

# LEARNERS' USE OF DOWNGRADERS IN SUGGESTIONS UNDER FOCUS ON FORMS AND FOCUS ON FORM TREATMENT CONDITIONS\*

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## ABSTRACT

The role of instruction to develop learners' pragmatic ability in a target language has recently motivated a lot of research (Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor; Tatsuki). Nevertheless, most of this research has adopted an explicit teaching approach represented by the FonFormS instructional paradigm. Consequently, Kasper and Rose point out the need to properly operationalise different treatments in order to ascertain their effectiveness in the realm of pragmatics. With that aim in mind, the present study analyses the effectiveness of both FonFormS and FonF treatment conditions in developing learners' use of downgraders (i.e. mitigating elements that serve to soften the impositive nature of directive speech acts) when making suggestions. Findings indicated that both treatments were effective, since no significant differences were found when comparing learners' performance from each group after receiving instruction. Finally, further research that examines some of the limitations found in this study is suggested.

KEY WORDS: Pragmatic competence, types of instruction, downgraders, foreign language contexts.

## RESUMEN

El papel de la instrucción para el desarrollo de la competencia pragmática de los estudiantes ha motivado numerosos estudios (Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor; Tatsuki). Sin embargo, la mayoría de estos estudios han adoptado un tipo de instrucción explícita representada por el paradigma del enfoque a las formas. Por tanto, Kasper and Rose señalan la necesidad de operacionalizar de forma apropiada otros tipos de instrucción para corroborar su eficacia en el campo de la pragmática. Teniendo en cuenta esta necesidad, el presente estudio analiza la eficacia de dos tipos de instrucción, el enfoque a las formas y el enfoque a la forma, para desarrollar el uso de elementos de mitigación al realizar sugerencias. Los resultados muestran que los dos tipos de instrucción son eficaces, puesto que las diferencias entre los dos grupos de estudiantes después de recibir cada tipo de instrucción no son estadísticamente significativas. Finalmente, se sugieren líneas futuras de investigación que examinen algunas de las limitaciones de este estudio.

PALABRAS CLAVE: competencia pragmática, tipos de instrucción, elementos de mitigación, contextos de lenguas extranjeras.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last 20 years, studies from the second language acquisition (SLA) field have demonstrated that instruction does make a difference (Doughty, “Second; “Instructed”; Long “Focus”; “Role”). Moreover, apart from establishing the effectiveness of instruction, research has also been conducted to ascertain which type of instruction is more facilitative of SLA (Norris and Ortega). The two types of instruction, that is explicit versus implicit, have been represented by two language teaching paradigms: Focus on Forms (FonFormS) and Focus on Form (FonF). The FonFormS paradigm has been regarded as the most traditional approach, in which learning is a conscious process that takes place through the explicit discussion and assimilation of rules. Thus, the target language is acquired through decontextualised explanations and series of drills that enable learners to practice the rules they have been presented. This option is related to the synthetic syllabus, in which the language is divided into separate parts, and consequently taught in different steps. In contrast to this approach, in a FonF paradigm the prerequisite for attention to forms involves an engagement in communicative and meaningful situations. Thus, the underlying assumption implied within this paradigm (Long “Focus”; Long and Robinson) consists of focusing on the linguistic aspect only when it comes up as a problem in the process of communication. This conceptualisation has been further classified as reactive or proactive FonF (Doughty and Williams). In the case of reactive FonF, teachers are ready to notice an error and consequently intervene with an appropriate FonF technique, whereas in a proactive FonF, the teacher chooses in advance which form he/she is going to select for paying attention to.

