A Code Restructuring Tool to help Scaffold Novice Programmers

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Abstract

This paper concerns a new software tool called CORT (code restructuring tool) that has been developed by the author to help students learn programming. The paper begins by discussing the difficulties that students face when learning to program and the use of part complete solutions as a teaching and learning method that reduces the cognitive load that students experience.

CORT has been developed to support this use of part complete solutions and its features are outlined. When used by a student, a part complete solution to a given programming problem is displayed in one window and possible lines of code that can be used to complete the solution are displayed within another window. The lines can easily be moved between the windows in order to complete the solution and the solution then transferred to the target programming environment for testing purposes.

Finally, the use of CORT with both undergraduate and postgraduate students at Edith Cowan University is described, preliminary feedback from students indicating that CORT is easy to use and that they perceive that it is helping them in their learning of programming. Four different methods of using CORT have been identified and these will be the subject of future research.

1 Introduction

Learning to write computer programs is not easy [3, 18] and this is reflected in the low levels of achievement experienced by many students in first programming courses. For example, Perkins, Schwartz et al [17] state that:

> *Students with a semester or more of instruction often display remarkable naivete about the language that they have been studying and often prove unable to manage dismayingly simple programming problems.*

and King, Feltham et al [8] state that:

> *even after two years of study, many students had only a rudimentary understanding of programming*

Over the years since the advent of high level programming languages in the 1960s, much has been written about the problems that students have in learning programming and many ideas and initiatives have been put forward for improvements in the teaching and learning process with varying degrees of success. In practice, the ways in which teaching and learning takes place in the domain of programming have changed little and many students still find the learning of programming a very difficult process. The challenge of learning programming in introductory courses lies in simultaneously learning: general problem solving skills; algorithm design; program design; a programming language in which to implement algorithms as programs; and an environment to support the program design and implementation [6]. In addition, students need to learn testing and debugging techniques to validate programs and to identify and fix problems that they may have within their programs.

2 Use of Worked Examples in the Teaching and Learning of Problem Solving and Programming

There are several methods used in the teaching and learning of programming and one of these is to utilise worked examples. Several researchers have experimented with the use of worked examples in place of conventional instruction and found strong advantages. In the domain of algebra, Sweller and Cooper [19] suggested that students would learn better by studying worked examples until they had "mastered" them rather than attempting to solve problems as soon as they had been presented with, or familiarised themselves, with new material. In their research, students studied worked examples and teachers answered any questions that the students had. Students then had to explain the goal of each problem together with the steps involved in the solution and then complete similar problems until they could be solved without errors. Sweller and Cooper found that this method was less time-consuming than the conventional practice-based model and that students made fewer errors in solving similar problems than students who were exposed to the conventional practice-based model of instruction. There was no significant difference between the "worked example" group and the "conventional" problem solving group when they attempted to solve novel problems and it was therefore concluded that learning was more efficient and yet no less effective when this worked example method was used.

Worked examples are heavily used within the “reading” method of learning programming. According to Van Merrienboer et al [22, 23] the reading approach emphasises the reading, comprehension, modification and amplification of non-trivial, well-designed working programs. However, they also suggest that presenting worked examples to students is not sufficient as the students may not “abstract” the programming plans from them, a plan being a stereotyped sequence of computer instructions.

“Mindful” abstraction of plans is required by the voluntary investment of effort and the question then arises as to how we can get students to study the worked examples properly. In practice, students tend to rush through the examples, even if they have been asked to trace them in a debugger, as they often believe that they are only making progress in their learning when they are attempting to solve problems.

Lieberman [10] suggests that students should annotate worked examples with information about what they do or what they illustrate. Another suggestion is to use incomplete, well-structured and understandable program examples that require students to generate the missing code or “complete” the examples. This latter approach forces students to study the incomplete examples as it would not be possible for their completion without a thorough understanding of the examples’ workings. An important aspect is that the incomplete examples are carefully designed as they have to contain enough “clues” in the code to guide the students in their completion. It is suggested that this method facilitates both automation, students having blueprints available for mapping to new problem situations, and schemata acquisition as they are forced to mindfully abstract these from the incomplete programs [24].

