

An Attempted Evaluation of Computer Assisted Language Learning in China

EVALUATION DE L'APPRENTISSAGE DES LANGUES ASSISTÉ PAR ORDINATEUR EN CHINE

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Abstract: With the rapid development of computer technology and further educational reform in China, more and more colleges or universities start to employ computers for foreign language teaching and learning. This paper, thus, first briefly introduces the evolution of CALL, then examines the constructive value and drawbacks of computer-assisted language teaching and learning, and finally emphasizes some rational cognition in implications and conclusion.

Key words: review, benefits, drawbacks, rational cognition

Résumé: Avec le développement rapide de la technologie d'ordinateur et la réforme éducative approfondie de Chine, de plus en plus de lycées ou d'universités commencent à employer l'ordinateur dans l'enseignement-apprentissage des langues étrangères. L'article présent, tout d'abord, introduit brièvement l'évolution de l'ALAO (l'Apprentissage des langues assisté par Ordinateur), et puis examine la valeur constructive et les désavantages de l'enseignement-apprentissage des langues assisté par ordinateur. En fin de compte, l'article insiste sur des cognitions rationnelles dans les implications et la conclusion.

Mots-Clés: ALAO, rétrospection, bénéfices, désavantages, cognition rationnelle

1. MODIFICATION OF CALL AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

Computers have been used for language teaching ever since the 1960's. In the 1960's and 1970's the first form of computer-assisted Language Learning featured repetitive language drills, the so-called drill-and-practice method (Warschauer, M., & Healey, D. 1998). It was mainly used for extensive drills, explicit grammar instruction, and translation tests. The CALL then was based on the dominant behaviorist theories of learning and teaching of the time, presenting the learner a carefully graded series of habit-forming modes of learning.

Communicative CALL emerged in the 1970's and 1980's as a reaction to the behaviorist approach to language learning. Proponents of communicative CALL rejected behaviorist approaches at both the theoretical and pedagogical level. They stressed that CALL should focus more on using forms rather than on the forms themselves. Grammar should be taught implicitly and students should be encouraged to generate original

utterances instead of manipulating prefabricated forms (Jones & Fortescue, 1987; Phillips, 1987; Underwood, 1984). This form of computer-based instruction corresponded to cognitive theories which recognized that learning was a creative process of discovery, expression, and development. The mainframe was replaced by personal computers that allowed greater possibilities for individual work. Popular CALL software in this era included text reconstruction programmers and simulations.

With the development of language learning research, communicative CALL was criticized while integrative CALL was promoted for communicative CALL's using the computer in an ad hoc and disconnected fashion and using the computer made "a greater contribution to marginal rather than central elements" of language learning (Kenning & Kenning, 1990: 90). Teachers moved away from a cognitive view of communicative language teaching to a socio-cognitive view that emphasizes real language use in a meaningful, authentic context. Integrative CALL seeks both to integrate the various skills of language learning (listening, speaking, writing, and reading) and to integrate technology more fully into language teaching (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). To this end the multimedia-networked computer

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provides a range of informational, communicative, and publishing tools that are potentially available to every student.

With the modification of CALL, CALL is to integrate various media and computer technologies into foreign language teaching in order to better the learning situations and get positive results. Moreover, CALL, to a large degree, can meet the requirements of the learning theories of constructivism, which has brought revolutionary influence on the technology of education and has become a very important theoretical base and one of the guiding principles in language teaching and learning (Kafai & Resnik, 1996). The learning theory of constructivism appeared after behaviorism and pure cognitivism. Constructivism does not agree with behaviorism in that the teacher determines all of the skills needed and ensures that students learn them all in a step-by-step manner. Constructivism goes further than pure cognitive approaches by recommending helping learners to construct meaningful and conceptually functional representations of the external world.”(Rüschoff, 1999). Constructivists view learning as an active, creative, and socially interactive process. He & Ma (2007) say that CALL has been shifting in orientation from modernism to post modernism in late 20th and early 21st century. The rapid development of educational technologies promotes the integration of educational technologies into foreign language teaching and learning (pp-59). Research and practice suggest that, appropriately implemented, CALL can contribute significantly to some aspects of constructivism education.

