Computer Assisted Language Learning: Merits and Demerits

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Abstract

Computer assisted language learning and teaching has come to a new step, especially with the development of microcomputer and the Internet. Computers can facilitate a variety of learning tasks and have enormous potency as teaching tools. They can help both students and teachers because of their special properties. This paper aims to investigate the merits and demerits of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) for current foreign language learning and teaching. The findings indicate that it is necessary to apply computers in current second language classroom, although it still has demerits and weaknesses. Therefore, when we try to apply CALL programs to enhance teaching or learning EFL, we should realize what the merits and demerits are in current CALL programs in order to avoid misemploying CALL programs and get its maximum benefits for our EFL teaching and learning.

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Introduction

Using Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL) has increased markedly in the last decades, and numerous studies have been conducted about the role of computer in learning English as second or foreign language in the 20th and 21st centuries. With the advent of Internet and multimedia, studies in recent years (Ali, & Yacob, 2010; Ercetin, 2010; Kilickaya, 2010, AbuSeileek, 2011, AbuSeileek, 2012) have shown an explosion of interest in using computers for foreign language teaching and learning. Computer technology has played an important role in the teaching and learning process around the world. Lockard, Abrams, and Many (1997) point out that *"the computer is an inescapable component of changes now facing education in the United States, indeed throughout the world"* (p. 4).

Today, computers are becoming an increasingly significant element in the teaching and learning of foreign languages and in the study of English as a second and foreign language. Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore the merits and demerits of computer technology in learning of English as a second and foreign language in order to avoid misemploying CALL programs and get its maximum benefits for EFL teaching and learning.

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

CALL stands for Computer Assisted Language Learning. It is a term used by teachers and students to describe the use of computers as part of a language course. According to Levy (1997), CALL may be defined as the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning. In her recent book on CALL, *English language learning and technology*, Chapelle (2003) intentionally uses a variety of terms to signify the applications of technology in English language teaching and learning: CALL is one of them, alongside applied linguistics, technology-mediated tasks and computer mediated communications. (CALL is the only one that includes language learning. Jones & Fortescue (1987), indicate that the traditional

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description of CALL is unfortunate, and they present the computer as flexible classroom aid, which can be used by teachers and learners, in and out of class, in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. However, work with the computer, as any other teaching aid, needs to be linked with ordinary classroom work and CALL lessons, like other lessons, need to be planned carefully.As all other methods of language learning and teaching, CALL has merits and demerits.

Merits of CALL

With the great development of computers and Internet, more and more second and foreign language teachers and learners are using these technologies for foreign language teaching and learning today. Although the uses of computers in teaching and learning have a positive effect on the achievement levels of second and foreign language learners, there still remain some barriers, which will be dealt in the current paper.

Educators (Kenning, 1983; Ahmad, 1985; Jonassen, 1996; Salaberry, 1999; Rost, 2002; Wang, 2006; Han, 2008) indicate that the current computer technology has many advantages for second and foreign language learning. Computer and its attached language learning programs could provide second and foreign language learners more independence from classrooms and allow learners the option to work on their learning material at any time of the day.

The reasons for using computer-assisted language learning include: (a) experiential learning, (b) motivations, (c) enhancing students' achievement, (d) authentic materials for study, (e) greater interaction, (f) individualization, (g) independence from a single source of information, and (h) global understanding (Lee, 2000). Also, using networked computers as a way to provide interactive communication has been used extensively and with variable degrees of success in foreign language classrooms since the late 1980s (Kung, 2002).Also, Wang (2006) points out that computer assisted language teaching and learning has come to a new step, especially with the development of microcomputer and Internet. Computers can facilitate a variety of learning tasks, and have enormous potency as teaching tools. They can help both the students and the teachers because of their special properties.

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Some studies (Han, 2008; Wang 2006; Gündüz 2005; Taylor 1980) report that CALL is gaining more popularity in foreign language learning and it mainly enjoys many merits for second and foreign language learners. According to Gündüz (2005), one of the most important advantages of the growth of CALL is that software vendors (and language teachers) no longer feel bound to grammar practice as the main goal of computer use in the language classroom. The movement for communicative teaching with computers is clearly expanding. The vocabulary software has started to be contextualized, to incorporate graphics, audio recording, playback, and video. More sophisticated error-checking programs can provide students real help in the feedback they receive, directing them to further practice or moving them to the next stage. Those who need extra help with those aspects of language that improve with practice can use small, focused programs to give them additional time and assistance outside the regular class time.

Classroom teaching becomes more effective with the help of computers. Computers are good to motivate students. Language teaching in the past was conducted mainly in the classroom with teachers' teaching and students' passive learning, with the aids of, first, blackboard, then, recorders and videos. With computers, teachers can present pictures, videos, and written texts with or without sound. Students feel things are more real and more understandable. Through simulation and other techniques, computers can present abstract things in a concrete and easily understandable way. Many students who get bored and in traditional English classes become more and more interested in this new style of teaching and learning. Thus, students do not get bored easily and may become more active.

