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CALL as a tool, not a totality

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Introduction

In the last 15 years with the emergence of the Internet, the face of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) has drastically changed. In response, many universities and educational institutions throughout the world have markedly increased their use of CALL in the classroom as well as outside of campus. In such institutions, thanks to CALL, teachers have at their disposition a wide array of technical tools to help students enhance their mastery of a target language. Yet, it is important to understand the place of CALL in language education. This article will try to show that, despite CALL improvements, the presupposition of using CALL as a be-all learning tool can also have somewhat negative effects upon the task of language learning.

First, a general definition of CALL as a tool in language education will be provided. This will include a brief summary of the major stages of CALL development since the 1950s. The second, and final part, will provide a discussion on several perspectives pertaining to CALL. In it, we will lend our measured support to CALL by arguing that, if it is imposed in a top-down fashion and becomes a primary learning concern for educators, language course objectives can be sacrificed in the process. Consequently, we argue that CALL should be limited to the status of a language learning tool to be used and enjoyed

by teachers and students. We also wish to stress that the full effectiveness of CALL can be enhanced if it is correlated with SLA (Second Language Acquisition) theory. That way, the task of language learning remains central, and does not become overshadowed by the use of technology.

1. The history of CALL

As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, our reliance on computers in all aspects of life has become more and more ubiquitous. This reality is clearly observable in the field of SLA, where CALL has been gaining a significantly greater share of attention in educational institutions and conferences on language education around the world. As indicated by the rise of Moodle, Blackboard, and other such software, which have displaced the traditional language labs of the 70s and 80s, and even the CDs and DVDs of the 80s and 90s, the very definition of a language learning tool has shifted. With this in mind, a short discussion on the various stages of CALL development over the last 50 years is needed.

Being somewhat static and a minor concern for the public in its initial stages, the history of CALL has demonstrated tremendous adaptability in response to various social and technological changes in the last half century. Now, CALL seems to have adapted well to the demands of today's internet savvy users, who require instant access to information and marked versatility from their tech tools. Warschauer (2000) traces this history by outlining three major phases of CALL: structural CALL, communicative CALL, and integrative CALL. Structural CALL was based on 'drill and practice' techniques, whereby

computers and other forms of technology were employed to serve the oral approach to language teaching. Learners used such tools to interact with the target language as an object of study, with the objective of developing target language behaviors. At this stage, CALL was not concerned with the relationship between classroom language learning and contextualized language use. It was merely a tool to conduct ‘drilling’ practices in the classroom. In response to new developments in the field of SLA, the communicative phase of CALL was introduced as a more implicit approach to computers in the language classroom. By focusing more on language functions, it aimed at serving more democratic language teaching approaches, which forced a departure from strict, prescriptive, and limited uses of the target language. After the ‘kill and drill’ approach of structural CALL, and the ‘ad hoc’ approach of communicative CALL, came integrative CALL, which is what most language learners and teachers have been involved with since the late 1990s. This move was, according to Warschauer (*ibid*), in response to the rise of the Internet and its influence upon education at large.

Integrative CALL has now become a bulwark of many university language programs throughout the world. It is characterized by a dynamic combination of multimedia and Internet use. First, a language learner nowadays can interact with text, graphics, sound, animation and video, all accessible from a single inexpensive computer. This is an enormous benefit for students and teachers which cannot be understated. With integrative CALL, learners gain the ability to control more of what, when and how they learn the L2 (second language). Second, integrative CALL allows for greater improvement of writing and reading skills as a result of increased access to, and interac-

tion with, digital texts and language samples available online and in educational libraries. Third, and not the least, there is the clear advantage for shy and inhibited students to engage in interactive activities more actively. This is a clear improvement from other communicative language teaching approaches, which may render language learning tasks daunting for these students because of the imperative of face-to-face interaction. Perhaps the most significant advantage to integrative CALL, which has emerged out of the Internet revolution, is that learning the L2 is now possible through immediate access to an abundance of information and various cultural contexts that lay outside the classroom boundaries. For these reasons, some may argue that integrative CALL has made the language learning experience even more connected to real-life.

2. Perspectives on the uses of CALL

With this brief introduction to the history of CALL, we will now look at the dangers of CALL, especially integrative CALL, due to its overambitious focus on the use of the Internet and the ubiquity of personal computers, tablets, and smart phones in the language classroom. We are not here to condemn the stem of CALL but rather to show a voice of reason in the wave of integrative CALL that seems to be sweeping universities and institutions here in Japan and throughout the world.

