The Varied Horizon of Multimedia & Web Tools for English Language Acquisition in the Information Age

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Technology for Language Learning

Today computers have become so widespread in schools and homes and their uses have expanded so dramatically that the majority of language teachers must now begin to think about the implications of computers for language learning. Computer assisted Language Learning or CALL is different things to different people.

To some it is the use of text editors in the process of writing a homework assignment. To others it is surfing the internet for strengthening a language through tasks and exercises. Whatever be the motivation and the mode of study, to any enthusiastic learner, it brings the welcome air of novelty to break the boredom of the language classroom. It is the promised land of language teaching and learning, with learners acquiring language knowledge and skills effortlessly from the machine, and the teacher walking benignly among workstations and laptops, offering help and guidance when needed.

This paper discusses some fruitful activities, which can be assigned for the learners to equip them with better speaking skills and a sharper vocabulary and to enable them to retain in memory the words that they have learnt.

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Why is Technology Preferred?

Opportunities for learning with multimedia are changing the focus of course delivery. Designing a course claims more importance. Language teachers are generally considered to be weak in technology. At the same time, technically sound people may not be good in language expressions. Hence, a prudent and balanced combination of Language & technology should be more effective and interesting.

The main objectives for introducing technology-assisted language learning system are the following:

(i) To improve teaching and learning by using a computer as a tool or using any technical gadgets can enrich existing teaching practices and open up new ways of presenting linguistic information.

(ii) To promote a self-determined learning instrument that can be used collectively for many learners.

(iii) To increase motivation by supporting a decision making and problem-solving activity.

(iv) To have an effect on the cognitive level by providing a combinatorial environment. In order to operate in this environment, learners should learn how to handle and evaluate different types of non-linear information.

(v) To help the learners acquire a certain degree of computer literacy. This knowledge may be a valuable ingredient in their curriculum, and may help them to cope more effectively with the demands of their scholarly and professional life.

(vi) To give access to information by introducing basic features of information technology. Access to information would eventually lead to a greater individual freedom and to the breakdown of rigid and standardized classroom practices.

Computer Applications versus Traditional Approaches

For some acquisition tasks, computers can provide distinct advantages over more traditional approaches. The use of a computer for listening exercises often provides not only sound, but also visual input providing students with more contextual clues. Similarly speaking skills can be enriched incredibly. Especially in the field of pronunciation, students can employ a computer to record themselves to compare their pronunciation to a target pronunciation. This can be repeated endlessly with self-pacing until a student is satisfied with his/her result. These pronunciation exercises are often combined with

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visual aids (such as intonation graphs) to help the student recognize how his/her pronunciation appears when compared to the target pronunciation.

Multimedia as an Integral Part of Learning

Multimedia is usually recorded and played, displayed or accessed by information content processing devices, such as computerized and electronic devices, but can also be part of a live performance. Multimedia is an integral part of learning today. It has become part and parcel of our life, whether it be through CD ROM or with Internet or blogs or mails. Modern students spend more time with computers or laptops, which are even freely issued in colleges. A CD or a CDROM is quite limited in its contents, whereas the Internet is not limited. Its horizon is ever expanding and learners can never feel satiated. Due to the impact and influence of information technology on society and education, computer-assisted language learning is becoming the trend today in foreign language teaching.

The Multimedia Lab

The Multimedia Lab has an edge over the traditional audio-lingual language lab, though it lab shares some features with it. The teacher can broadcast the teaching materials by playing audio tapes, video-tapes, or CDs. The multimedia lab has some features that traditional language lab cannot compete.

First, a traditional language lab does not have the function of video on demand. Students can choose an English teaching program they are interested in and learn on their pace of learning. The English learning program will just serve the student's desired goal of learning. In one sense, students easily get the individual attention from the computer.

Second, the function of a multimedia lab is multiple. It can not only assume the role of a traditional language lab, but also offer teachers more powerful teaching tools with the aid of modern computer technology.

Computer assisted language learning can now provide endless opportunities for interaction with a rich set of media types, characters and cultural information. It can also promote greater autonomy among learners, and is one of few methods yet discovered and is different from the unavoidable rote learning aspect of language acquisition, experienced by second language learners. It also aims to provide a relevant, challenging and non-threatening environment which motivated students to communicate, to reinforce their learning, and to become familiar with situations and cultural notions that may be encountered in everyday life.

What Do We Need?

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To achieve these aims, carefully designed and selected media clips can also be integrated into a wide range of exercises and interaction styles, including:

- crosswords
- word puzzles
- written and aural comprehension exercises
- quizzes
- multi-choice questions

Scope for Innovative Activities

Music, video and audio taped interviews, everyday conversations, shots of famous locations, architecture, artifacts, typical local scenes and characters can all be used to present information, that will lead to communication exchanges. Collection of these materials is not very costly and it is not a time consuming process also. Once we involve complicated and steep learning procedures such as video capture, sound production, graphics work, live interview techniques, copyright clearance and complex programming, it may lead to expenditure risks. But, the end product is infinitely re-usable in flexible formats, needs no further copyright clearance for any purpose, and may prove to be commercially viable.