Students' learning becomes more individualized and autonomous. One major problem in English teaching and learning is that students, very often, have a variety of interests and levels of English proficiency. Their learning speeds and learning styles also vary greatly. Computers may help teachers to meet different students' needs by providing students with different levels of learning materials, by offering students different studying methods, by making each student work at his/her own pace. This means that students become the center of learning, and teachers, instead, become the facilitators.

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Thus, the computer provides a platform for communication between teachers and students. In contrast to traditional second language classroom study, students can study more independently, leaving for the teachers more time to concentrate their efforts on those parts of second language teaching that are still hard or impossible by the computer, such as pronunciation, work on spoken dialogue, and training for essay writing and presentation. Such individualized instruction can initiate students' active learning, promote learning with comprehension, and allow students to see their progress themselves.

The teaching resources can be stored for a longer time and shared by other teachers and students. One big difference between computers and teachers is that computers will never get tired and can repeat the same thing again and again without complaining. Furthermore, computers can keep teaching resources for a longer time, which is almost impossible in the traditional classroom. The teaching resources can then be shared by other teachers and students.

Language learners have the option to study anytime and anywhere. Traditionally, learners must go to a class themselves at a fixed time and in a fixed classroom. If the place has a network of computer laboratories, learners can use the same materials wherever they are. They can even study at home if their personal computers have a link to the system or network in their school.

CALL programs can be wonderful stimuli for second language learning. Currently, computer technology can provide many funny games and communicative activities, reduce the learning stresses and anxieties, and provide repeated lessons as often as necessary. Those abilities will promote second language learners' learning motivation. Through various communicative and interactive activities, computer technology can help second language learners, strengthen their linguistic skills, affect their learning attitude, and build their self-instruction strategies and self-confidence.

The computer can promote learning interaction between learners and teachers. When computer technology combines with the Internet, it creates a channel for students to obtain a huge amount of human experience and guides students to enter the "Global Community". In this

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way, students not only can extend their personal views, thoughts, and experience, but also can learn to live in the real world.

Warschauer (2000) indicated that the random access to Web pages would break the linear flow of instructions. By sending E-mails and joining newsgroups, second language learners can also communicate with people they have never met before and interact with their own teachers or classmates. Shy or inhibited learners can greatly benefit from the individualized technology-learning environment, and studious learners can proceed at their own pace to achieve higher levels.

The writing process is another area where computers have added a great deal of value. Some programs help students in the pre-writing stage to generate and outline ideas. Most word-processors now come with spelling checkers, giving weak spellers some help in finding their errors and recognizing the correct spelling from a list of options (Gündüz, 2005).

Computers are very useful for teaching composition. In the past, when a writing assignment is given, students have to write their draft first and then retype or copy it again. Writing is not only time-consuming, but cannot also easily be stored for use afterwards. But with computers, students can use a word processing program to write their compositions and make corrections easily so that they do not have to retype or copy their final draft. They can also edit their writing before they turn it in to the teacher, and then to revise the composition based on their teacher's comments. The teachers can check students' writing, make corrections and provide suggestions, and even show it to other students. Furthermore, computers can help both language teachers and learners keep their writings and records for further use.

Further, pronunciation work in particular has benefited from CALL. Most pronunciation programs now incorporate some sort of voice recording and playback to let students compare their recording with a model. Most computer programs stimulate some discussion among group of learners even if oral practice is not the main purpose of the activity. Higgins suggests that the

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computer's main value is as an environment, which allows language experiments to be carried out (Higgins, 1995).

Most drills now include games, as well, using the power of the computer and competition for collaboration toward a goal, the fun factor, to motivate language learning. These programs provide a varying amount of instructions along with the games. The other advantages of CALL are (Warschauer &Healey, 1998):

• Multimodal practice with feedback,

• Individualization in a large class,

• Pair or small group work on projects,

• The fun factor,

• Variety in the resources available and learning styles used,

• Exploratory learning with large amounts of language data,

• Real-life skill building in computer use.

Moreover, Gündüz (2005) points out that CALL programs, besides teaching a foreign language, will provide the learner with some sort of computer literacy, which is becoming essential in our modern society and which could be of great help in future training and career prospects. The difference between the computer and other pieces of equipment, such as tape recorders and film projectors is its interactive capability as highlighted in the quotation below (Kenning &Kenning, 1983:2):

"The unique property of the computer as a medium for education is its ability to interact with the student. Books and tape recording can tell a student what the rules are and what the right solutions are, but they cannot analyze the specific mistake

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the student has made and react in a manner which leads him not only to correct his

mistake, but also to understand the principles behind the correct solution."

Therefore, the computer

• gives individual attention to the learner and replies to him/her. Traditionally, it acts as a tutor, assessing the learner's reply, recording it, pointing out mistakes, and giving explanations;

• guides the learner towards the correct answer;

• offers interactive learning and can assess the learner's response;

• can repeat an activity without any of the errors arising from repetition by humans;

• can handle a very large volume of interaction and can deliver to the student feedback;

• can accommodate different speeds of learning; and

•can impose limits on the time available for answering questions (for testing purposes).