What we mean by “CALL as a totality” is a situation in which CALL is used in an unbalanced way, i.e., when computer use is approached uncritically, and becomes the central focus of the language classroom, at the detriment of actual human communication. According to

Levy (2006: 2), “in striving for a balanced approach in the context of CALL, one needs to know how best to marshal technological resources and then how best to combine them with face-to-face teacher-student and student-student interaction in the classroom.” We believe that ‘CALL as a tool’ assigns primacy to face-to-face communication, while ‘CALL as a totality’ overlooks that need. CALL becomes a totality when both macro and micro language objectives are being overwhelmed by the task of operating and using technology. In the language classroom, this would mean devoting much of the time to learning how to operate the technology at the detriment of the language learning experience. We consider this sort of conflation between tool and objective as not only misguided, but one which can potentially affect language learning.

The integration of CALL programs into university language programs is a sensible endeavour at the core. While the relative mastery of technological tools which may facilitate the learning of a language is a common sense strategy, one must not lose focus on the very purpose that CALL sets out to do, which is to give students an enhanced language learning experience. In that respect, we do believe that CALL has a legitimate role to play in institutional language learning. But that role can only involve the facilitation of language learning, not the restraining of it.

Teaching how to use a tool can be understood as part of a task-based approach to language teaching (TBLT). Doing so does provide a real-life context in which the target language can be used to effectuate changes in the real-world, which in this case would mean knowing how to use a computer to achieve specific tasks. Our measured

approach relates CALL to TBLT, and positions these approaches as highly beneficial to the negotiation of genuine, unrehearsed, instantaneous, goal-oriented language production. An important feature of task-based learning is that form is noticed only through failure. If a teacher's explanations in the target language do not lead to productive outcomes, then we are most likely dealing with a 'communicative mismatch' between language form and function. It is when learners notice that mismatch between form and function that the form itself becomes more apparent to them. If there is no such mismatch, one can assume that communication has been successful. TBLT also has the advantage of making the language classroom student-centered. In short, it is the traditional language classroom turned upside down. In this respect, if CALL is geared towards problem-solving by emphasizing the need for genuine human communication, we believe that genuine language learning can take place.

On the other hand, if CALL is essentially a matter of learners 'managing' technology, and if there is time, using the L2 in computer-mediated communicative contexts, then we are looking at CALL as a totality, one where CALL overshadows the real purpose of the language classroom. In this line, we are reminded of Garrett (1991, in Warschauer 1996) in his argument that computer use is not a method in and of itself. Rather, it is a medium shaped by a mix of methods and approaches. The paradigm of CALL as a totality assumes that CALL is effective due to the nature of the medium itself. In short, knowing how to use the tool effectively constitutes successful CALL-mediated language learning. Clearly, this view is limiting. If learners are to learn language with the use of technology, the focus must remain on the language learning task first and foremost, for this is the central reason

for the existence of CALL.

We are, in fact, trying to describe situations in which language educators become blinded by technology, and lose sight of their original mission, which is to teach language in the most effective way possible. The sweeping social and technological changes that we are witnessing in our society often bring about overwhelming and uncritical endorsements for new paradigms. New products are introduced in the market, and are often too rapidly assimilated by the public to mitigate potentially negative effects. This particular reality became visible in CALL in the first decade of the 21st century. For many who seek to understand integrative CALL and implement it whole heartedly in their everyday teaching practices, there seems to be an almost messianic view of the wonders of this new technology in SLA. These practitioners, who can be labelled ‘technologists’, predict sweeping social changes that will affect government operations, institutions and universities in holistic fashion. For them, technology is not a convenient and facilitating addition to their everyday business, it is their everyday business. This essentialization, one-directional and totalitarian approach to technology in language education readily sidesteps vital elements in the fundamental workings of human communication. It is unfortunate to think that many of these technologists have received TESOL training, and consequently are familiar with SLA literature, yet seem willing to overlook the importance of face-to-face human communication in their quest to improve their own CALL practices.

Here, we are reminded of Bowers’ (2000, in Chapelle 2003: 7) argument that the socio-pragmatic reality should also be considered when implementing CALL. In other words, unless people become

more aware of the complexities of communication, and less enthralled with the glorification of information technology, educational changes instigated by CALL will not be fully effective. Thus, the dangers of technology overshadowing human practices can be mitigated through a stronger, more realistic understanding of what it is that CALL is meant to achieve. In essence, the social pragmatic stance argues for stronger human agency and a re-framing of technology as tool, not totality.

However, the social pragmatists and the technologists do share the view that changes in integrative CALL are inevitable. Furthermore, these changes will undoubtedly be considered a central focus, if not a *raison d'être*, for many language programs by the middle of the 21st century, or perhaps even within the next few years. While we agree more with the social pragmatists, in the sense that it places more importance onto human communication in the language classroom, we prefer an extension to the social pragmatist view, a third perspective which is claimed by the critical analysts.