Huang in his "Communicative Language Teaching in a Multimedia Language Lab" (http://cc.fy.edu.tw) categorized computer simulations into two types: instruction-oriented and fun-oriented.

	Primary purpose	**Computer-human interaction**	**User control**
Instruction-oriented	Teaching & learning	Unbalanced	Limited
Fun-oriented	Motivational & entertaining	Balanced	Multiple

The instruction-oriented computer simulation aims at teaching or helping people learn. Consequently, the primary purpose of this type is giving instructions and placing the responsibility of learning on the users for most of the time and constantly monitoring them to see whether they have successfully achieved the goal. On the contrary, the primary purpose of fun-oriented simulations is to be both motivational and entertaining. Instruction in a particular subject is not the primary concern in fun-oriented simulations.

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This type of computer simulation tends to motivate users to get interested in the simulation itself. Entertainment is the goal. As a result, both user and computer share equal opportunities to receive instructions from and respond to each other. Furthermore, the user has multiple choices for taking control. Fewer restrictions are imposed. The user's move could lead to another multiplicity of choices and the prompting of an unexpected response from the computer.

However, the two categories of computer simulations are not mutually exclusive of each other. Rather, they would be better regarded as the two ends of a continuum. All computer simulation activities fall somewhere in between. In other words, it is very possible that a computer simulation possesses both instruction-oriented and fun-oriented features.

Response from Students

Students respond to information differently. That will make learning interesting and teaching easier. Teachers can innovatively use some combination of lecture, text, hands-on laboratory and images, simulations, video, audio and other multimedia material and can concoct them into a single, coherent environment for conveying information. For a second language learner, English movies with subtitles, downloaded from websites or extracted from channels like HBO, Star Movies, etc., can be broadcast in a networked multimedia lab. Subtitles will help learners learn a foreign language easily.

Otherwise the teacher should give an introduction or the text can be given as a visible copy, so that the learner will follow the flow of the visual. Contemporary materials which are of interest to the student should be selectively given to enhance fast learning.

Course design can be facilitated with a mixture of videos, typing or answering and auto evaluation can be done. If the lab is web-assisted, students can be given access to websites that have puzzles or texts for language acquisition. eg. Power vocabulary in msn.com, quizzes in various sites etc. Computer-based multimedia also helps students to develop technical and research skills that they cannot get from reading a textbook.

The Utility of Web Tools

With the advent of the Internet and the multiple formats that can be communicated over the World Wide Web, we now have several new and exciting ways to present information. The Web allows the incorporation of animation, moving pictures, and sound into lessons, which extends our abilities to present materials that encourage student interaction with the subject matter. Pictures and animations help bring to life language principles, and multimedia allows students to take a more active role in learning. Multimedia presentations keep students alert and focused. They can watch the live

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characters in action, zoom up whatever they prefer, and use a mouse or keyboard to navigate images, simulations and interactive material.

One of the advantages of using multimedia is to convey information quickly and effectively to all students – and keep them interested in learning and can cultivate their listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities, which are the final teaching aim — developing the students' English intercommunicative ability.

Enhancing Oral Communicative Skills

Doing grammar and vocabulary exercises can be highly exciting when done in a computer assisted lab. Cloze exercises done by the students will impart confidence in students.

A variety of tasks including identifying the right word within a stipulated time and filing up the missing letters in a word, finding the odd man out.

Matching the words and their synonyms are some of the tasks that would promote the interest of the students in vocabulary acquisition.

Memorizing the words and their synonyms will not enrich one's vocabulary. The words have to be imbibed into the learner's mind through constant usage.

The teacher is a wizard who can concoct interesting formulae to teach vocabulary and to render students to use the newly learned words and phrases in daily spoken language.

What Can Teachers Do?

On the part of the teachers, when they have ample access to computers, acquisition, production, and retrieval of prepared materials become easy for them. As all files are available digitally, giving exercises for the students and conducting tests become very easy. Time taken for these activities also is very less compared to our traditional classrooms. Classroom management becomes simple and effective. When we incorporate computers into teaching, Internet comes before us as an inevitable tool of information. Hence, a lot of reading materials are available for the benefit of the learners. It appeases the appetite of the knowledge sensitive students. Gathering data and information becomes easier. In short, using web - assisted computers enhances good teaching and fast learning.

Advantages

The following are some of the advantages enjoyed through multimedia assisted Language learning in improving the capacity of the learners in speaking:

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- It allows and encourages students to generate original utterances rather than just manipulating prefabricated language
- It is flexible to a variety of student responses and it avoids telling students they are wrong
- If the responses are incorrect, the program takes remedial action by showing examples or breaking down the task into smaller parts. At any time the student can control the situation by asking what to do, asking what to say, asking to hear again what was just said, requesting for a translation, or controlling the level of difficulty of the lesson.
- It uses the target language exclusively and creates an environment in which the learner feels natural using the target language, both on and off the screen; this helps in enhancing the speaking skills of the students
- It fosters interactivity - both learner-computer and learner-learner skills are easily integrated, since the variety of media makes it natural to combine reading, writing, speaking and listening in a single activity.
- students have great control over their learning, since they can not only go at their own pace but even on their own individual path, going forward and backwards to different parts of the program, honing in on particular aspects and skipping other aspects altogether.
- While the main lesson is in the foreground, students can have access to a variety of background links which will allow them rapid access to more links. We call this hypermedia, in which the systems are backed up with internet connectivity.

