

# **Computer-Assisted Language Learning (Call) And The Internet**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Computers and the Internet are so widespread today that one feels outdated if not using them. I have always been interested in computers and believe they can be beneficial in teaching, but have never really used them in my classes.

In our school we have computers in the self-access area, in which students can use CD-ROMS or the Internet. The school has compiled a list of useful web sites for students, and we ask them to access English-only web sites, but I have always felt students need more guidance in the use of these resources. Therefore I have chosen a small Intermediate class, in which I know most students already use the Internet at home or at school / university to experiment with the use of the Internet in class, as a way of promoting learner's independence and a better use of our self-access resources.

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is not a new development in language teaching, as it has been used since the 1960s and 70s. However, it still lacks research methods and a clear theoretical foundation. (Chapelle, 1997). We are going to describe the development of CALL and discuss the most recent questions regarding theory.

## **2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF CALL**

We can divide the development of CALL into three distinct phases (Warschauer, 1996): *behaviourist, communicative and integrative*.

*Behaviourist CALL* was implemented in the 1960's and 70's, when the Audio-lingual method was mostly used, and provided students with drills and practice. This model used the *computer as a tutor*, presenting drills and non-judgmental feedback.

Based on the communicative approach, *communicative CALL* focuses more on using forms rather than on the forms themselves. The communicative CALL programmes provide skill practice in a non-drill format, through language games, reading and text reconstruction. This approach still uses the *computer as a tutor*, although it gives students choices, control and interaction. Another CALL model used for communicative activities involves the *computer as stimulus*, as in programmes that stimulate writing or discussions, and which may not be specifically designed for language learners. Finally, communicative CALL also uses the *computer as a tool*, in programmes that do not provide language material, but enable the learner to understand and use the language, such as word processors, desk-top publishing, spelling and grammar checks programmes, as used for instance in process writing.

The current approach is *integrative CALL*, which is based on multimedia computers and the Internet. These technological developments have brought text, graphics, sound, animation and video to be accessed on a single inexpensive computer. These resources are all linked and called 'hypermedia', enabling learners to navigate through CD-ROMS and the Internet at their own pace and path, using a variety of media.

### **3. USING THE INTERNET IN ELT**

There are many advantages in using the Internet, as seen in Fox (1998), Singhal (1997) and Warschauer (1997). First, taking part in the Internet is intrinsically motivating for students, since they see it as a trendy and useful tool, enabling them to be connected with the world. As English is the main language in the Internet, learners begin to appreciate the usefulness in learning the language.

Using the net also gives students control over their learning, enabling them to go at their own pace and choose their paths according to their individual needs, which may also be motivating. It helps in promoting learner independence and the development of learning strategies, provided that learners receive appropriate guidance.

Secondly, the World Wide Web (WWW) give students instant access to a wide range of authentic material, from newspaper and magazine articles to radio broadcasts and informal chat-rooms, and also to material prepared specially for learners, such as grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary exercises and tests. Apart from retrieving information from the Internet, learners can also create their own materials, such as projects, and share them with partner classes or with the general public. This possibility also adds a great deal of interest, as learners communicate with a real audience.

Because the internet is primarily text driven, it appeals to shy students, giving them time to think and participate in exchanges in a chat room, e-mail or class conferencing. Another positive outcome of Internet use (reported by Singhal, 1997, Fox, 1998) is

improved reading and writing skills. Furthermore, because language used on the Internet tends to be lexically and syntactically more complex than oral discourse, students may gain a broader range of English. Communication with native speakers forces students to practice specific skills such as negotiating, persuading, clarifying meaning, and requesting information. In the near future, technical developments will probably make it easier to exchange messages orally as well, which will mean even more chances for skills development.

Finally, the Internet allows learners to participate in the culture of the target language and to see real language in context, away from course books and the classroom.

Despite the advantages just mentioned, there are a number of disadvantages or obstacles we need to consider. First, technical and financial problems, such as long waiting time to access information and costs related to the acquisition of computers, programmes, training, telephone lines and other expenses.

Lack of training and familiarity with computers and the Internet (on the part of both learners and teachers) can lead to frustration, instead of offering a motivating learning experience.

The enormous quantity of information found on the Internet can also be a disadvantage. First, it may be difficult for students to focus on what they want to do, with so many possibilities to sidetrack. Secondly, a lot of the material on the net is unsuitable for children and young learners, and it is virtually impossible to bar them from accessing it.

Finally, we have to address a problem that is not intrinsic to CALL and the Internet, but to how teachers use these resources. As Warschauer (1997) recommends, “in order to make effective use of new technologies, teachers must thus take a step back and focus on some basic pedagogical requirements”.

First, it must be remembered that “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” (Garret, cited by Warschauer, 1996).