The critical analysts bring the CALL ideology up to the surface by arguing that there is a need to methodically and critically investigate the belief system which places technology as an inevitable process, one which is fundamentally positive and culturally neutral. The idea of computers as neutral tools which, by fostering global communication, infuse people with a greater sense of agency in shaping their world may be true for those who are well-versed into computer technology. Yet, for those who are not, computers can significantly impede their ability to communicate and interact with the world, thus acting as a gate-keeper. In addition, the argument for the cultural neutrality of computers assigns universal attributes to human agents, and further

assumes that computer technology forms part of human intuition. The danger with this is that the reality of the computer world is overlooked. Nowadays, with the omnipresence of English on the Internet, coupled with the fact that most computer technology has, so far, originated in the U.S., it becomes very difficult to argue for the universality of computers. Especially in EFL contexts, while CALL practices can help learners connect with the rest of the world, one cannot overlook the socio-cultural issues which can surface as a result.

Drawing from Chapelle (2003), we wish to underline that the practice of teaching English is a value-laden enterprise that may need some re-evaluation of integrative CALL on three fronts: the pervasiveness of Western values of individualism which permeate current CALL approaches, the ubiquity of English as a lingua franca on the Internet, and the over-acceptance of native English speaking teachers as both educators and intellectual authorities. The fact that most research in the field of SLA at large is conducted in English does not imply that such a body of knowledge is applicable to all cultural contexts. The same goes for CALL research. Even beyond the cultural sphere, there is also the need to contend with the notion that educators' ideas of what is good for learners may not be so in reality. Moreover, one should question if teachers' pedagogical preferences are always determined with the learners' best interests in mind, or simply follow teachers' own tastes.

In addition to cultural issues, implementing CALL approaches to the classroom is not equivalent to implementing any new teaching approach. There are major implications to the decision of using CALL, the main one being financial. Another involves the notion of

relevance to learners' lives. Donaldson and Halggstrom (2006) sum up this argument as such:

“the hype surrounding CALL understates the difficulty of implementing CALL in a fashion that is both time and cost-effective. The instructor dedicated to employing the same technology in a truly effective fashion must realize the potential of recent innovations in a way that makes their relevance immediately apparent to learners and encourages them to explore further.” (p. VIII)

This statement underlines the necessity for teachers and institutions to be careful before implementing CALL programs, so that these do not end up being overly complicated, costly, and ultimately counter-productive ventures. As Browne and Gerrity (2006) argue, the implementation of CALL is best achieved initially through low-key set up strategies. This point is particularly important when considering that there are many students who still are at the beginning stages of technological competence. While many high school and university students demonstrate great agility when using their mobile phones, they often do not have the same level of competence when in front of a PC or a Mac. This has serious implications for the creation of an effective CALL-oriented language learning environment. In the end, implementing and running a CALL program of any sort takes a lot of commitment from those who are involved in the process: technicians, educators, and of course learners. This is precisely why careful attention must be placed on the impact of such commitment onto language programs themselves. In the end, any CALL initiative should always aim to protect the primacy of the task of language learning, which is best defined by SLA

theory.

3. Conclusion

There is no doubt that CALL has become a necessity in language learning, and a requirement for all institutionalized language curricula around the world. This is based on the overwhelming advantages of CALL to respond to the needs of current language learners, and that such advantages are very effective in convincing teachers and institutions to jump onto the CALL bandwagon. However, this is not the only perspective available out there. In contrast, we question an outright devotion to one particular approach to teaching. Indeed, we think that ecological approaches to language teaching, blending a variety of methodological and pedagogical techniques, are ideal. Adding CALL to the equation, we are then looking at an even richer approach to language teaching.

But clearly, implementing CALL in the language classroom involves many issues beyond the technical and economical spheres. Instead of accepting CALL unquestioningly and uncritically, it is important to strike for a middle path. By adapting CALL with cost-effective and appropriate CALL materials that are at once interesting, beneficial to students and within curricula, students, teachers and institutions will be able to better adapt to the challenges of a constantly shifting and evolving global society. In concrete terms, we must determine how far we wish to integrate CALL programs into our existing pedagogical practices. As such, before CALL can be implemented in a sound fashion, a thorough evaluation of learner needs is vital.

Again, this brings us back to SLA literature. Chapelle (2003) points out that there is a need to frame CALL within SLA theory because only then will its full impact be felt. In the current age of computerized language learning, to perceive technology as something more than a tool can produce two kinds of problems: a) losing sight of original language learning purposes, and b) overstressing the usefulness of technology in the classroom. Ultimately, as Sealey and Carter (2004) rightfully argue, it is people who construct discourse and communication. Ahmad, Corbett, Rogers and Sussex (1985: 2) adds that “[t]he computer is a tool, of itself incapable of action. It has no inborn wisdom, no mind of its own, no initiative and no inherent ability to learn or teach.” Thus, if we are concerned with having learners develop communicative competence in the L2, our core concern must be centered on having them use the language in meaningful contexts. Certainly, CALL can provide such contexts, and the tools to operate within that context. But at no point should CALL interfere with the central task of communicative language learning and teaching. For that to happen, we must follow a measured approach to CALL by making sure that our perspective on what we have set out to do in the first place does not become clouded by a total devotion to the workings of technology.

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