2. REASONS FOR CALL EMERGENCE IN CHINA

With the advent of multimedia computing and the Internet, Recent years have seen an explosion of interest in using computers for foreign language teaching and learning, and thus, the College English Teaching of more than 20 years in China is challenged by the new technology. Educators say that the purpose of College English Teaching is no longer solely to develop students’ reading comprehension. It is today’s main concern to foster students’ ability to use English in an all-round way, especially in listening and speaking. This appeal comes from the feedback of social needs in China, graduates bearing no significant competence of communication even though they have been studying English for many years. In this case “College English Curriculum Requirements (for trial implementation)” enacted by the Ministry of Education (2004) states that “colleges and universities should remould the existing teacher-centered pattern of language teaching by introducing new teaching models with the help of multimedia and network technology. The new model should be built on modern information technology,

particularly network technology, so that English language teaching will be free from the constraints of time or place and geared towards students’ individualized and autonomous learning”(pp21-23). This language policy places emphasis on listening and speaking by introducing new teaching models with the help of multimedia and network technology and “individualized and autonomous learning” reflects a new educational theory of postmodernism which promotes individualization and autonomy in study. Thus, the role of computers and Internet in language instruction has now become an important issue confronting large numbers of language teachers around China. At first, the current paper is going to explore the benefits brought about by CALL and also, analyze some problems or difficulties in implementing the technology-based method.

3. CONSTRUCTIVE BENEFITS BROUGHT ABOUT BY CALL

It is quite obvious that computer assisted language teaching and learning has come to a new step, especially with the development of microcomputer and Internet. Under the theories of constructivism, on some empirical studies, CALL has facilitated a variety of learning tasks, and shown its enormous potency as teaching tools. They can help both the students and the teachers in various ways because of their special properties.

3.1 Multimedia effects

Computers are good to motivate students. Language teaching in the past was conducted mainly in the classroom with teachers’ teaching and students’ passive learning, and with the aids of, first, chalkboard, 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 understood way. Many students who are tired of traditional English classes become more and more interested in this new style of teaching and learning. Consequently, when using a computer, students may study more actively. They are not just listening to the teachers passively as they do in the past and they do not get bored easily.

3.2 Learner Autonomy

Network-based instruction can help students strengthen their linguistic skills by positively affecting their learning attitude and by helping them build self-instruction strategies and promote their

self-confidence. Student motivation is therefore increased, especially whenever a variety of activities are offered, which make them feel more independent. Students through World Wide Web have to tackle a huge amount of human experience. In such a way, they can learn by doing things themselves. They become the creators not just the receivers of knowledge. As the way information is presented is not linear, users develop thinking skills and choose what to explore. Experiential Learning is in agreement with autonomous learning, which is advocated by educators nowadays.

3.3 Individualization

Shy or inhibited students can be greatly benefited by individualized, student-centered collaborative learning. High fliers can also realize their full potential without preventing their peers from working at their own pace. In English teaching and learning, as we know, 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 students work at their own paces. It requires students to take more responsibility for their learning, to learn how to learn. Such individualized instruction can initiate students' active learning, promote learning with comprehension, and allow students to see their own progress. As a result, slower learners can catch up, and advanced learners can do extra assignments.

3.4 Beyond confines of space and time

Traditionally, students must go to a lecture themselves at a fixed time and in a fixed classroom. However, nowadays, if a school has a satellite system of computer laboratories, students can study English at various places on campus at any time. If the school has a network of computer laboratories, students can use the same materials wherever they are working. Students can even study at home if their personal computers have a link to their school's system or network.

3.5 Authentic Materials for Study

Different from the traditional classroom which is far from any similarities to the real life situation, CALL offers the opportunity for students to visualize the situation. The computer software creates a virtual world that is very similar to the real world. The computer can enhance the authenticity of the language transactions presented by enabling students to see as well as hear native-speakers interacting in the language which is not only verbal but also embodied partially or totally in facial expressions and body languages. The Internet also facilitates the use of specific language in an authentic setting (Feng & Zhang 2005: 88). It is a

medium of global communication and a source of boundless authentic materials (Wang, 2006). All students can use various resources of authentic reading materials either at school or from their home.

There are still a great many language training programs available, which incorporate graphics, audio recording and playback, and video and so on. Through real-life situations with native-speakers, students are able to learn real, natural English. As learning simultaneously involves listening, seeing, reflecting, doing and participating, students can improve their speaking ability, increase their comprehension, expand their vocabulary, test their pronunciation, and practice their reading and writing skills.

3.6 Greater Interaction

Language development is social processes that depend on interaction with others. A good interaction is hypothesized to occur when the normal interactive structure has been modified because the student has requested, for example, a repetition, clarification, or restatement of the original input. The reason that the modified interaction is expected to be good is that it can function to negotiate the meaning of the input (Chapelle, 1997). CALL can now provide endless opportunities for interaction with a rich set of media types, characters and cultural information.