Focusing particularly on whether foreign language (FL) settings provide learners with opportunities for pragmatic language development, the role of instruction has recently motivated a lot of research (Rose and Kasper; Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor; Martínez-Flor et al.; Tatsuki). Rose and Kasper’s volume, for instance, includes a series of interventional studies that have dealt with the effect of instruction on different pragmatic features, such as interactional norms (Liddicoat and Crozet), compliments and compliment responses (Rose and Kg Kwai-fun), request strategies (Takahashi), pragmatic routines (Tateyama) and discourse markers (Yoshimi). Results from these studies, which have all been conducted in FL classrooms, have indicated that instruction contributes to developing learners’ pragmatic competence in this educational setting. However, most of the studies that have analysed the effectiveness of implementing a pedagogical intervention on pragmatic acquisition (see also Olshtain and Cohen; Safont; among many others) have

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adopted a FonFormS treatment characterised by an explicit type of instruction. Teaching pragmatic aspects by adopting this particular paradigm involves the use of pedagogical strategies for learners' development of their pragmatic ability (Kasper). These strategies consist of two types of activities: awareness-raising tasks and activities that involve the practice of the pragmatic features. In relation to awareness-raising tasks, and similar to the type of metalinguistic explanations and rule presentation that characterises the FonFormS approach, metapragmatic discussions may help learners focus explicitly on the particular aspect under instruction. In addition, the traditional pattern of explicit intervention is also observed here, since the pragmatic feature is presented, described, explained, and then discussed in order to establish the relationship between the pragmalinguistic forms that learners can employ and the sociopragmatic factors that may intervene in the choice of a particular form.

Apart from this type of instruction, Kasper and Rose suggest the need to examine other possible instructional approaches, such as adopting the paradigm of FonF in the field of pragmatics. In this regard, Celce-Murcia et al., Ellis et al., and Alcón have also claimed that the principles and efficacy of the FonF paradigm might be applied not only to grammar, but also to the discourse and pragmatic levels. Moreover, since most of the studies comparing the effectiveness of given teaching approaches have dealt with a particular speech act as the focus of instruction (Rose and Kg Kwai-fun; Takahashi; among many others), there also seems to be a need to analyse whether different types of instruction are equally effective to foster learners' use of other pragmatic issues. To that end, the present study was designed to investigate whether both FonFormS and FonF instructional approaches are effective to develop learners' use of downgraders (i.e. mitigating devices that serve to soften the impositive nature of directive speech acts) when making suggestions in a variety of situations. The research question underlying this study thus is the following: Which type of treatment condition (i.e. FonFormS versus FonF) is more effective in fostering learners' use of downgraders when making suggestions?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the study consisted of two groups of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners who were studying Computer Science at the Universitat Jaume I in Castelló. Their ages ranged between 19 and 25 years and they did not differ with regard to their ethnicity or academic background. There were 43 males and 6 females, who had an intermediate level of English according to the Department of English Studies placement test distributed among them prior to the study. The participants constituted two intact classes which received a specific type of instruction: Group 1 [ $n=24$ ] was under a FonFormS treatment condition, and Group 2 [ $n=25$ ] was under a FonF treatment condition.



The study followed a pre-test and post-test design in order to compare the performance of the two instructional groups at two different points in time, that is, before and after receiving instruction. The pre-test consisted of two production tasks (i.e. emails and phone messages) that involved 8 different situations each (see Appendix A for an example of one situation of the oral production task). These situations varied according to the sociopragmatic factor of status (Brown and Levinson 1987) and, consequently, two levels of status were considered: equal (i.e. student to student) and higher (i.e. student to professor). In the email task, the participants were requested to read the situations at a computer lab and send an email to the four email addresses provided. Regarding the phone task, the learners were instructed to read the situations in order to make a telephone call to four people. In each situation, an answering machine was activated and then the learners heard the person they were calling saying that he/she was not at home. Therefore, they had to leave a message (i.e. make a suggestion) on the answering machine. The post-test also involved 8 different situations in each production task, but they were different from those employed in the pre-test to avoid practice effects (see Appendix B for an example of one situation of the oral production task).

