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Conveniences and Complexities of Computer-Aided Language Learning

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Abstract

Computer Assisted Language Learning is a relatively new and rapidly evolving academic field that exposes the role of information and technology involving in language learning and teaching. Computers provide excellent ambience conducive to second language learning in any aspect of the target language, be it vocabulary, composition, pronunciation or other linguistic and pragmatic skills. But many English teachers believe that the use of computer software and programs cannot become the premier part of their arena. Some suggestions to reconcile these opposing viewpoints are suggested.

An ideal CALL courseware remains not an alternative but an extended application in reinforcing classroom activities. Eventually, CALL will enable students to receive individualized attention from both teachers and machines to a degree that has hitherto been impossible.

Key words: Computer Assisted Language Learning – Conveniences in using CALL – Complexities in utilizing CALL facilities – Complexities or Challenges of the transition period

Introduction

The paper focuses on:

> i. Computer Assisted Language Learning – a premier tool to impart language skills.
> ii. Conveniences in using CALL for mediation between teacher and students.
> iii. Complexities in utilizing CALL facilities and how to deal with the same.

What is CALL?

CALL, Computer Assisted Language Learning, is a relatively new and rapidly evolving academic field that exposes the role of information and technology involving in language learning and teaching.

Evolution of the field can be broadly categorized into three phases, namely, Behaviorist, Communicative and Integrative.

The Uses of Computer in Different Phases of Learning

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In the Behaviorist phase, the computer is used as a vehicle for delivering varied instructional materials to provide a lot of information to take the role as a tutor.

In the Communicative phase, the computer is used for practicing skills with simulated programmes and software providing students with a greater degree of choice, control and interaction.

In the Integrative phase, multimedia and Internet are used to enable Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing skills to be combined in a single integrated activity with the learner exercising a high degree of control over the path that they follow through the material.

Reluctance to Use CALL

Computers provide excellent ambience conducive to second language learning in any aspect of the target language, be it vocabulary, composition, pronunciation or other linguistic and pragmatic skills. But many English teachers believe that the use of computer software and programs cannot become the premier part of their arena.

Conveniences Provided by CALL

i. **Autonomy**:

Students of the same class never have the same standard, interest, background and capacity of learning. CALL provides self-instructional tasks that let them master the prerequisite skills and course objectives at a speed and level as per their own needs and capacities.

Various materials can be selectively provided to various learners based on their speed and mastery through the computers. Students try to acquire language skills using those materials according their interests, needs and capacities. They need not compare themselves with other students to feel inferior or superior to others, but can only concentrate on their internal learning practice. Some students concentrate on basics, some others practice on their weak areas of previous learning, and some other students learn new areas like stress and so on. Thus, CALL acts as a tutor and guides the learner towards the personalized learning while adapting the material to their own needs. CALL provides individualized instruction.

ii. **Not Mere Imitation**:

Generally, language is learnt by imitating the model speakers, learning and using by trial and error method. Earlier, the teachers in language classrooms were concentrating on practicing through repetition of exercises to memorize language techniques. Students were forcibly doing the activities either with internal or external motivation. CALL provides activities with unending variety to impart language skills making language learning more interesting, entertaining and attractive.

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The activities include (a) using the computer programs to stimulate conversations, writing or critical thinking and (b) using the computer as a tool or workhorse. Examples include word processors, spelling and grammar checkers. High speed networks provide access to authentic cultural material to familiarize themselves with the culture of the native users of the target language.

Multimedia, a powerful combination of text, graphics, cartoons, animated graphics, and sound helps the teacher facilitate language learning environment in CALL laboratory. Tedious drills of various elements of the language now become interesting and the students recognize their present level and try to reach the desired level in using language skills with the force of imitation.

iii. **Learning at one's own style**:

Every student is a unique person and has own ways of acquiring language skills. The pedagogical method used by teacher may not be palatable and interesting to every learner. It's impossible to teachers to personally identify and teach every student in their own learning style. CALL facilitates providing materials compatible with various learning styles.

Students have a choice to choose suitable materials according to their need, interest and style of learning and learn various dimensions of the target language.

As students use the material that suits their own style of learning, they get involved and find the learning easier and interesting.

