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Theoretical Issues Involved in Computer-Assisted Language Learning

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Abstract

Computer assisted language learning (CALL) is a buzz-word in the ELT world of today. It has generated immense interest among teachers teaching English as a second language (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL) throughout the globe. It has changed the nature of sharing, storage and dissemination of information. The present paper deals with the importance of CALL in teaching language skills by integrating new models of learning by ESL/EFL teachers in their pedagogical practices while confronting the classroom of 21st century learners.

Key Words: English as a second language learner (ESL), English as a foreign language learner, Computer assisted language learning (CALL), Target language (TL), Language teacher, language learner

Information and communication technology is a wonderful resource for opening up the English-language world and can be used with great pleasure and profit- and very little sweat. Computer is a flexible classroom aid, which can be used by language teachers and learners, in and out of class, in a variety of ways with the help of technological tools. Computer technology can be regarded as an educational tool supporting English Language teaching (Liang and Bonk 9). In fact, a wide range of electronic technologies have been developed to supplement second language teaching and learning (Liang and Bonk 10). CALL has been projected as a means to extend learners' opportunities to engage in communicative practice in the target language and thereby overcome classroom teaching limitations (Chapelle, 2003). It promotes personalized instruction and individualization in language learning, which, consequently, can increase learners' motivation since students direct much of the learning themselves. Moreover, CALL allows language teachers to process and present authentic materials with flexibility (Stevens, 1992). Here are some reasons why authentic computer is an essential tool for learning languages today.

The classroom scenario – The existing exam oriented system often fails to create a natural, inspiring setting in a second language classroom learning to help learners enthusiastically. Consequently, students continue to be tongue tied, unable to use English flawlessly even after graduation. Fear of mistakes and consequent ridicule, inhibition and self

consciousness often prevent learners from using English in the classroom. Learners develop an aversion towards English when they fail to acquire the proficiency expected by teachers.

The Paradigm Shift- The increasing role of computers in every activity has changed learning and teaching method too. Notebooks have gradually given way to laptops, handwritten assignments to laser prints, blackboard to multimedia and libraries to web sites. It would be right only if English language teacher too imbibed changes to facilitate acquiring of language skills in the most popular electronic way.

1. **For its own sake**- People want access to the world of English language media: they want to be able to view news, get information from advertisements, to see a film. In short, they want to use these language products like normal consumers. This may be one of our students' major goals in learning English and in all fairness they ought to be able to get a glimpse of their goals.
2. **For comprehension of the spoken language**- Computer brings us all kind of voices in all kind of situations, with full contextual back-up. One obvious advantage for comprehension is the visual dimension, particularly for pragmatic understanding in dialogue. The long term contextual understanding builds up as the programme develops.
3. **As a language model**- Information and communication technology provides a vast up-to-date linguistic resource of accents, vocabulary, grammar and syntax, and all kind of discourse, which shows us language in most of its uses and context something neither course book nor can a classroom do. Authentic video can be a model for specific language items or a general pool for students to pick and choose from. Each genre contributes its own particular discourse structures and lexis; drama video is particularly valuable because it illustrates the kind of interactive language most foreign-language students seldom encounter.
4. **For culture** – Video is a window on English language culture. Apart from giving access to global culture products like feature film, it also shows how people live and think and behave. A small amount of showing is worth hours of telling a teacher or reading and cramming a course book.
5. **As a stimulus or input** – Computer can be used for discussion, for writing assignment, as input for projects or the study of other subjects. 'The film of the book' is particularly useful in the study of literature, and work based scenarios and training films are useful in special-purpose language teaching.
6. **As a moving picture book** – Computer gives access to things, places, people, events and behaviour, regardless of the language used, and is worth thousands of picture dictionaries and magazines.

7. No wastage of time in rubbing out, drawing and writing on the black board.
8. Easy to learn and operate.
9. Multimedia storage and retrieval system can contain more information than any human training agent can possibly embrace, and can have many terminals through which students can have access to the information.

The other benefits of multimedia are critical thinking, individualized teaching, learning and the student will learn at their own time and space. Internet has already made it possible to take education to the home of learners. Multimedia has been extensively and creatively used to create- self-learning programmes. The learners can have the choice of the most effective way of learning by different teaching method and system. Personal digital libraries can be created to provide a mechanism for managing one's accumulated knowledge resource. The process of continuous learning becomes a reality. The limits of time and space gradually vanish.

Zhao suggests several advantages that are more directly related to language learning and teaching. According to Zhao, CALL materials help by 1) enhancing access efficiency through digital multimedia technologies, 2) enhancing authenticity using video and the internet, 3) enhancing comprehensibility through learner control and multimedia annotations, 4) providing opportunities for communication (through interaction with the computer and through

interaction with remote audience through the computer), 5) by providing feedback, 6) by offering computer-based grammar checkers and 7) tracking and analyzing students' errors and behaviour. Although this list combines technical and pedagogical advantages (e.g. 'authenticity'), it is clear that there is a board range of potential areas where CALL materials can make a contribution (451-454).