#### PRAGMATIC FEATURE IN FOCUS

The study focused on the pragmatic feature of downgraders, which according to House and Kasper refer to those markers that play down the impact a speaker's utterance may have on the hearer. In particular, we addressed learners' use of these markers when performing the speech act of suggestions, since this has been regarded as a directive and face-threatening speech act which needs to be softened in order to minimise its force on the hearer (Searle; Brown and Levinson). Among the different types of downgraders proposed by House and Kasper, we selected seven which belong to the types of i) *downtoner*, ii) "minus" committer, and iii) *forewarn*. As House and Kasper point out, *downtoners* consist of sentence modifiers which are used by the speaker in order to soften the impact his/her utterance is likely to have on the hearer (e.g. *just, probably, perhaps, maybe*). By "minus" committer, the authors refer to a type of modifier employed by the speaker to lower the degree of his/her commitment to the state of affairs referred to in the utterance by explicitly showing his/her personal opinion. This type of modifiers is thus showing the speaker's opinion with elements such as *I think* or *personally*. The third type, that of *forewarn*, expresses a kind of anticipatory device used by the speaker to forewarn the hearer about possible negative reactions to the act he/she is about to employ. This downgrader usually consists of a preliminary metacomment about what the speaker is going to do in order to soften what could be a potential offence. For this reason, a forewarn makes use of the conjunction *but* before stating the actual speech act (e.g. *I'm not sure, but...*).

The purpose of choosing the limited number of downgraders mentioned above was made on the basis of previous research that supports the fact that specific



selected items are more effective in instruction (Doughty and Williams; Doughty, “Instructed”). Therefore, these seven downgraders accompanied particular pragmatic forms for the speech act of suggestions, and constituted the instructional focus addressed in the present study.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, considering the socio-pragmatic factor of status proposed by Brown and Levinson in their politeness theory, we distributed these forms into two groups<sup>2</sup>:

1. *Equal status*: You can just...; Perhaps you should...; I think you need...
2. *Higher status*: I would probably suggest that...; Personally, I would recommend that...; Maybe you could...; I’m not sure, but I think a good idea would be...

## TREATMENT

The treatment lasted for 16 weeks and consisted of six 2-hour instructional sessions. During these sessions, the two groups of students participating in the study received two different types of instructional treatments accompanied by specific material elaborated for each treatment (see Table 1). On the one hand, Group 1 was under a FonFormS treatment condition which adopted a sequential method consisting in the presentation of videotaped situations that involved American native-speakers interacting in different computer-related situations, the video scripts from these situations, and a sequence of activities ranging from awareness-raising tasks to production tasks (see Appendix C for an example of these activities). The instruction for this group was also characterised by the teacher’s use of metapragmatic explanations regarding the importance of using downgraders when making suggestions in different situations.

FONFORMS	FONF
<i>Sequential method:</i>	<i>Parallel method:</i>
Video presentation	Video presentation
From awareness-raising tasks	Input enhancement
↓	+
To production tasks	Recasts

<sup>1</sup> The selection of these particular seven target forms was made considering that they were the most frequently employed forms by native speakers in the videotaped situations used as the instructional material (see the Treatment subsection for a detailed description of this material)

<sup>2</sup> The seven target downgraders are underlined for a quick identification.



On the other hand, Group 2 received a FonF type of instruction, which consisted in a parallel method with the combination of two implicit techniques, i.e. input enhancement through the video presentation and video scripts, and recasts during the role-play practice. This systematic combination of both techniques was employed following the assumption that the use of just one technique might not be enough to make the implicit condition characterised by the FonF instructional paradigm effective in enabling learners to acquire the pragmatic feature under instruction (Doughty and Williams). The same videotaped situations that were presented to Group 1 were also employed for Group 2, although this version was altered by including captions in bold-face that addressed the target forms for making suggestions, which included the seven selected downgraders. Similarly, the same target forms also appeared in bold on the video scripts prepared for Group 2. Regarding the activities, a set of listening and reading activities was elaborated that focused on the content of the videotaped situations (see Appendix D). In addition, role-play activities were implemented during all the instructional sessions in order to be able to recast learners' inappropriate use of suggestions. When this happened, the teacher used one of the target forms that included one of the seven selected downgraders.

### 3. RESULTS

The research question of the present study asked which of the two treatment conditions (i.e. FonFormS versus FonF) was more effective in developing learners' use of downgraders when making suggestions. As can be observed in Figure 1, it appears that the performance of learners from both treatments was quite similar in the pre-test, although the FonF condition seemed to be slightly higher. The opposite pattern is displayed in the post-test, where the amount of downgraders used by learners from the two conditions seems to be quite similar, although this time the FonFormS type of instruction appears to be slightly higher.

