2. Multimedia

Learners' attitudes towards the use of sound, pictures, animation and above all the video clips were very positive. They explained that having control of what, when and how many times to listen to and/or watch a listening segment of the lesson was extremely useful. Using the multimedia program, they did not have to wait for the entire class. Use of pictures and animation was also considered of great help to those learners as they stated that concepts and rules of grammar were much clarified using these tools. The participants also added that watching rather than just listening to a recorded conversation exposed them not only to verbal language but also to body language, facial expressions etc. The latter is believed to be as important as the former as it puts the language in the actual context of use.

As for the English version of the transcript, learners did not take advantage of this feature of the program presumably because English was not the first language for twenty six (92.8%) of the subjects. (two students only were native speakers of English and hence made use of the English version of the transcript). However, the learners quite liked the use of professionally made video clips. They pointed out that the shooting of and also acting in them was done professionally and that this helped them focus on the language not the acting.

3.1.3. Navigating the program

When asked about program navigation, learners who were skilled at using computers stated that the software was user-friendly and that not much guidance was needed to get started. That statement was confirmed at the orientation session where learners were seen trying out different activities, clicking on icons and paying little attention and at times no attention to what the researcher was saying. The computer-illiterate learners showed no signs of difficulty in accessing, using and/or navigating the program. One reason for the ease of use encountered by the learners could be due to the consistency in the program format. All lessons followed
the same pattern but with different language situations, grammar points, sets of vocabulary etc.

To sum up, the participants found the software appealing, enjoyable and easy to use, with a wide range of varied activities. They made good use of the non-linear format where hyperlinks allowed them to move easily between the activities and/or lessons. Observation of the CALL sessions showed that learners were very involved in the multimedia lessons. Though their computers had access to the Internet and they could have easily surfed the Internet or checked their e-mails, they were immersed in the activities trying out all exercises, listening to the recordings and answering questions.

3.2 Negative features of the program

Despite the above-mentioned positive remarks made by the participants through analysis of learners’ responses to the questionnaire and in the semi-structured group interviews held at the end of the study, there were some negative comments. It is noteworthy that there are some technical or linguistic problems that are specific to this particular program but which are not the focus of this study. For example, using the program, the author spotted some lexical and syntactic errors (as can be seen in Fig. 2 where “tukalif” is translated into “it cost” while the correct translation is “it costs”). While these types of linguistic errors are sometimes found in such programs, one cannot make a generalization that all Arabic CALL would necessarily suffer from such problems. Negative features that are worthy of attention here are those that could be found in other Arabic CALL programs.

3.2.1. Printing option

Not having an inbuilt printing facility made it hard for the learners to have a copy of whatever segment of the lesson they wanted to print. The learners were seen spending a long time copying down lists of phrases, verbs and word meanings. That time could have been better spent on doing more useful things such as working on an extra activity or listening to a recorded interaction.

3.2.2. Feedback

The only feedback given to the learners was a flashing sign indicating that the answer to a question was either correct or wrong. There was no explanation or hint of any kind on why an answer is wrong. The students expressed their frustration over this because they did not receive any clues when giving an incorrect response.
3.2.3. Sound quality

Despite the fact that the learners did enjoy the multimedia feature of the program and the use of professional actors and actresses, some of them pointed out that the sound quality of the program was so poor at times that they could not follow what was said. Also, two learners stated that though the actors tried hard to speak in classical Arabic (Al-Fusha), there was a trace of an Egyptian accent present in the clips.

3.2.4. Medium of instruction

Furthermore, having students from fifteen different countries speaking fifteen different languages with only two native speakers of English made the English instructions and explanations (whenever available) of little use to the learners. Not all the learners had good written/spoken comprehension of English. According to them, what would have been more useful was to have Arabic instructions and explanations especially when taking into consideration that this program is specifically designed to be used by learners of Arabic as a foreign language.

3.2.5. Program flexibility

From the teachers' point of view, one drawback of the program is that it is not flexible or adaptable. Teachers cannot add their own text, graphics, sound or exercises to the lessons because the program does not have an authoring facility.

To summarize, despite learners' positive attitudes towards the program, there were some technical features that were lacking such as the printing and authoring facilities. Learners also reported their dissatisfaction with the occasional poor sound quality and the fixed type of right/wrong feedback. Presence of typos in the lessons was also received negatively by the learners. While these drawbacks can be found in other "ready-made" CALL programs, the teachers' role is vital in compensating for some of the drawbacks, as will be discussed in section 5.