The E-mail advantage- The e-mail is often a silent electronic conversation offering learners an environment, free from embarrassment and ridicule. It provides them ample opportunity to try, experiment and play with the words, to add, alter and replace them till the idea in mind is translated in words. Every such exploration and successful drafting of response gives a quantum leap to one's confidence to comprehend and write clearly. Latest software developments aid learners to identify and rectify errors easily. E-mails indirectly help in developing conversational English too.

Online chatting opens exciting opportunities to learn English. It sustains learners' interest longer, brings about quick synchronization of comprehension and expression. The quick exchange of messages achieves simplicity, precision and brevity. It activates the thought process to fix contextual meaning, include instant search for the right words and arrange them logically to respond appropriately. Thus, this activity promotes reading and writing. Both, sender and receiver learn from each other's style, usage and mistakes even

without any formal teaching. Substantial learning takes place while one enthusiastically chats with friends, foreigners, members of opposite sex and those with similar interests.

Other Avenues – Apart from chatting, teachers could make the process more challenging by setting task to visit specific web sites for specific information (reading), critically evaluate them (analysis) and present the gist (writing). Tasks based on audio output available at many web sites of news, sports and movie agencies and voice mail could be exploited to develop listening and speaking skills.

For language teaching, documentaries have a lot of scope. They can be stored and used again. They have a good mix of spontaneous and scripted language and a lot of usable short sequences. On the top of that, they are not difficult to understand: they are shorter than feature films. Some are useful in English for special purpose: travel documentaries for tourist schools, management training videos for civil servants and business people, educational programmes for students of all subjects.

CALL also addresses linguistic issues involved in language:

1. Understanding is that much easier because the language is interpreted in full visual content. Events, setting, actions, expressions, gestures in a scene give a dense immediate content which highlights meaning, both literal and pragmatic.

2. The language is directly linked to the feelings, situations and speakers which inspire it, and this full social context gives access to the full meaning.

3. Another reason for using film drama in language learning is the kind of language the drama provide-interactive language, the language of daily conversational exchange e.g. act along, getting things done, hollow phrases, interactive language, jumped statement variation, lip reading and mind reading question, quotes, telephone conversation etc.

4. 'Interaction' is now recognized in the European language frame work as one of the major areas of language competence, along with production, reception and meditation, but it is relatively neglected in course book. So learners of English as a second language are often to produce natural spoken English. When asked to play a role on a dialogue of a script, they frequently produce strange scholastic language, inappropriate tone, distorted idioms, unlikely collocations and a limited repertoire of functional language.

Only drama can provide this range of language, and students need such exposure because to learn to speak to people they must see and hear people speaking to each other. Common human activities such as shopping, going to the bank, traveling and eating out feature heavily in language course book, partly because of the spoken

language they demand but also because they are constant topics of daily talks. Fortunately, they also turn regularly in film drama.

5. Pronunciation – The social significance of accents is also enhanced by video, because accents are the signature tune of culture and should be heard in their social content, for most learners, however the first problem with accents is comprehension.

One of the main complaints about authentic is that it is too difficult. There is a lot of justice in this. Obviously students learn best when they understand most of what they hear and comprehension is therefore a top priority. We need to develop a good feeling for what students can manage and how to help them with it. We also need to be sympathetic to what they want to understand. Clearly the level of language is very important. The elements which make for comprehension difficultly are: high verbal and lexical density; high speed speech; little support from the visual scene; background noise; dialect, strong regional accents; and 'nature' features like indistinct articulation and overlap. Sometimes they complain that they 'understand' all the words but can not answer the question. When viewing in our own language we tend to go for general idea, 'get the message', but it is also natural for us to monitor closely for anything which disturb our grasp, and we may bend our attention to small points (a word, a sound, a single visual detail) at will.

So comprehension is a very individual process, and we should not be too dogmatic or prescriptive. One should try various approaches, observe what students do, consult them about their difficulties as they are the experts of them.

Felix, U. provides a comprehensive survey of research into CALL in her article "The unreasonable effectiveness of CALL: what have we learned in two decades of researches?"

In her conclusion she writes:

We are beginning to see enough data in CALL that suggest positive effects on spelling, reading and writing. There is also a substantial body of data that indicates that students' perceptions of CALL are positive on the whole, provided technologies are stable and well supported. On the negative side there are still concerns about technical difficulties interfering with the learning process; older students not feeling comfortable with computers; younger students not possessing the necessary metaskills for coping effectively in these challenging environments; training needs in computer literacy for both students and teachers; problems with group dynamics; and time constraints. (156)

It is certain that computer will rule the world. It is time for English teacher to get acquainted with the computer. The

reasonable man adapts himself to the present need of the world. Why can not we keep the pace with the modern approaches in second language learning and thereby diminish the gap between the traditional method and the information & communication technology in the field of English language teaching. The field is new and the task ahead may not be easy. But we have to learn, lest we should be left out. Let the information and communication technology revolution revolutionize ELT too.

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