



Computer Assisted Language Learning (C.A.L.L.) of English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

At least in certain affluent countries CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) might take over the traditional ways of teaching a language, and especially English, due to multifarious reasons. Getting into vogue in the 1960s CALL has already passed three main phases: Behavioural CALL, Communicative CALL and Integrative CALL. The history of CALL reveals that with the arrival of the Internet and its widespread usage, computers as well as computer applications in mobile phones, i-phones or i-pads can serve a variety of uses for language teaching as well as for language learning.

Keywords

Computer Assisted Language Learning; C.A.L.L. of English; English through APPS; Technology Assisted Language Learning (T.E.L.L.).



Creation of innumerable new vistas of information and knowledge at the fingertips of the present day generation by the accessibility and availability of the computers has thrown also new challenges to the old concepts of educational approaches. The present day generation seems to be born to win with the use of computers. All over the world we can notice the strident growth in the rate of people resorting to computational technology for anything and everything in their lives. Although the use of computers is applied to all fields of knowledge, the

present study delves deep into the role computers have to play in learning a language and especially in learning English Language.

The acronym CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) seems to have been coined at the beginning of 1980s and its first occurrence can be traced to a symposium paper by Davis & Steel (1981). In the USA the acronym CALI (Computer Assisted Language Instruction) was initially preferred, appearing in the name of CALICO which was founded in 1982 and which is the oldest professional association devoted to the promotion of the use of computers in language learning and teaching. Kenner (1996) notes that TESOL favoured CALL and set up its CALL Interest Section (CALL-IS) in 1983. By 1988 an alternative term to CALL emerged, namely TELL (Technology Enhanced Language Learning) as is evident from what Brown (1988:6) affirms:

Learning a foreign language can enrich the education of every pupil socially and intellectually and be vocationally relevant. The new technology should form an integral part of a modern language department's overall teaching strategy. By these means, to coin a communicative-sounding acronym, TELL (Technology Assisted Language Learning) can help produce telling results in language performance both in school and in the wider world. It [TELL] therefore has a place in every modern language department.

Whether we call it CALL or TELL the fact that there is increased use of computers for the purpose of learning a language cannot be neglected or overlooked. In the present study we stick on to the term CALL rather than TELL. Scouring the various definitions by scholars around the world, the succinctly clear definition given by Levy (1997:1) for CALL can be deemed to be the best. For him CALL meant “the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning.”

Introducing the updated history of CALL, Mark Warshauer (1996) has poignantly explained the three most important phases of CALL, namely Behaviouristic CALL, Communicative CALL and finally, Integrative CALL, with the universalization of the multi-media web applications. According to

Warshauer, what makes multimedia even more powerful is that it also entails hypermedia; or in other words, the multimedia resources are all linked together and learners can navigate their own path simply by pointing and clicking a mouse. The whole world becomes yielding at their finger-tips, and that too within split seconds of time.

An example of how hypermedia can be used for language learning is the program *Dustin* which was developed by the Institute for Learning Sciences at Northwestern University (Shank & Cleary, 1995). The program, in fact, is a simulation of a student arriving at a U.S. airport. Naturally the student has to confront with the needs of going through the customs, finding transportation to the city, and checking in at a hotel. The language learner using this program takes the role of the arriving student by interacting with simulated people who appear in video clips and responding to what they say by typing in responses. If the responses are correct, the student is sent off to do other tasks, such as meeting a roommate etc. In case the responses are not correct, the program resorts to remedial action by showing examples or even breaking down the tasks into smaller parts. The advantage of this program is that at any time the student can control the situation by asking what to do, asking what to say, asking to hear again what was just said but not comprehended, requesting for a translation, or controlling the level of the difficulty of the lesson. The greatest psychological advantage and support for the student here is that he need not be worried at all about the annoyance and displeasure of a human teacher in being repeatedly bothered about certain points, the reaction to all of which depends totally on his moods.

All the same, Warshauer (1996) points out that today's computer programs are not yet intelligent enough to be truly interactive and remarks that a program like *Dustin* should ideally be able to understand a user's spoken input and evaluate it not just for correctness but also for appropriateness. It should also be able to diagnose a student's pronunciation problems, syntax, or usage and then intelligently decide among a range of options such as repeating, paraphrasing, slowing down, correcting, or directing the student to background

explanations. Certainly, computers with that much of intelligence for comprehensive interaction will not be a sheer utopian dream and can lead us to the next phase of CALL, namely Intelligent CALL which could be the ultimate usage of computers for language learning as has been suggested by Underwood (1989) and would be certainly achieved and realized very soon.