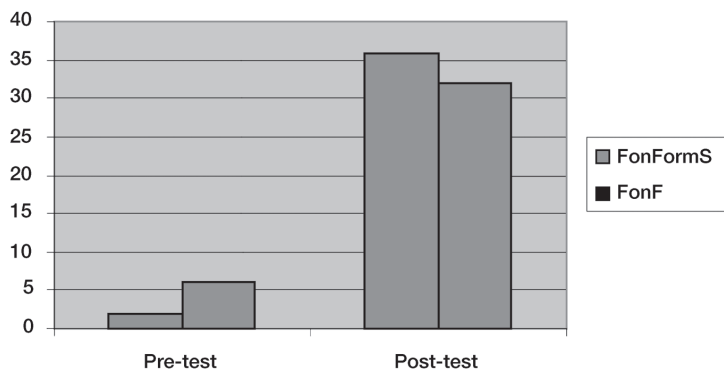


Figure 1. Overall use of downgraders used by the FonFormS and FonF treatments in the pre-test and post-test.

In order to ascertain the level of significance of the differences found between learners' use of downgraders under the two treatment conditions in the two moments, a statistical analysis was conducted. The Mann-Whitney nonparametric statistical test for independent sample data was employed, since we first applied a normality test to the data (i.e. the Kolmogorov-Smirnov z) and found that the data were not normally distributed. The results from applying this test are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE FONFORMS AND FONF TREATMENT CONDITIONS AS REGARDS THEIR USE OF DOWNGRADERS IN THE PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST

TIME	GROUP	DF	RANK	MEAN	MEDIAN	SIG.
Pre-test	FonFormS	24	22.54	0.09	0.00	.079
	FonF	25	27.36			
Post-test	FonFormS	24	25.88	1.51	1.50	.668
	FonF	25	24.16			

As reported in Table 2, the differences between the FonFormS and FonF treatment conditions regarding their use of downgraders when making suggestions are not statistically significant in either the pre-test or the post-test ( $p < 0.05$ ). A closer examination of the ranks achieved by each group indicated that learners under the FonF treatment condition performed better than those from the FonFormS condition in the pre-test, whereas the opposite pattern occurred in the post-test. However, as reported above, these differences were not statistically significant at a  $p < 0.05$  level, which appears to indicate that the two types of instruction proved to be effective in fostering learners' use of downgraders when making appropriate and mitigated suggestions in a variety of situations. Additionally, a detailed analysis of learners' utterances from both groups not only showed that they employed a higher amount of downgraders after receiving either FonFormS or FonF instruction, but that they also varied their responses by choosing the different downgraders selected as the pragmatic instructional focus. The following examples illustrate this point by showing how learners from the FonFormS (Example 1) and FonF (Example 2) treatment conditions employed a variety of downgraders when making suggestions in Situation 1 from the oral post-test (see Appendix B).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> A pseudonym has been employed in the examples to protect the identity of learners. Their responses have been exactly transcribed as originally told by them when making the phone calls.

### Example 1

- eh... hello... I am Elena Puerto... about eh... the professor... eh... I think that German Fabregat is a good professor... who he knows the PowerPoint program... this professor is my friend... so maybe you could speak him and he help... help you... bye.
- hi I'm Jose Navarro... eh... I... I would like to suggest you a... a professor from Computer Science program... eh... department in order to... to help you... to organise the summer course on PowerPoint... eh... perhaps you would like to meet Gloria...eh... bye.
- eh... hello I am Teresa... I am a student from Computer science... I am talking with you because... personally I would recommend you a teacher from the computer science department... his name is Oscar Belmonte... he is a teacher of subject such as Multimedia or Graphics Computing... eh... bye.