To cite an instance, the computer can provide an exciting rapid-fire drill for one student and a calm, slow-paced mode of presentation for another.

iv. **Instantaneous response to the activities makes learning faster**:

Students amend their previous erroneous practices, habits and usages through teacher's corrections. Due to various reasons, responses/corrections to the students' performance are often delayed and at times ignored. Teachers also may not show consistency in their evaluation process and the phenomenon of amending mistakes/errors gets slower. Here, in the CALL laboratory, the corrections of students' mistakes are made instantaneously with the helping hand of technology. The learning process is swift with spontaneous corrections and consolidating the correct basics in the language.

v. **Error Analysis**:

Computer database can be used by the instructor to classify and differentiate the type of general errors as well as errors committed by learners on account of the influence of their first language (as well as any other language they've already learned to some extent). And thus the teachers can determine the most common errors cross-linguistically and more specifically, the particular form of a particular error type within a particular language group.

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One such study conducted reveals interesting findings, for example, that in subject-verb agreement errors the base form of verb was over generalized incorrectly more often than the -s form by all speakers.

Also, Telugu writers typically omit the articles a/an more often than others. A computer can analyze the specific mistakes the students make and can react in a different way from the usual teacher. This leads the student not only to self-correction, but also to understand the principles behind the correct solutions.

vi. **Guided and Free Writing**:

A word-processor in the computer can be very effective in teaching guided/free writing activities. The ability to create and manipulate text easily is the principle on which the word-processor programmes are founded. In this manner, the word-processor encourages practice in guided or free writing activities together with a number of sub-skills which comprise the writing process. Aspects of paragraphing, register, style, cohesion, rhetorical structure, lexical choice and expression can all receive attention without requiring the user to learn different programmes.

The advantage is that the teacher can direct the students' writing without exerting total and rigid control, allowing for freedom of expression within certain boundaries. Insight into grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, can also be developed in the CALL laboratory.

Complexities in Using CALL

i. **Students' comparison**

Teacher vs. Computer: In spite of its glaring merits, the prospect of CALL has troubled teachers more. Perhaps, the major cause of their worry might have developed from the basic problem of accessibility.

Often the computers have been kept in Science or Mathematics department causing a real and psychological distance in the minds of the English teachers.

Nevertheless, many see computer as a threat not only in terms of its power to replace the traditional skills, which the language teachers promote, but also the teacher himself.

Furthermore, the teacher may seen rolled down to the position of a facilitator/moderator instead of being a sole dependable guide. In addition, the computer-student interactive learning not only allows the possibility of role changes, but also alters concentration from the teacher to the students' activities and eventually to students. That is, the students literally turn their back to the teachers, and silence is now on the part of the teacher until called for assistance. Yet this role reversal can be exploited, since, it allows the classroom to become far more "learning centered" than" learner centered".

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ii. CALL versus Conventional Class:
Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) contrasted with Language Learning in conventional class, demands certain extra-skills such as typography, graphic design, or paper making and the lack of which panics the teacher and the taught alike.

The differences of the settings in traditional class and computer-supported class are illustrated as follows:

	Traditional Class	Computer-Supported Class
Lay out	Matrix	Matrix / rectangular along the walls
Teaching tools	Blackboard, chalk, audiotapes and projectors.	Computers, LAN, hardware, projectors
Materials	Text book, handouts	Software in audio and video form
Communicative activities	Imaginative role-play with teachers guidelines	Simulated activities by imitating real life situations
Student-teacher interaction	Personal, many-one	Personal, one-many
Role of student	Passive, acts as per the directions of the teacher	Active, takes more decisions during the activities
Role of teacher	Mentor to run the class	Facilitator of methods and materials

Problem or Challenge?

Yet, these complexities should be seen in the backdrop of a developmental stage of computerization of individuals and institutions and as a temporary phenomenon. The next generation of teachers and learners will be part of a computer generation. They will take for granted the skills demanded by computer technology and handle it as coolly as switching on a tape recorder or watching a television.

Similarly, the learners change their attitude while attending CALL laboratory in nearer future and this makes the teacher exploit the situations completely through apt material and methods.

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The teachers would ensure that they are the ones in control of educational software by becoming involved in the development process and rejecting those programmes which do not serve their needs. For that reason, the onus is on the teachers to update themselves with the upcoming developments in the concerned field to extend their teaching potentialities.

Conclusion

An ideal CALL courseware remains not an alternative but an extended application in reinforcing classroom activities. Apart from relying on the ability of educators to create suitable CALL courseware, the effectiveness of CALL depends on the teachers' readiness to adopt new attitudes and approaches towards language teaching.

The teachers should avoid being skeptical about the use of computer in language teaching and begin to re-evaluate their methods in the light of computer's influential teaching potential and boldly address the present day challenges.

Computer can assist teachers if it is seen not as a replacement for their work but as a supplement to it. By the way, the computer, will not replace the language teachers, but, used creatively to relieve them from tedious tasks.

Eventually, computers will enable students to receive individualized attention from both teachers and machines to a degree that has hitherto been impossible.

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