3 The Cloze Procedure

A scaffolding tool called CORT (Code Restructuring Tool) has been produced that allows students to fill in lines of missing code from programs and this method is based upon the cloze procedure. The term is derived from “closure”, a Gestalt psychology term referring to the human tendency to complete a familiar but not quite finished pattern [2]. The use of cloze was first used to measure comprehension in English readability [9] however it has also been used in the teaching and learning of programming as a way of measuring student understanding of programs [7, 20]. Such program comprehension tests are constructed by replacing some of the “words” or tokens by blanks and requiring students to fill in the blanks during a test. The use of the cloze procedure in testing was found to correlate well with conventional comprehension, question – answer, type quizzes and is also much easier to create and administer, see for example the work of Cook, Bregar et al [2].

Other researchers have experimented with the testing of program comprehension by omitting complete lines of code from programs and requiring students to fill in those lines [5, 13, 14, 15, 16]. Norcio found that students were more likely to supply correct statements if they had been omitted within a

logic segment rather than from the beginning of a segment. This is consistent with the chunking hypothesis [12] that specifies that the first element of a chunk provides the key to the contents of the entire unit. Ehrlich looked at the differences between experts and novices in filling in missing lines within various programming plans and, as expected, found that the experts filled in the lines correctly taking into account the surrounding plan whereas novices had more difficulty.

In the various experiments in program comprehension using the cloze procedure, the students had to fill in the lines of code without being given a selection of lines to choose from. In some work done in an area unrelated to programming, students were expected to create an essay using a file of statements, only some of which were relevant to the topic [4]. The students were expected to copy and paste only the statements which they believed to be relevant and then to link them with their own text and it was suggested that learners would consolidate their understanding of the topics by having to actively evaluate all possible statements. The file of statements was acting as a scaffold to student learning.

Although the literature suggests that the cloze procedure has only been used in measuring program comprehension, it appears that it could prove useful as a way of scaffolding student learning of programming. An incomplete solution to a programming problem could be given to a student together with a choice of statements that might be used in the solution. The student would then have to study the incomplete solution and the choice of statements and decide which statements to use and where to put them. CORT uses this idea making the mechanics of placing the statements into the incomplete solution very straightforward for the student and eliminating typing errors and therefore also syntax errors.

4 The Code Restructuring Tool (CORT)

CORT has been designed to support the “completion” method of learning to program and it was decided that the following features would be required in the first prototype:

- Support for part-complete solutions to programming problems. Such solutions help in schemata creation and also reduce cognitive load.
- A mechanism so that missing statements can easily be inserted into a part-complete solution and also moved within that solution. This provides scaffolding for students.
- A facility so that students can add and amend lines of code. This would allow scaffolding to be reduced and for students to add more of their own code.
- For visual programming, a facility for students to easily view the target interface. The interface should be annotated with the various object names thereby reducing any split-attention effect and helping reduce cognitive load [1].
- A facility to access tutor created questions concerning the programming problems being attempted and for students to enter answers to those questions. This will promote reflection and higher order thinking.
- A facility to easily transfer a completed solution from CORT to the target programming environment.
- A facility to easily transfer programming code from the target programming environment back into CORT for further amendment.

4.1 The CORT Design

The user interface of CORT has been designed taking into consideration the three issues that have been suggested by Marcus [11] as being fundamental to interface design, namely development, usability, and acceptance. The interface for CORT is shown in figure 1.