Demerits of CALL

There are still many doubts whether computers can serve well in teaching language and whether they can provide learners with efficient and effective practice. According to Gündüz (2005), although computers in language classes have an important role in language learning process, there are some disadvantages of CALL. CALL requires computers and software as well as other equipment all of which are expensive. Once computer laboratories are established, it is not possible to re-equip them for several years. There are many limitations of equipment and facilities, and many teachers may not be able to do what they want to do.

Besides the merits that computers bring to foreign language teaching and learning, computers are not free from weakness. Computers are quite expensive and the upgraded version replaces the older one very fast. Although the prices of computers have come down, the older

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computers become obsolete so fast that replacements require expenditure, which make them unaffordable for the majority of people. It is thus a big problem for schools and universities, which cannot afford many computers to keep pace with newer versions. Computer hardware, software, and programs are continually updated with the technological development, which puts more pressure on educators and learners who want to catch up with new technology. Some scholars argue that CALL increases educational costs and harm the equity of education. When computers become a basic requirement for students to purchase, low-budget schools and low-income students usually would not afford computers. It will cause unfair educational conditions for the poor schools and students.

Computers are not very good at teaching the teachers, and the software does not run the lesson for the teacher. The teacher can adapt, improve and compensate for shortcomings in the software. It can take longer for the teacher to learn a piece of CALL software than handle a textbook, because s/he has to work through it, rather than just skimming through it. The teacher must feel comfortable in the computer lab and with the medium in order to be able to use it effectively. In addition, it is important to use the appropriate program for the students' level. If it is not correct for their level, the activity cannot be prevented from becoming a chaos of uncertainty (Higgins, 1988).

Computers can only do what they are programmed to do. Computers, after all, are machines. Complicated and powerful as they are, they still cannot take the place of teachers. They cannot communicate meaningfully with the users because they do not recognize natural language fully. They can only respond to certain commands that are already programmed in advance. Thus, many programs fail to meet users' individual demands. Second language learners' learning situations are varying nature, dynamic and ever changing. Due to the limitations of computer's artificial intelligence, computer technology is unable to deal with learners' unexpected learning problems and response to learners' questions immediately as the teachers do.

Both teachers and students need training to learn to use computers. Acceptance of the new technologies is an important barrier for language teachers and learners because many of them

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may not be interested in computers and the Internet. They may usually prefer to teach in a traditional classroom because to teach CALL lessons requires them to learn many new things about computers and the Internet besides language. For students, it will take them a long time and a lot of energy to learn the basic skills for using a computer before they can even begin to use them to study a subject. Many teachers do not have enough technical knowledge about computers and the Internet, and new programs and software are developing so fast that teachers sometimes feel they need to learn a new program.

No matter how simple computers and software are, students need to learn a great deal to use them. Some students can never really adjust to using computers. They are never comfortable with them, so these students often make mistakes. On some occasions, the computer programs used with learners or demonstrated to teachers can be overtaken by a power cut, or mechanical failure. Therefore, teachers should be trained in the use of computers.

Computers cannot handle unexpected situations due to technological barriers. Language teachers sometimes have barriers, which are related to the system, such as viruses, connection problems or problems caused by the students unconsciously. Computers may have technical problems and then may result breakdowns though it does not happen frequently. However, a breakdown in the middle of classroom teaching may leave the teachers embarrassed, and waste a lot of time. A breakdown during students' autonomous learning may result in a loss of data and works, and students would then have to do some exercises from the beginning again because everything is programmed in advance. This is really a big challenge for students who are not very skillful with computers.

Some other demerits can be listed as follows:

 • Learners who do not have prior experience in using the keyboard may waste a lot of valuable time identifying in order to print their responses;

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• Working with computers normally means that the learners work in isolation. This obviously does not help in developing normal communication among the learners, which is a crucial aim in any language lesson. Suggestion about organizing pair work around the computer have been impressive only in theory, but in practice learners tend, for convenience, to revert to their mother tongue in discussing their strategies and responses;

• Computers are not suitable to all the activities that go on in the classroom;

• Computers cannot cope with the unexpected happenings and ambiguity;

• Computers cannot conduct open ended dialogues and cannot give feedback to open ended questions;

• The time and effort required to develop CALL programs could be considerable, and thus their cost and effectiveness becomes questionable. It requires competence in the target subject area, pedagogical skills and computing experience;

• It is more tiring to read from a screen than from a printed text; or to scroll the screen than turn over the page (Mirescu: 1997; Stokes: 1999; Kenning and Kenning: 1983; Ahmed, Corbett, Rogers & Sussex: 1985, Gündüz, 2005).

Conclusion

Recent past has shown a boom in interest for using computers in the teaching of foreign language and its learning. Besides being powerful and stimulating aids, computers offer great potential for language learning. With the great development of computers and internet, more and more second language teachers and learners are using computers for foreign language teaching and learning today. After we have discussed the merits and demerits of computer assisted learning and teaching for current foreign language learning, we can find it necessary to apply computers in current second language classroom, although it still has demerits and weaknesses. Therefore, when we try to apply CALL programs to enhance their teaching or to help student

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learning, we should realize what the merits and demerits are in current CALL programs in order to avoid misemploying CALL programs and get its maximum benefits for our EFL teaching and learning.

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