### Example 2

- hello... I'm Manolo... I telephone you for recommended a teacher for PowerPoint... eh... I'm not sure but... I think... a good idea would be Oscar Belmonte from University Jaume I... eh... it's all... goodbye.
- hello... I'm Vicente... eh... as you told me on Monday I have been asking some people about the use of PowerPoint... some of these people said me that Gloria Martínez... who is a teacher in Science school is an expert... so I would probably suggest you going to talk to her... eh... because I'm sure she will help you... goodbye.
- hello... I am Juan... eh... I think about look for the teacher for the summer course on on PowerPoint... eh... I think I know a teacher from my course that is good... eh... his name is German Fabregat... so maybe you could talk with him and explain explain the... the... the characteristics about the course... eh... I call you again... bye.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The findings reported above seem to demonstrate the efficacy of the two treatment conditions adopted in the present study, namely FonFormS and FonF, to develop learners' use of downgraders when making suggestions. These results differ from previous research that has compared a FonFormS treatment characterised by an explicit type of instruction with a more implicit type of treatment and has found that the former outperformed the latter (House; Rose and Ng Kwai-fun; Takahashi). However, it is important to point out that the conceptualisation of the more implicit condition in these studies was based on either excluding metapragmatic explanations (House) or just providing additional examples together with practice activities, such as merely exposing learners to film segments (Rose and Ng Kwai-



fun) or making them read transcripts of role-plays between NSs and then answer some comprehension questions (Takahashi). In our opinion, having provided learners with simple exposure to pragmatic examples in the implicit groups without any additional information, such as the metapragmatic discussions given to the FonFormS treatment group receiving an explicit instruction, may have been the explanation for obtaining no significant results for this type of instruction.

Instead, learners under the FonF treatment condition in the present study were provided with the three theoretical conditions necessary for language acquisition, namely those of input, output and feedback. First, they were presented with appropriate input through the use of the videotaped situations that contained downgraders in order to mitigate suggestions in different status-relationship participant situations. Second, opportunities for output were also arranged by making them enact role-plays during all the instructional sessions and, third, these role-plays also facilitated the provision of feedback on their inappropriate and unmitigated use of suggestions when necessary. Moreover, it is important to point out that learners were taught not only the target forms that included the selected downgraders as pragmalinguistic expressions in isolation, but also the connections among such forms, situations, functions (i.e. to suggest), and the sociopragmatic variable of status affecting their use. In other words, the principles that define FonF (Doughty and Williams), namely those of meaning, function and use when using downgraders to mitigate suggestions in different situations, were implemented with the group of learners under this treatment condition. Finally, the application of the two implicit techniques (i.e. input enhancement and recasts) with this FonF group also appears to have helped them notice the target forms. This fact supports Schmidt's ("Consciousness," "Attention") noticing hypothesis, which implies that exposure to input alone is not sufficient for pragmatic learning and, consequently, learners have to be provided with opportunities to pay attention to the target features in order for learning to take place. In this sense, adopting a particular type of instruction that is properly operationalised, such as the FonF treatment condition implemented in this study, may have helped learners notice those target pragmatic features fostering their acquisition. All these reasons therefore may explain why not only the FonFormS treatment but also the FonF teaching approach implemented in our study has proved to be effective to foster learners' pragmatic ability.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

In this study we sought to examine the effectiveness of two different teaching approaches (i.e. FonFormS and FonF) in the development of learners' use of downgraders when making suggestions. Results have demonstrated that both treatment conditions were effective, since no significant differences were found when comparing learners' performance from each group after receiving instruction. This being the case, it can be stated that a FonF teaching condition may be effective not only in developing grammatical and lexical aspects of the target language, but also pragmatic competence (Celce-Murcia et al.; Ellis et al.; Alcón).





However, our study also presents some limitations that should be considered in future research. One of the first limitations that might be considered when interpreting the findings relates to the selection of a very limited number of instructional target forms (i.e. seven types of downgraders used when making suggestions). However, our choosing a certain number of target forms was justified taking into consideration the principles underlying FonF (Doughty and Williams). By adopting two implicit techniques from this paradigm with this treatment condition, the selection of some specific forms was a requisite in order to maximise the effectiveness of this type of instruction, which should be consistent and based on those pragmalinguistic forms. Therefore, it should be interesting to analyse in future studies whether the selection of other target forms for downgraders would lead us to obtain similar results.