Situation based Utterances – Imparting Emotional Intelligence

One prominent advantage here is that the choice of situation can be from the teacher or from the student himself or from the computer software, which can be of use to the trainer, in case of need. There can be situations given which arouse the learner to speak out on his own and promote his communicative competence and emotional intelligence. The following set of dilemmas feature the learner to give out his responses in a few sentences.

(i)   Your car has a puncture, and you have just discovered that your spare tyre is flat. You are alone on a lonely road. Night is falling.

(ii)   You have put on a lot of weight, none of your clothes fit, and your doctor says you must diet. But you feel happy and you enjoy your food.

The student can make his own suggestions and speak out or he can write down. Both forms can be assessed by the teacher and corrections can be made. Regarding this, Penny Ur observes that "these learning processes are certainly more interesting to do than purely form-based ones and the interest of the learners can be further increased by the introduction of piquant or amusing subject matter or game-like techniques" (9).

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Application of Tailor-made Software

Software that provide the scope for face to face conversations, telephonic conversations and role plays can be utilized in the computer Laboratory. Restricted dialogues in which the response of one speaker is already given will cultivate the capacity to fill up the dialogue of the other speaker in the learner. This may be done orally or in the written form.

When spoken, the utterances can be recorded and played again along with the response of the computer, in the form of a dialogue. There is also the possibility of reverse 'ping-pong', where the student initiates the exchange, and the computer responds. It is an advantage that the teacher can monitor all the utterances of the students and the computer.

There are several drawbacks that can be attributed to software production that plays an important role in multimedia learning and teaching. Software venders use the language as per their wish and cause an irrepairable damage to student community. Errors occur in vocabulary, change of cases – upper and lower, punctuation marks, spacing between words etc. These things should be rectified and if necessary, the teachers can offer an error-free text or software for learning.

Learner-centred Training

The greatest advantage for the students is for the shy and hesitant learners who feel diffident in facing the challenges given out by a human teacher in front of them. George Yule uses the term 'affective filter' to refer to the barriers in language acquisition that result from negative feelings or experiences or from feeling self conscious (Quoted in Burton, 128). As proposed by Krashen and Terrell, an environment conducive to acquisition can be easily and comfortably created in a computer assisted learning center – "with low anxiety level, good rapport with the teacher and with learner-centered, friendly support from the technical gadgets" (192).

But as pointed out by Garrett (1991), "the use of the computer does not constitute a method". Rather, it is a "medium in which a variety of methods, approaches, and pedagogical philosophies may be implemented" (75). The effectiveness of multimedia assisted teaching process cannot reside in the medium itself but only in how it is put to use. Those who expect to get magnificent results simply from the purchase of expensive and elaborate systems are likely to be disappointed. But those who put computer technology to use in the service of good pedagogy will undoubtedly find ways to enrich their educational program and the learning opportunities of their students. Once learning becomes an exciting play task, acquiring mastery over the language is not an unachieved dream.

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Language Acquisition for Survival

In this age of globalization, there is an incredible need and demand for proficiency in English. English language is an insurgent weapon to penetrate into the world of knowledge and technology ought to be used to improve the communicative skills of the students. Teacher-oriented teaching makes the students only to "know" English. It is technology-oriented learning that makes the students "practise" the skills of learning English language. Technology infuses confidence into the student. Student initiative can be easily achieved, when technology is employed in teaching. Special coaching and teaching may be offered as a supplementary for the teachers who are handling English that is being taught technically.

Keeping up with technology is the most effective means of ensuring quality education. Using technology can even eliminate the difference between the rural and the urban students and the distance between the East and the West too. Students, especially those who undergo technical and professional education should be constantly exposed to such situations where they work with computer-aided or web-assisted ways of learning English. Only then, they can act interactively and intellectually and thereby empower themselves academically too.

No matter how powerful the modern education technology is, it is only a kind of technology, and it only provides a kind of possibility. It isn't the proved solution for all the problems and we can't depend on it excessively. We should scan the role of a teacher and a student in a class again. Teachers are mentors and can inspire the students with a strong desire to learn a language. A teacher's idea is far more important than a teaching method.

As Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) have justly pointed out, integration and implementation of any educational innovation into existing practices depends heavily on the teachers. The integration of the educational software in the classroom environment requires strategic and careful teaching. It should be carefully planned and it should be supported both by a technical infrastructure and by a continuing professional development of the teachers. We should make best use of its advantages and bypass its disadvantages.

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