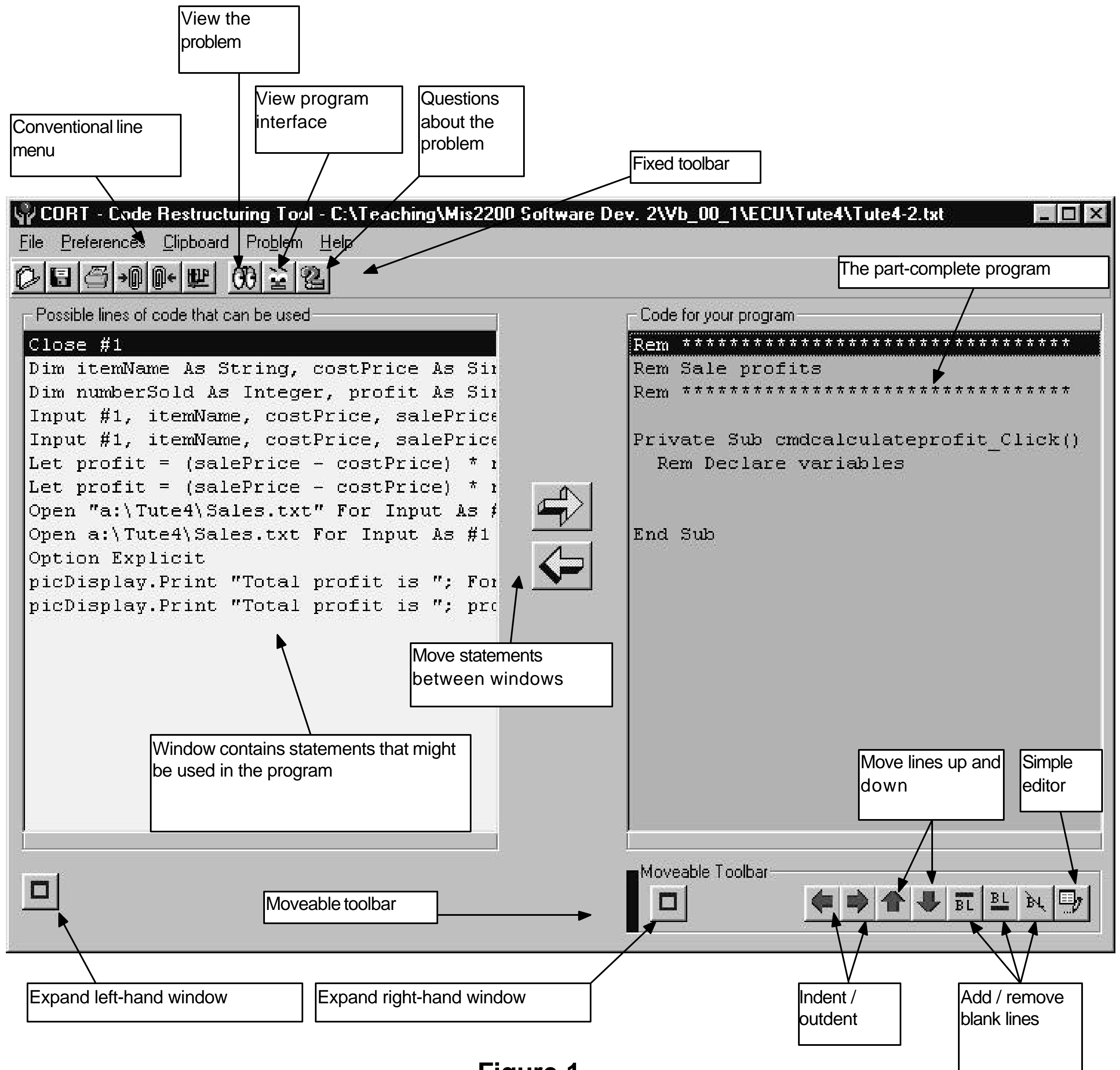

Figure 1

The ways in which the CORT design supports the list of required features are described table 1.

Feature	Support in CORT Design
Support for part-complete solutions to programming problems	The part-complete solutions are automatically loaded into the right hand window and possible statements into the left hand window. Students load these from a file.
A mechanism so that missing statements can easily be inserted into a part-complete solution and also moved within that solution	Two buttons in the middle of the screen will move lines between the windows. One line, or several lines can be selected and moved across.
A facility so that students can add and amend lines of code	A simple editor is provided so that students can add their own lines or amend existing lines.

For visual programming, a facility for students to easily view the target interface	Access to this feature is via a button on the fixed toolbar.
A facility to access tutor created questions on the workings of the programming examples and to enter student answers	Access to this feature is via a button on the fixed toolbar. Student answers are automatically saved.
A facility to easily transfer a completed solution from CORT to the target programming environment	This is provided by a button on the main toolbar. A single click will copy the contents of the right hand window to the Windows clipboard ready for pasting into the Visual BASIC programming environment.
A facility to easily transfer programming code from the target programming environment back into CORT for further amendment	This is provided by a button on the main toolbar. A single click will paste the contents of the Windows clipboard into the right hand window, overwriting what is there.

