COMPUTER ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING (CALL)
IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF INTERACTIVE APPROACH: ADVANTAGES AND APPREHENSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

To begin with the question whether computers really assist second language learning, many teachers who have never touched a computer tend to respond with an emphatic no; whereas, the overwhelming number of teachers who give computers a try find that they are indeed useful in second language learning. No doubt, computers make excellent teaching tools, especially in teaching languages in any aspect, be it vocabulary, grammar, composition, pronunciation, or other linguistic and pragmatic-communicative skills. And the major benefits offered by computer in enhancing language acquisition apparently outweigh its limitations.

ADVANTAGES

Interest and Motivation
It is often necessary, in a language learning classroom, to provide repeated practice to meet important objectives. Because this can be boring, painful, and frustrating, many students lose interest and motivation to learn foreign languages. CALL programmes present the learner with a novelty. They teach the language in different and more interesting, attractive ways and present language through games, animated graphics and problem-solving techniques. As a result even tedious drills become more interesting. In fact, CALL motivates the students to go beyond the point of initial mastery and practice activity until they become automatic.

Individualisation
Many students need additional time and individualised practice to meet learning objectives. The computer offers students self-instructional tasks that let them master prerequisite skills and course

objectives at a speed and level dictated by their own needs. Besides, additional programmes can be made available for students who master objectives quickly. These additional programmes can provide more intense study of the same objectives, proceed to higher objectives, or integrate the objectives covered in the unit with other objectives. In this manner, a computer gives individual attention to the learner and replies immediately to questions or commands. It acts as a tutor and guides the learner towards the correct answer while adapting the material to his performance.

A Compatible Learning Style

Students differ in their preferred styles of learning. Many students seem to learn much more effectively when they are able to use a compatible learning style than when they are forced to employ an incompatible one. Serious conflicts may arise when a teacher employs a style that is incompatible with a student's. In this regard, the computer can be used for adapting instruction to the unique styles of individual students. 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.

Optimal Use of Learning Time

By using the computer, students are often able to use their Academic Learning Time (ALT) more fruitfully. Academic Learning Time (ALT) is the amount of time a student spends attending to relevant academic tasks while performing those tasks with a high rate of success. For example, not all the time officially scheduled for studying a foreign language is likely to be allocated to it. If an hour is assigned to working on a topic, but the teacher devotes five minutes at the beginning of the session to returning papers and five minutes at the end to reading announcements, then only fifty minutes have been allocated to working on the topic. Scheduled time merely sets an upper limit on allocated time. Likewise, allocated time merely sets the upper limit to engaged time, which refers to the amount of time students actively attend to the subject matter under consideration. Even though fifty minutes may be allocated to studying a topic in French class, students may stare out the window or talk to their neighbours instead of pursuing the assigned activity. Therefore, even when they are actively engaged in studying the foreign language, students learn effectively only when they are performing at a high rate of success. This smaller amount of time is the factor that is most strongly related to the amount of learning that takes place (Lareau 1985:65-67). Computers enhance second/foreign language academic learning time by permitting learners to acquire specific information and practice specific skills and by helping students develop basic tools of learning which they can apply in a wide variety of settings. This also subverts the relationship between time and traditional instruction. Traditional instruction holds time constant and allows achievement to vary within a group. Computer-assisted learning reverses this relationship by holding achievement constant and letting the time students spend in pursuit of the objectives vary.

Immediate Feedback

Learners receive maximum benefit from feedback only when it is supplied immediately. Their interest and receptivity declines when the information on their performance is delayed. Yet, for various reasons, classroom feedback is often delayed and at times denied. A deferment of positive feedback, though important to act as encouragement and reinforcement, may not harm the progress of the learners. Nonetheless, any delay in offering negative feedback, the knowledge that one is wrong, will become

crucial. A blissfully ignorant student may continue mispronouncing a word or applying a misconception before discovering the nature of this error. In such case, the computer can give instantaneous feedback and help the learner ward off his misconception at the initial stage itself. In addition to this, the computer can look for certain types of errors and give specific feedback, such as, "It looks as if you forgot the article."

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 the first language. And thus determine the most common errors cross-linguistically and more specifically, the particular form of a particular error type within a particular language group. One such study conducted reveals interesting findings, for example, that in subject-verb agreement errors the base form of verb was over generalised incorrectly more often than the -s form by all speakers. Also, Chinese writers typically omitted the articles a/an more often than the (Dalgish 1987:81-82). A computer can thus analyse the specific mistakes the student has made and can react in a different way from the usual teacher--this leads the student not only to self-correction, but also to understanding the principles behind the correct solution.

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 student's writing without exerting total and rigid control, allowing for freedom of expression within certain bounds. Insights into grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, can also be developed.

