COMPUTER IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This article examines and discusses the practical potential of computer-assisted language learning in specific areas of English language teaching namely in the Reading and Vocabulary, Grammar and Writing Components. Some existing ready-to-use and 'authoring' softwares are also highlighted but one must bear in mind that a computer program is a flexible language-learning aid and so a particular program can be useful for more than one language skill : it is up to the teacher which area of language is given the most emphasis at any one time.

Computers indisputably can make a worthwhile contribution to the teaching of English as a second language. Up to now, the involvement of computers has solely been one dimensional i.e. as computer-assisted instruction where emphasis is on drill-and-practice and tutorial materials. Proponents of new approaches to teaching language have thus adopted the alternative terminology CALL : Computer-assisted language learning to include the whole range of possible roles that the computer can play in the 4 language skills namely reading and vocabulary; grammar; writing; and listening and speaking.

In a number of areas of education, computer-assisted learning has already begun to fulfill its promises yet in the teaching of English it is still at its infant stage. The main reason being teachers with a background in the arts are reluctant to venture into an area they are unfamiliar with. Basic computer knowledge and literacy are of utmost importance to the language teacher as they are fast becoming prerequisites for full participation in academic life. Virtually all young people seem to have a basic keyboard skills nowadays. Most students need only a brief introduction to CALL. They need to know how to switch on the equipment, insert disks and how to start a program running. I believe that computers have much to offer us as English language teachers and will have more to offer in the future. Next we might ask the question "how would it affect the role of the teacher?" Given the arguable advantage of the technology for individualized learning, does this mean that it will replace the teacher altogether? I do not believe this should be the case. The teacher, with

established skills in communication, analysis and diagnosis, is depended upon to assist and, when necessary, assess the learner. The computer, on the other hand, is used to manipulate the text to the advantage of the student.

Higgins and Johns in their book <u>Computer in language learning</u> have categorized the roles of the computer into 3 main categories: the role of instructor, collaborator and facilitator. In the instructional role, the material and practice are authoritative where the students work at producing the anticipated language forms and responses. In collaborative CALL, the initiative is turned over to the student or groups of students. The end result of the activity can either be predetermined or completely unpredictable, thus giving the students a wider choice of the language. In the third role as a facilitator, the computer merely serves as a tool in other-language-learning activities, for example, in a writing assignment using a word processor or even an electronic dictionary in reading.

THE VARIOUS POSSIBILITIES FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF CALL ACTIVITIES AS RELATED TO SPECIFIC SKILLS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

In the following section, it would be helpful if you could relate the 3 main categories mentioned above to the CALL activities discussed under the specific language skills.

Reading and Vocabulary

There are 3 main ways in which computers are useful in helping language learners develop reading skills. Firstly, in the completion of an activity, he does incidental reading. For example, in the program <u>A Reading Maze</u>, the learner's task is to find a way out of the maze by presenting relevant information. The program records the number of choice made before a successful outcome, and a number of follow-up activities are possible to resolve the maze in fewer moves, to tell the story of what happened, or to discover all the possible 'dead-ends' situations contained in the maze. The fact that the reading is incidental to the main task gives it a real communicative purpose : students are reading for necessary information, not just because they have been told to read.

Secondly, in the traditional question-and-answer CALL program for reading comprehension, the focus can be on guessing the meaning of words from context, skimming and scanning skills, paragraph focus and general comprehension checking. OUP's <u>Reading for English</u> series has adequate activities based on a text, pre-reading and sentence building exercises for this purpose. Computers are an ideal medium for timed reading, and a good program to try is <u>Speedread</u> which allows the student to choose a passage and any of 9 different speeds. The learner can regulate the activity according to his own ability and there is an incentive to read more efficiently and thus graduate to faster speeds.

The third reading skill students can develop is manipulation of the reading texts. Programs like <u>Sentence Building, Close-up, Storyboard and Gapkit</u> not only involve reading skills but also give insights into grammar, vocabulary and discourse, and generates a great deal of discussion off-screen. <u>Storyboard</u> is probably the most flexible and most popular among students. It deletes every word in a short text, leaving only the title, the punctuation and blobs representing the letters of each missing word. Learners then start solving the text by guessing whole words, which when correct would appear in place as many times as it occurs in the text. For example, if the title is superstition, the student would try some lexis that they associate with it : Cat, ladder, thirteen, unlucky, Friday and so on. Next they try a few verbs and if they are stuck they can use the 'help' feature a few times, eventually after much trial and error and off-screen discussion, the whole story is restored. This program involves many skills other than reading. This is all to the good as the more grammatical insights is required when reading, the more integrated these skills are. Another collaborative activity is creative reading where several story lines can be developed from a title chosen from the menu. Based on students selection from the multi-choice format, students create stories and adapt to their wishes. Incidentally the notions, functions, rhetoric, and vocabulary can be incorporated in the reading curriculum.. Thus students work in a highly motivated manner with a number of carefully selected reading skills.

Computer-assisted techniques can also provide an effective way of learning vocabulary. According to David H. Wyatt' CALL techniques for vocabulary improvement result in more rapid learning with higher and longer-term retention. He explains that this may be due to the enjoyable types of activity that are possible with screen, including game formats like <u>Linkword, Crossword</u> or <u>Mindword</u>. One might ask the question "why use a computer?" Can't you learn vocubulary without it?" This question raises some interesting questions of its own, the most obvious of which is the underlying assumption that we should avoid using computers if we can possibly help it. Often a teacher would use a cassette recorder when she can easily read a passage aloud. Similarly by using the computer it provides a nice change. All teachers know that changes are motivating to do something familiar in an unfamiliar way. The computerised activity is different from the non-computer version, just as a cassette recording is different from a teacher reading aloud. Both have their place.