With sociocognitive approaches to CALL, language learning moves from students' interaction with computers to interaction with other humans via the computer, and students can communicate across languages and cultures (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). Random access to Web pages breaks the linear flow of instruction. By sending E-mail and joining newsgroups, students can communicate with people they have never met. We can say that CALL allows a participant to share a message with a small group, the whole class, or an international discussion involving hundreds or thousands of people. Participants s' access to the web and make them feel citizens of a global classroom, practicing communication on a global level. As Lee aid, although students can still use their books, they are given the chance to escape from canned knowledge and discover thousands of information sources. As a result, their education fulfils the need for interdisciplinary learning in a multicultural world.(Lee Kuang-wu 2000).

4. DRAWBACKS OF CALL

While CALL brings benefits to foreign language teaching and learning, there are still some issues to be concerned with. The barriers inhibiting the practice of Computer-assisted Language Learning can be classified in the following common categories.

4.1 Financial Budget

Although colleges and universities are instructed to adopt CALL by Ministry of Education in China, there is a flexible implementation of the technology-based learning tool. Financial barriers are mentioned most frequently by language education practitioners. They include the cost of hardware, software, maintenance, and extend to some staff development. Concerning the money, the challenge was unique because of the nature of the technology.

4.2 Availability of Computer Hardware and Software

The most significant aspects of computer are hardware and software. Availability of high quality software is the most pressing challenge in applying the new technologies in education. Underlying this problem is a lack of knowledge of what elements in software will promote different kinds of learning. There are few educators skilled in designing it because software development is costly and time-consuming.

4.3 Lack of Technical and Theoretical Knowledge

A lack of technical and theoretical knowledge is another barrier to the use of Computer-assisted Language Learning technology. Not only is there a shortage of knowledge about developing software to promote learning, but many instructors also do not understand how to use the new technologies. Furthermore, little is known about integrating these new means of learning into an overall plan as some old teachers only consider CALL as a newly emerged item, not knowing its theoretical revelation. So, improper use of technologies can affect both the teacher and learner negatively.

4.4 Resistance from Traditional Pedagogy

The current of change move so quickly that it destroys what was considered the norm in the past, and by doing so, create new opportunities. But, there is a natural tendency for traditional force to resist changes not only because of old teachers lack of theory and knowledge, but also deep-rooted Chinese traditional teaching method. Instructors are tend not to use technologies that require substantially more preparation and organizing time.

4.5 Management of CALL

Management of Call is another issue which is not supposed to be neglected. Here I refer management to the control of students, open time of language labs, a comprehensive plan for students. At present, as CALL

is still in its infancy in China plus specific environment in some universities, students wants to be supervised for their concentration on courses not on pure entertainment with computers; Language labs are mainstreams for CALL in China, Internet being the secondary in view of present situation; students also needed to be guided under a comprehensive plan made by teachers or instructors.

Engaging in Computer-assisted Language Learning is a continuing challenge that requires time and commitment. As we approach the 21st century, we realize that technology as such is not the answer to all our problems. What really matters is how we use technology. Computers can never substitute teachers but they offer new opportunities for better language practice. They may actually make the process of language learning significantly richer and play a key role in the reform of our educational system.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The role of computers in language teaching has changed significantly over the past years. Technological and pedagogical developments now allow us to better integrate computer technology into the language learning process. This paper suggests that CALL has contributed and might contribute to positive learning outcomes through authentic environments, modified interaction and enhancing motivation, and autonomous learning. Future developments in networked communication, multimedia, and artificial intelligence will likely converge in trend, creating a potentially more central role for the computer as a tool for authentic language exploration and use in the second language or foreign language classroom. As our focus of attention gradually shifts from the computer itself to the natural integration of computers into the language learning process, we know that computer technology has taken its rightful place as an important element of language learning and teaching. It is known that in the United States and the United Kingdom CALL is widely applied in each

course. No doubt, We are in the center of a monumental technological paradigm shift which will eventually change the way that all instructors teach and the way students learn.

Under the influence of postmodernism education, CALL program is fostering student engagement and learning and allowed students to develop a constructive approach to their learning. However, Chinese initial technology-based instruction is under synchronous with that of some developed countries. Constructive approach in China must be built up in accordance with Chinese teaching surroundings. Chinese educators should not copy what western countries have done in CALL ahead of us.

In view of specific education environment, aspects need to be investigated to guide future research in this area, especially in China. Concerning theory research, how can CALL correspond to the communicative or pedagogical goals of language teaching in China? Concerning technology, how will its related facets assist language learners in functioning in the global community? Concerning educational system, how can it be used more effectively alongside the present language curriculum? While these questions have been examined

to some degree, researchers and language educators must further investigate and implement this technology to provide others with guidelines in this area.

One point we should emphasize that while it is essential that we make informed decisions about how the CALL can be successfully integrated into the language classroom, foreign educators have seriously told us that machine can never take the place of man, and CALL is a great approach, but not a sole approach in language teaching and learning.

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