A second limitation of our study involves the short-term effects of the instructional treatments. We would have liked to make use of a delayed post-test in order to determine whether learners' gains in their pragmatic behaviour had been retained some time after the instructional period took place, but this was not possible due to institutional constraints. Further research should be carried out into the analysis of the long-term effects of instruction by adopting the use of a delayed post test as part of the research design features. Finally, another limitation concerns the particular population of learners involved in this study. In our research, participants belonged to two intact classes and consisted of male and female computer science university students with an intermediate level of proficiency in English. Thus, the student individual variables may have influenced our findings. In fact, we wonder whether research with either just male or female participants would provide us with different results. Similarly, age and proficiency should also have been taken into account, which means that we do not know how younger, older, beginner or advanced learners would have performed in a similar way after receiving the instruction. Consequently, there is a need for further research that examines the influence of these and other individual variables, such as motivation or social and psychological distance, on the teachability of pragmatic competence in FL contexts.

## APPENDIX A

Situation 1 from the oral production task used in the pre-test:

You are helping Professor Marzal in the organisation of the "International Conference on Internet and Language". Today, you were talking to him about arranging a formal dinner with the main "guests" (important people invited to give a talk during the conference) on Friday night. When you arrive home, it occurs to you that there are several possible restaurants where this special dinner could be organised. Call your professor and suggest a good restaurant for this formal dinner:

Telephone number: 964-729867

## APPENDIX B

Situation 1 from the oral production task used in the post-test:

One of the professors you know from the Business Administration Department asks you to help him to organise a summer course on the use of PowerPoint. As part of the course, he would like to invite a professor from your Computer Science Department for a practical presentation of this programme. When you arrive home, the names of some professors from your department who could participate in this course suddenly occur to you. Call the professor in charge of the course and suggest a good professor for this PowerPoint presentation:

Telephone number: 964-729867

## APPENDIX C

Example of the activities used with Group 1 under the FonFormS treatment condition

*Awareness-raising activities:*

- Example from an activity implemented after watching the videotaped scenes
  - What is the status between the participants?
    - Martha has a higher status than Sarah
    - Sarah has a higher status than Martha
    - Both have an equal status
    - One participant has a lower status
- Example from an activity implemented after reading the video scripts
  - What is Martha doing in lines 17-18 and 20-21?
    - She wants ideas to implement and present in class.
    - She asks Sarah to help her in a presentation.
    - She suggests that she would like to present something using PowerPoint.
    - She tells Sarah that she wants to teach more things in class.

*Production activities:*

- Example of one of the role-plays
  - A. You are working with one of your professors on a new project in the Computer Science Department. Your professor would like to know your ideas about upgrading the PC from the project into a Multimedia system. The PC is very old with only 4 megabytes of RAM; the monitor is still black and white; and it doesn't have either a CD-ROM drive or stereo speakers. Moreover, the system software is not the suitable for a Multimedia system. Apart from this, your professor would also like to set up an electronic encyclopedia. Provide your professor with ideas about the necessary components to upgrade a Multimedia system and also the benefits of having an electronic encyclopedia:
    - Necessity of a new PC
    - Hardware components
    - Software sources
    - Names of possible electronic encyclopedias to be set up
  - B. You are the professor. You would like to know one of your student's ideas (because this student is working with you in a project) about the configuration of a Multimedia system in the PC of the project and also about electronic encyclopedias.



## APPENDIX D

Example of the activities used with Group 2 under the FonF treatment condition

*Listening and reading activities:*

- Example from an activity implemented after watching the videotaped scenes  
Which programme does Sarah tell Martha to use in class?
  - QuickTime
  - Cinemania
  - PowerPoint
  
- Example from an activity implemented after reading the video scripts  
What does Martha think about Sarah's ideas?

*Production activities:*

- Example of one of the role-plays
- A. You are working with one of your professors on a new project in the Computer Science Department. Your professor would like to know your ideas about upgrading the PC from the project into a Multimedia system. The PC is very old with only 4 megabytes of RAM; the monitor is still black and white; and it doesn't have either a CD-ROM drive or stereo speakers. Moreover, the system software is not the suitable for a Multimedia system. Apart from this, your professor would also like to set up an electronic encyclopedia. Provide your professor with ideas about the necessary components to upgrade a Multimedia system and also the benefits of having an electronic encyclopedia:
  - Necessity of a new PC
  - Hardware components
  - Software sources
  - Names of possible electronic encyclopedias to be set up
  
- B. You are the professor. You would like to know one of your student's ideas (because this student is working with you in a project) about the configuration of a Multimedia system in the PC of the project and also about electronic encyclopedias.

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