Secondly, as *Integrative CALL* is still a very recent development, its research methods and theoretical foundations are under intense debate among researchers (Chapelle, 1997; Salaberry, 1999). Therefore, until more studies confirm the advantages of *Integrative CALL* and clearer guidelines for teachers are published, we need to analyse it carefully in the light of our experience and the results we obtain.

Chapelle (1997) proposes two basic questions to guide the evaluation of CALL activities, and which can be useful in our practice. They are:

- What kind of language does the learner engage in during a CALL activity?
- How good is the language experience in CALL for L2 learning?

Both questions are complex and a reliable answer to these would involve discourse analysis, which is not the field of teachers. However, they show us some aspects we need to consider.

In some CD-ROM programmes and Internet activities, what learners do most is click the mouse, or engage in other activities in which very little language is produced. And when there is language production, does it promote learners' dual concern for communicating meaning using suitable form? Does it elicit repetition or expansion of previous language?

We also need to consider the question of input. How can we control input and provide optimal comprehensible input in activities on the Internet?

Fox (1998) suggests attention to three basic elements in successful Internet activities: integration in the course, e.g. a pen-pal project alongside a writing course; development of computer competence by teachers and students alike; and active teacher involvement in guiding and supporting students to avoid frustration.

Warschauer (1997) proposes five guidelines to help teachers implement computer network-based activities into the second language classroom. They are general guidelines that can also be used in an EFL context:

1. 'Consider carefully your goals': It must be clear to the teacher why this tool would be more successful than a traditional one. Reasons for using the Internet range from increased motivation to learning computer skills, but we should not ask students to do something on the computer that a book could do just as well.
2. 'Think integration': Simply asking students to have a computer pen pal will not ensure a significant educational outcome. Teachers must be more involved in the activities and integrate them into the overall design and goals of the course.
3. 'Don't underestimate the complexity': A number of students may lack basic prerequisites for using the Internet, and it might be very time consuming to train these students. Apart from this, technical practicalities such as having computers available, hardware and software malfunction and excessively long waiting time to access web pages., may all hinder the use of the Internet in class.
4. 'Provide necessary support': We should not stop trying to use the Internet due to the problems we mentioned above, but provide support in the form of hand-outs, training sessions, set up simple log-on procedures, encourage students to work in pairs or groups and help each other, and being available to help students when they are carrying out their Internet tasks.

5. 'Involve students in decisions': Because of the complexities and difficulties mentioned, the teacher must be aware of the impact of these activities, consulting them through class discussions and surveys. This does not mean a passive role for the teacher, who should co-ordinate activities, focus students' attention on linguistic aspects of texts and assist students in developing learning strategies.

Concluding, although we certainly do not think technology should take over the language classroom, we believe the Internet shows great potential for use in ELT. Therefore, we ought to endeavour to make informed choices about how the Internet can be successfully integrated into our teaching, being open to analysing the results of such experiments.

#### **4. EXPERIMENTING WITH THE INTERNET**

When I started having access to the Internet at home one year ago, and having read some articles about it (Renner, 1998, Porto, 1998) I started accessing ELT web sites such as David Sterling's ESL Café, Comenius and others, and found it would be interesting for students. At about the same time, our school started providing free Internet access for students through two computers in the self-access area. A list of useful web sites was compiled, and quite a number of students use the Internet, but no training in class was provided.

Meanwhile, general interest in the Internet has been increasing and it has been widely popularised. Students are always talking about it, and quite a number of them have easy access to it.

As Warschauer (1997) advises in his guidelines (see part 3), we thought it was important to consult students about their interest in using the Internet to learn English, and also in having a class focusing on it. I had a class discussion with one of my groups, and all students responded very positively. This is a very co-operative class, with students who want to stretch the limits of their learning. Most of them are highly motivated and I believe that using the Internet will promote greater learner independence and widen their opportunities of exposure to the language. I also chose this class because of its small number, so that they could work in pairs on our three computers that are linked to the Internet. Out of the six students, only one said she did not know how to use the Internet.

What I intend to do in this particular class is to show students a few ELT web sites that I think are useful and that they could access during the holidays, so that they do not lose contact with the language in the next two months. As this will be their first contact with the Internet in a language class, and for one student the first contact with the Internet ever, my goals are rather limited, but our long-term aim is to integrate Internet activities in the course. Following Warschauer's (1997) guidelines, we do not want to underestimate the complexity of dealing with the Internet. Secondly, we are going to support students with a handout containing all the steps they must follow, and we are also

going to monitor and help students as needed. Moreover, students are going to work in pairs so that they are able to help each other, hopefully using the target language to communicate.