3.3. Observing CALL sessions

As mentioned in section 2.4.2. above, the presence of the author at the CALL sessions made it practically possible to observe learners' interactions with each other, particularly the way they dealt with a technical or language problem and the degree of their involvement in the multimedia lesson. Generally, the learners exhibited impressively positive attitudes towards the task. Some of the obvious manifestations of these attitudes were their keen interest, and their statements about the usefulness of such CALL programs. They appeared to be very involved in the task to an extent that they did not notice when CALL session time was over. The learners also stated that they
thought the topics discussed in the program were realistic in that they might well find themselves performing similar activities outside the classroom. This degree of learner involvement and interest in CALL lessons has been confirmed by other studies (Al-Hamly, 1998).

4. Reflection on the study

It is important to mention some of the limitations of this study in order to caution against wider implications being drawn from this data.

4.1. Number and types of learners

The small number of participants in this study reduces the generalisability of these findings to other language learning programs/contexts. It is also important to note that the learners in this study were undergraduates and that they had different degrees of computer skills. The reactions of different types of learners operating in different institutions need to be recorded.

4.2. Integration of the program

The design of the present study included the use of a program which was not directly related to classroom instruction. The program was not an integral part of the curriculum content for those students. The participants who volunteered to take part in the study spent about one to one and a half hours every week outside the classroom working on Learn Arabic. The content and exercises of the program were not discussed in the classroom. The students remarked upon this as they felt that classroom instruction and CALL sessions were not related to each other. The relationship they were calling for is what teachers would refer to as "integration". This need for the integration of CALL material into the curriculum is validated and supported by many studies on CALL effectiveness (Abraham and Liou, 1991; Al-Hamly, 1998; Brett, 1996; Johnson, 1991; Tchaicha, 1999).

4.3. Time spent on task

The participants were given a specific time to explore the lesson, learn the language content and do the exercises. That limitation of time was considered useful for the learners in the sense that it made them conscious of the time factor and prompted them to cover all parts of a lesson, watch the video clip, read content and do most of the exercises within the allocated span of time. They were also very involved in the activity, checking out the information/items needed and doing the exercises. When time was about to run out they did not refer to the dictionary or listen to the pronunciation of all words and phrases.
4.4. Dictionary use

As mentioned earlier, the participants rarely used the bilingual English-Arabic dictionary included in the software. This could be attributed to several factors derived from the questionnaire and the interviews:

a) Neither English nor Arabic was the first language for most of the learners and hence there was little value getting a word-meaning in a language that the learners were not proficient in.

b) Time was limited and learners may have preferred to finish doing the activities than to search for word meaning from a dictionary.

c) The difficulty level of the program matched reasonably well with the learners' proficiency. Hence, learners may not have been challenged with difficult unknown words. In general, they managed to comprehend what was written/said without consulting a dictionary.

d) Not including a specific task for the learners on dictionary usage but leaving it merely for their reference may have discouraged learners from using it.

4.5. Learner control

On the performance level, it was noticeable that the learners had full control on what parts of a lesson to access, the order in which they did the lessons/exercises and the time spent on each activity. They preferred this context of learning compared to the conventional whole-class setting where control is placed in the teachers' hand.

5. Implementations/recommendations for the Arabic classrooms

The following recommendations can be made with regard to the introduction of a multimedia language-learning program in a curriculum in particular or any form of CALL in general. They could also guide the selection and design of software:

1. Integration is often favored over stand-alone. Though the multimedia program used here could be easily used on a self-access basis, it is recommended that the software be integrated into the curriculum in order to enable the learners to get optimum benefit. There are numerous ways of doing this, in the form of pre-CALL activities in the classroom or post-CALL activities. Students could be asked to complete worksheets, do writing and reading assignments, participate in role-plays, or design glossaries of studied words and phrases and/or summaries.
2. *Compensation for the missing technical feature(s).* It is rare to find a software that meets all the needs of all language teachers/learners in different learning settings. While this is understandable, it is important that language teachers, educators, administrators or any decision-maker be aware of the full potential of a software as well as its drawbacks. That is to say, it is vital that drawbacks are compensated for in the best possible way. For instance, while the present program does not allow for teachers’ authoring or students’ printing, teachers should be encouraged to prepare for their students supplementary materials in the form of handouts. When feedback is not given, teachers are also advised to develop learners’ error identification, analysis and correction skills with their students.