In both reading skills and vocabulary development, the computer's advantage over the print medium lies in its clarity and attractiveness of presentation, its games-manager role, its availability at all hours and not forgetting the traditional advantage of providing learners with feedback and help. Together these amount to a powerful motivating force.

Grammar

Of the four traditional skill areas, grammar is the one in which CALL has the most potential as far as standard class activities are concerned. To many teachers, CALL is synonymous with grammar drills since much of the older software was grammar-oriented. Though drill-and-practice grammar materials still persist in recent materials, we must not confuse the medium with its content. Theoreticians who criticize the existing drill materials should not generalize as there are worthwhile materials to be found on large computer systems and on microcomputers. Increasing number of up-to-date grammar drills-and-practice are presented in an interesting way. Drills-and-practice are essential to grammar lessons especially as remedial exercises for slower learners, make-up exercises for absentees and as an opportunity to review before tests.

One advantage of the grammar drills on computer has over workbook or textbooks is that it enables the students to focus on the language task at hand as immediate feedback on error, self-pacing and problem areas is possible. Furthermore workbook-based written activities usually involve time consuming recopying and rewriting. The computer also makes possible a variety of exercise formats that would not be possible or practical in class, an example is the program Photofit. Photofit is one program that uses graphics to good effect while giving practice in comparative forms and the lexis of facial description. The process of trying to create an identical face from the one introduced by the computer can generate a lof of useful off-screen talk. Other useful programs are Can you guess? which presents simple present and present tense of the verb 'to be' designed to practise yes/no questions; Ask offers a practice in higher level question forms; and Reconstruction is a program that requires the student to restore a text, by answering rather than asking questions.

Computerized follow-up to classwork has also become more interesting at more advance levels where students frequently handle quite lengthy clause and sentence patterns. A student can also return periodically to areas of grammar that are difficult. Finally, in courses where more extensive attention is paid to formal statements about grammar structures and rules the computer can make a significant contribution. The computer can be an effective tutor to the student who needs longer and more carefully structured explanations. They are also presented in an enjoyable manner i.e as a game for 2 or more players.

For the future, proponents of CALL forsees grammar orientated CALL materials will not only involve instructional forms but rather more follow-up activites which would make grammar communicative.

Writing

Writing is another area of the curriculum where computer-assisted methods can make an immediate and extensive impact. On traditional medium of pen and paper, the writing exercise is a drudgery and a laborious task for most students. The problem is well stated by Seymour Papert in his book Mindstorms[2].

> For me, writing means making a rough draft and refining it over a considerable period of time. My image of myself as a writer includes the expectation of an "unacceptable" first draft that will develop with successive editing into presentable form. But I would not be able to afford this image if I were a third grader. The physical act of writing would be slow and laborious. For most children rewriting a text is so laborious that the first draft is the final copy, and the skill of rereading with a critical eye is never acquired.

In the writing skill, the computer has the potential in the facilitative role of the word processor. Creation, correction and editing of writing exercises are easily carried out on the word processor. Another sub-use is it can keep word-count which is useful for summary writing and word frequency counts. In the classroom the most commonly used programs for writing activities are still guided writing since they are highly adaptable to computerization. In a guided writing task, students are usually given a piece of writing which they alter in some ways. It might be a passage or dialogue which is incomplete or it could even be a text that needs reorganisation. Thus word-processors are ideal for guided writing. However, the computer will remain limited in its ability to analyze and correct free writing i.e in correcting grammar, punctuation or style. Even on sophisticated programs like the IBM's Epistle Program, according to Hertz (1984)[3], was only able to successfully correct 60% of the sentence in the text supplied to it. At a less ambitious level these programs can bring common grammatical errors to the attention of a learner and suggest a more suitable choice. Thus the teacher is still an important evaluator, though her work is made easier when many of the obstacles are removed. It would seem that even with maximum computer involvement, their role would appear to be limited though worthwhile. It is also evident that a fruitful blend of man and machine is possible in the writing class.

Listening And Speaking

Among the four traditional areas, oral activities have the least potential as the computer cannot perform the necessary analysis of any extended utterances. Oral interaction, so far, has been discussed as a side effect of activities in which our main aim was to help learners develop other skills. Computer simulation can provide a motivating stimulus for role-plays and discussions but older forms of educational

technology such as the language lab and tape recorder are more popular among teachers as they cost less. Similarly in the area of listening skills, the use of the computer is limited. Though there are sophisticated devices where the cassette operation is controlled by the computer program, such devices are often more expensive than micro-computer or terminals to which they are attached. Thus, the potential of CALL in the area of listening skills depends very much on the type of hardware available to the teacher.

CONCLUSION

Research and projects involving computer-assisted language learning and teaching are still being carried out in all the 4 language skills. Clearly emphasis should also be placed on the Soft Ware available in the market. Teacher who are unfamiliar with CALL would need advice on how to evaluate software and how to locate reviews by others. Armed with CALL techniques and materials, teachers are in a position to control the ready-to-use software; without it intimidating or controlling the class activities. In this respect authoring the software to meet the needs of the learner is of utmost importance. It would be useful to look upon this brief study as an attempt to highlight the potentials and possibilities towards achieving effective teaching through CALL.

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