Table 1

4.2 Use of CORT by Students

A student would typically use CORT as follows:

1. A student loads in a CORT file and the two windows display a part-complete solution to a problem together with possible lines to be used. There is a facility available for the contents of the two windows to be printed out.
2. The student can view the problem statement and the Visual BASIC solution interface by clicking on the appropriate buttons on the fixed toolbar. The problem statement may have already been provided to the student in the form of a handout, however there is also a facility to print it from within CORT.
3. The student moves certain lines from the left hand window to the right hand window in an attempt to complete the solution. Lines can be moved up or down, and indented or outdented in the right hand window. Some problems have too many lines in the left hand window, some of those lines being incorrect.
4. If necessary, the student can invoke a simple editor to amend, add or delete lines of code.
5. The student clicks on the appropriate button to copy the contents of the right hand window to the Windows clipboard.
6. The student invokes Visual BASIC and loads the file that contains the interface for the solution. This is in effect the Visual BASIC solution to the problem without the lines of code and was created by the tutor.
7. The student pastes the contents of the Windows Clipboard into the Visual BASIC editor and tests the program to determine if it works correctly. Use is made of the trace and debugging facilities of Visual BASIC. These facilities provide an insight to the workings of the notional machine.
8. If the student finds a problem with the working of the program, they can return to CORT and make the changes to the code there.
9. The student repeats steps 3 to 8 until they have a working program.
10. The student answers the tutor’s questions concerning the programming problem that they have just attempted.

4.3 Initial Student Feedback

CORT has been used for one semester with both undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Faculty of Business and Public Management. The particular units are in the area of software development and the language that the students learn is Visual BASIC.

Each week the students have to undertake completion programming exercises using CORT and after each problem they were asked to comment on the use of CORT for the particular problem that they had just finished. The data was collected on-line through the Web and below are some of the comments that were received:

1. It's very helpful. I can see the interface of the program before actually running it.
2. I think CORT is a very useful tool to play around the codes. It saves me time copying and pasting.
3. Considering the increased workload as the semester progresses it is a bit of a relief that the exercises are much easier with the "fill in the gap" type format in CORT.
4. Without CORT, it's sure that I'll have a lot trouble with this particular problem, which focuses on arrays (a difficult topic). Thanks CORT...
5. CORT was useful in that the part solution helped to understand the logic of VB code
6. CORT is useful . However, I have used the unit text to try to understand the indentation format when writing the code. The directional keys are great for editing the code to meet the required format.
7. This was a challenge! I think that CORT is useful so long as I am not tempted to simply manipulate code until the program runs. If I were having to write programs from scratch I would use CORT so as to format and manipulate code and modules or sub procedures etc.

5 Conclusions

As can be seen from the above, the initial feedback on the use of CORT has been favourable. We have found that students can undertake two or three small programming problems within a one hour tutorial whereas without CORT they could only undertake one such problem. Also, without using CORT students often never manage to successfully complete their assigned problems and this certainly affected their motivation.

By using CORT, students do not have to be concerned with the design of programming interfaces which considerably reduces the cognitive load in the initial stages of learning programming. Also, the reduction of “split attention affect” by labelling all the objects with their names has been very popular with the students.

The above has described a preliminary study of the use of CORT and it has been undertaken to determine its suitability and to fine tune some of its features. CORT can be used in several ways and four distinct methods have now been identified. These will be the subject of further research. The four methods are as follows:

1. **All** of the lines that are required to complete a program are made available in the left hand window of CORT. There are no extra lines displayed in the left hand window.
2. **All** of the lines that are required to complete a program are made available in the left hand window of CORT. There are also additional lines displayed in the left hand window that are not required within the program. The extra lines are similar to the required lines, however they are incorrect and act as “red herrings”.
3. **Some** of the lines that are required to complete a program are made available in the left hand window of CORT. Other lines that are required for the program completion need to be keyed in by the student.

4. **None** of the lines that are required to complete a program are made available in the left hand window of CORT. All of the lines that are required for the program completion need to be keyed in by the student.

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