3. *There is a considerable number of CALL programs available in the market which are poor in content but rich in visual effects.* One needs to be cautious of false appearances. Not all multimedia programs are good simply because of the inclusion of sound, pictures, video or animation. The use of these devices should be justified. The existence of pictures or animation, for instance, is not enough to guarantee the quality of the language content. When selecting a program, one needs to evaluate its theoretical underpinnings in terms of content, approach, type and choice of activities and cultural appropriateness as well as its technical features.

6. **Conclusion**

This study has investigated the initial attitudes and reactions to the use of the Arabic language-learning multimedia program *Learn Arabic* by AFL learners and has reported highly positive attitudes. Although the learners expressed a need for certain features which the program lacked, they found the software program under study to be very enjoyable and useful. The fact that they were using a multimedia language program for the first time (novelty factor) did not affect their involvement with the program.

In answer to the question posed at the beginning of the study about learners’ attitudes towards the use of multimedia in promoting Arabic learning, one can allude to the results which are significant in the sense that they showed favorable attitudes. There is another factor and that is learners’ response. The participants strongly believed that the inclusion of such CALL programs would enhance their language learning. The implications are that multimedia has a beneficial role to play in the context of language-learning especially when fully integrated in the curriculum.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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APPENDIX I

Table of Arabic study participants' data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poland, Lithuania, Tajikistan, U.S.A., Pakistan, Ghana, Zanzibar, France, Spain, Thailand, Italy, Afghanistan, Korea, Japan, Senegal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pashto, Japanese, Korean, Italian, Polish, Lithuanian, Persian, English, Urdu, Dagomba, Swahili, French, Spanish, Thai</td>
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<td>Arabic level</td>
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<td>Computer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginners: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good: 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent: 18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX II

Learn Arabic questionnaire

Name: ................................................................. Lesson .................................................................

Date: ................................................................. Start time: ................................................................. Finish time: .................................................................

PART I:

Answer the following questions after the computer session (Tick your choice):

1.a. I watched DIALOGUE

Yes No

1.b. At times, I had to listen to a segment of the dialogue

Yes No

1.c. When watching DIALOGUE, I read the written conversation

Yes No

1.d. I found DIALOGUE very interesting interesting OK boring very boring

2.a. I checked VOCABULARY especially All Verbs Nouns Adjectives Particles Phrases

Yes No

2.b. When checking VOCABULARY, I listened to the pronunciation of some words none of the words all words

Yes No

2.c. I found VOCABULARY very interesting interesting OK boredom very boring

Yes No
3.a. I read the GRAMMAR of the lesson. Yes  No
3.b. I think the GRAMMAR lesson was easy to understand OK difficult to understand
3.c. I found GRAMMAR very interesting interesting OK boring very boring

4.a. I did the DRILLS of the lesson. All Some None
4.b. I concentrated on ___________________________________________________________
4.c. I found DRILLS very interesting interesting OK boring very boring

5.a. I studied the information in ACTIVITY Yes No
5.b. I found ACTIVITY very interesting interesting OK boring very boring

6.a. I played the GAME Yes No
6.b. I played level one only level two only both levels
6.c. I found the GAME very interesting interesting OK boring very boring

7.a. I used DICTIONARY in this lesson Yes No
7.b. I used English/Arabic Arabic/English
7.c. I used the DICTIONARY 1-5 words 6-10 words more than 10 words

8. I finished all parts of the lesson on time Yes No

PART II:

To what extent do you agree with the following description of the program?

1. I found the lesson of the program enjoyable.
   - strongly agree
   - agree
   - neither agree nor disagree
   - strongly disagree
   - disagree

2. I found the lesson of the program useful.
   - strongly agree
   - agree
   - neither agree nor disagree
   - strongly disagree
   - disagree

3. The nature of the tasks was interesting.
   - strongly agree
   - agree
   - neither agree nor disagree
   - strongly disagree
   - disagree
4. Do you have any comments on any of the activities?

5. Using the computer made the lesson more interesting.
   - strongly agree
   - agree
   - neither agree nor disagree
   - strongly disagree

6. If I were given a choice, I'd prefer to learn Arabic using the textbook only.
   - strongly agree
   - agree
   - neither agree nor disagree
   - strongly disagree
   - disagree

7. List three activities that you liked best in the lessons studied.

8. List the part which you liked best in the lessons studied.

9. Would you like to do more multimedia activities using the computer?

   If so, do you have any suggestions?
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