Pre-determined to Process Syllabus

One major advantage in using a microprocessor is that it can enhance the learning process from a pre-determined syllabus to an emerging/process syllabus. Even the ordinary 'fill-in-the-blanks' type of monotonous exercise on paper can be made an exciting task on the screen in the self-access mode, where the students themselves choose their own material. CALL thus facilitates the synthesis of the pre-planned syllabus and learner syllabuses "through a decision making process undertaken by teacher and learners together" (Breen 1986:51).

Other Prospects

As students and teachers become more sophisticated in their use of such CALL software, more complicated use of these packages become possible. For instance, the ability of the computer to handle data, and allow the students to become computational linguists, is very powerful (Hardistry 1988:42-43). The experiential use of Wide Area Network (WAN) and Local Area Network (LAN) can reveal unexplored teaching materials and untouched learning methods. By effective use of linking computer with internet, authentic material can be brought directly into the classroom. A reading text can be done using that day's news item or weather forecast than using a news clipping of the previous year. The

topicality of the issue can generate lot of interest and create authenticity of purpose. Correspondingly, the facility of LAN can be very useful for the practising of writing pithy telegraphic and telex messages. Of course, the joy and the excitement involved in the online communication process, both local and international, is an additional increment one gets from screen-based learning!

APPREHENSIONS

Man versus Machine

In spite of its glaring merits, the prospect of computer-assisted language learning 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 Maths department causing a real and psychological distance in the minds of the Arts faculty. 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 its eventual replacement of the teacher himself. Furthermore, shifting the control centre from the authoritarian teacher to the need-based learner and accepting the humble role of a facilitator/moderator instead of being a veritable dictator does not come easy for the traditionally clad chalk-talk teacher. In addition, the computer-student interactive learning not only allows the possibility of role changes, but also the potential for role-reversal, endangered by physical reversal by 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 centred" (Hardistry 1988:39). This term rather than learner-centred, has been used, to indicate that the central aim of the language lesson is to enable students to learn.

The Language Lab versus Computer

Another reason why teachers and sanctioning authorities alike are uncertain about the use of computers in language learning is that computers too, like language lab and other technological innovations, despite large investments, may remain unused and stored in some dark and abandoned room. After all, language laboratories in many countries fell into disuse, as they were too tied to one particular form of methodology, which limited the awareness of the potential. One real danger is that the computer could be used, like the language lab, as an instrument of Skinnerian behaviourism to facilitate the structuralist approach with an emphasis on "correctness," negating its flexibility and potential as a teaching aid to liberate the imaginations of the learners (Moore 1986:18-19). In this perspective, often CALL courseware has been restricted to drill and practice, with the screen equivalent to the textbook. Much software, like a textbook, is static both in presentation and in content. Another major criticism of CALL software is the lock-step design of the lessons. This, in turn, means that CALL software is missing a chance to exploit the computer's potential, with the result that computer power is not released to the student adequately.

CALL versus TALL

Computer-Assisted Language Learning(CALL) contrasted with Textbook-Assisted Language Learning (TALL), demands certain extra-skills such as typography, graphic design, or paper making and the lack

of which panics the teacher and the taught alike. For instance, an inadvertent typographical error on the part of the student input may be classified wrong although the grammar of the student's answer is correct. Further, in terms of communication of ideas, a book is a means of communication between the author and the reader. In the same way, the computer is a means of communication between the programmer and the user. However, in this analogy, the author and the programmer do not mostly share similar concerns. While the author is bound to be a subject expert, the programmer is mostly a technician combined with the likely motives of a businessman. This gap between the author and the programmer is responsible for inappropriate lesson content, poor documentation, errors in format and content, improper feedback, etc. Likewise, in most software, there is little chance for the teacher to add to or modify the existing programmes, even if he wishes too, since most of it is locked to prevent pirating. And for the few of those who develop their own material, the time spent on programming and typing in the lessons can be quite lengthy.

PROBLEMS OR CHALLENGES?

Yet, these apprehensions should be seen in the backdrop of a developmental stage of computerisation 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 taperecorder or watching a television. Similarly, the pupils will need no readjustment of attitude when faced with a computer in a classroom and their familiarity and frequent association with the machine would replace the sense of awe and alienation felt by older people. Then planning pre-, actual and post-computer activities would be easily possible. 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 present CALL-disposed teachers that in order to convince the CALL-deposed teachers about the potentiality of CALL courseware, they must prove that it is not only perfect in every way, but that it is far better than any other existing teaching aid.

CONCLUSION

An ideal CALL courseware remains not an alternative but a complementary tool in reinforcing classroom activities. Apart from relying on the ability of educators to create suitable CALL courseware, the effectiveness of CALL depends on the teacher's readiness to adopt new attitudes and approaches toward language teaching. The teacher should avoid being skeptical about the use of computer in language teaching and begin to re-evaluate his methods in the light of computer's tremendous teaching potential and boldly address to the challenges offered. The computer can best 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, it will relieve them of tedious tasks and will enable students to receive individualised attention from both teachers and machines to a degree that has hitherto been impossible.

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