I have selected six web sites, and my idea is to ask each pair to explore two of them (see handout attached to the lesson plan, in part 5). I have also assigned tasks to be carried out while they are logged in, so that they have a focus in this 'exploration' and so that they make notes to be exchanged with other students afterwards. The idea is that each student will have an idea of what each web site on their handout offers, hopefully motivating them to access these in their own time.

Feedback on the activity will be collected during a class discussion and also through an anonymous survey with three questions, which students are going to answer at the end of the class. Their feedback will be invaluable to guide us through further exploration of this new, promising resource, as well as being a chance for students to reflect about the class.

## **6. POST-LESSON ANALYSIS AND REFLECTION**

The fact that we had three computers connected to the Internet at the same time made the connections very slow, and caused two of them to be disconnected lots of times. This made the activity not at all exciting for some students, who had to wait for a long time until connections were re-established.

One out of the three pairs did not encounter any such problems, being able to carry out the tasks much more easily. However, even in this pair, the students were so absorbed in the screen that they did not take all the notes they were supposed to, even though I kept asking them to do so while monitoring the activity.

One pair also had 'navigation' problems. This is something I had not anticipated and is mentioned by Singhal (1997). Searching the web requires logic skills, scanning and evaluative judgement on the part of learner, and these are skills that need to be developed in most learners. As a result, this pair needed a lot of guidance during the activity.

Another aspect I observed was communication between the partners while doing the tasks. I noticed they did not speak much, only exchanged a few remarks, like 'this one', 'go there', 'copy this' while pointing at the screen. Also, they lacked vocabulary to talk about the computer problems and features of the programmes, resorting to Portuguese. Therefore, teaching them some specific language would encourage this kind of communication L2, which is very common in real life.

During the feedback session, I noticed that most groups had missed some very important features of the web sites visited. For instance, they did not find the chat rooms for learners, nor the access to pen pals files. As a result, I decided to tell them about these, which I think are the most interesting things the sites offer, and students seemed interested in checking these in their own time.

On the whole, however, they were able to find important resources, such as an on-line dictionary with pronunciation, proficiency tests, idioms, and others.

The answers to the feedback questions reveal two opposite views. Two students did not approve of the activity. In their words:

- *Did you like learning English through the Internet ?*

*'No. If I have a doubt I can't ask to (sic) a teacher because I'll be alone'*

*'No. it's slower and more bore (sic) than a normal class'*

- • *Do you intend to study English through the Internet outside class ?*

*'No. I like learning English inside the class because we can talk to people'.*

*'No, I think it takes a lot of time'.*

These answers reflect firstly the frustration or disappointment related to technical problems (the long waiting time and constant interruptions), and secondly, and more importantly, problems that are intrinsic to the current state of development of the Internet and CALL. As Warschauer (1996) puts it 'today's computers are not yet intelligent enough to be truly interactive', not being able to diagnose a student's problem and suggest different courses of action, thus our students' feeling of being 'alone' when there is a doubt. Still according to him, it will be a long time before Artificial Intelligence is adequately applied to CALL, making programs and Internet web sites more interactive.

Nowadays it is already possible to use real-time audio and audio-visual chatting in the Internet, although these tools are not yet widespread. Being able to talk to other people while looking at them on the screen will certainly immensely improve the possibilities of using the Internet in ELT, and then maybe students will not feel that they are only talking to a machine.

Despite these negative but extremely interesting comments, the other four students seemed to have favoured the experience. Some of their comments:

*'I mostly learned that there are different ways of improve (sic) my language while I can have some fun'*

*'I liked it a lot. I think the Internet is a good an dynamic way to learn (sic) English'.*

*'I intend to visit this (sic) sites at home.'*

*'It was very interesting. It's important for us to learn English in different ways'*

Among the students who found the experience useful, one had very little experience with computers and wrote *'I don't know a lot of things about Internet. I must learn more about computers. (...) This class was important because we had an idea about how to learn English using the Internet. I think we should have more classes like this one'*.

Another student who also liked the class added a suggestion: *'I think it should be more "directioned", (sic) or you can lose yourself" (sic).*

From all these comments I could conclude that we should start using the Internet in class, but we would have to have better computer facilities, including faster telephone lines, which is something we do not have much control over.

Another improvement for this kind of class, following the last comment, would be to direct students more in each web site, maybe preparing a list of features and asking students to find which ones those web sites offer.

The next step, as suggested by Fox (1998) and Warschauer (1997) would be to integrate Internet activities into the course curriculum. For instance, for the Intermediate level, when students are studying informal letters, they could start having a pen-pal. When the topic is job hunting, they could have contact with authentic job adverts on the net. If the topic is `Countries`, they could check different web sites and then prepare one about their country as a class project. These are just a few ideas that show how the Internet could be used, but in all these cases, a principled approach is needed, and in this respect we intend to follow this methodological debate about the Internet in ELT, which is happening right there, on the Internet.

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