Phil Hubbard (2009) explains how CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) emerged as a subfield of CALL in the 1990s and a lot of interest shifted to text based synchronous CMC rather than the asynchronous CMC by the use of e-mails, bulletins, or discussion boards in which the communication did not happen at the same time or real time simultaneously. Many researches have shown that synchronous CMC interaction by means of chatting, instant messaging, and even VoIP calls seem to allow more balanced participation than a face-to-face discussion (Roed, 2003; Warschauer, 1995/1996). As hinted by Hubbard, one reason for this may be the absence of visual cues as to who is holding the floor and the possibility of maintaining anonymity in some cases. Phil Hubbard (2010) refers to www.daedalus.com where students could carry out synchronous discussion in a computer classroom using this tool. Although it may sound strange and very odd at the outset and possibly raise the doubt why not have them discussing orally face to face since they are in the same room, a number of studies positively assert that some students communicate more when they don't have to speak or be face to face with interlocutors and that communication overall is more evenly distributed among participants (See Warschauer et al., 2000) and that those students even use a much wider range of discourse functions than they really do in face-to-face settings with the same material (Kern, 1995). When the student is not confronting with the teacher face-to-face, while at the same time could be communicating with each other, the student will be surely be relieved of the inhibition or stage fright. Phil Hubbard (2010) also recommends some useful specialized chat rooms for English language learners: Dave's ESL Cafe available at www.eslcafe.com and English Baby available at www.englishbaby.com. Similarly, a meticulous study by Greg Kessler (2010) explores and shows how CALL environments can help learners

reduce their anxiety in speaking tasks, specifically relating to their fluency. When we talk about Computer mediated communication, I put on record the experience of two taxi-driver friends of mine, who constantly listened to English songs on the CD in the car while driving, simply for the sake of getting conversant with the language. One of them belonged to Libya where the use of English Language had been banned for about 15 years. The second one is from Ethiopia. These examples of using English songs to learn the language cannot be totally discarded, as here too you can notice a sort of quasi-computer mediated communication happening.

If for any reason, a student finds it difficult to get admitted to an educational institution, - the reasons thereof could be anything like lack of money, lack of time due to the family constrains etc., - he or she can just ‘google’ on the website and find out numberless suitable sites which might help him/her for his/her studies, very often without having to pay anything at all. “Unit 5: CALL and Language Skills” of the book *Invitation to CALL* by Phil Hubbard (2010), of course, gives a compact description of how CALL can be used with regard to all the language skills. He also suggested Ohio Program of Intensive English site, www.ohiou.edu/esl/english/ where one can get a good set of links for all skills of the language. Online language proficiency tests would be available at the sites of World English, http://www.world-english.org/english_test.htm etc. Connected with the listening skills of English, sites like www.esl-lab.com, www.ello.org, and www.lingual.net are very important. With regard to direct practice of speaking English there are plenty of voice chat sites on the web which make it possible for learners and teachers to interact through the Internet in distance education courses. Asynchronous speaking practice is very much possible through www.wimba.com, using the Internet voicemail or simply attaching the sound files to email, maybe, in mp3 formats. The most widely used indirect method for practicing speaking is simply to listen to conversational dialogues on disk or the web and try to practice them. For example, www.focusenglish.com/dialogues/conversation.html can be very useful for this purpose. Asking the students just to read the web and comprehend, resorting to

Adult Education reading Site, <http://literacyworks.org/learningresources>, and asking to do by themselves text reconstruction activities such as Storyboard, [cloze exercises](http://eslus.com/LESSONS/READING/READ.HTM) ([http:// eslus.com/LESSONS/READING/READ.HTM](http://eslus.com/LESSONS/READING/READ.HTM)) and using timed and paced readings on sites such as www.readingsoft.com can help a lot to improve the reading facility of the learners. More frequent use of emails or text messages can help a lot in improving the fluency development with regard to writing. When it is connected with the skill of writing and improving it to the extent of attaining a flair of writing, online writing resources such as <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/index.html> and writing tutorials such as www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/writing/index.html can definitely enhance the capability of writing English well. There are also many sites which help the students to improve the grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

From the six years of my teaching experience in Tripoli, Libya and Al Baha, Saudi Arabia, I can doubtlessly testify that the idea of using computers even for language learning has been caught up especially among the students in countries where they cannot have the easy accessibility to any real library. In many such affluent countries, each and every student might have the possession of an i-phone, computer or even an i-pad at their hands. Only thing is that when you ask about a 'library' they might lead you to a book shop, which according to their perception is the library. Bereft of a real library replete with stacked shelves of hard copies of so many books related to their studies, these students eagerly spend their time for browsing and finding out suitable materials for their studies or researches, with a little guidance from outside. Very often, the teachers of higher education in such countries prepare even the course materials for a specific course, by downloading the suitable books and then duplicating the print outs for the students at the undergraduate levels. Even at the Master's level, in some such places they do not bother to provide the students with accessibility and availability of an extensive library proper, but would be happy with providing the students with a digital library. This has achieved the status of the present trend in affluent countries. Amazingly enough, these students make very good use of their computers, i-phones and i-pads to the maximum

and vie with each other to find out more and more suitable materials related to their curriculum of language learning and to undergo online language courses whenever possible. One of the very positive side effects of globalization is the awareness of the importance of English and the increased taste of more and more students to master this language in a better and faster way. With the explosion of knowledge by means of World Wide Web, each and every student, in any country for that matter, becomes keen and bent on using the internet websites and solving their problems by themselves.

The majority of us the elderly people would be literally surprised to notice the ingenious skill and expertise of the present day generation to handle with any modern electronic equipment. Without ever at all bothering to read out the user's manual in detail, as the elders cautiously do, the young children and people tackle any new equipment within seconds after he gets hold of it. This ease of usage of all the modern electronic devices is not marked out to be amidst the rich and affluent countries alone. How well CALL is familiar in the Indian context and how far CALL has been incorporated into the masses of students in India, would be an interesting field of study. One thing is sure, whether we Indians are familiar with the acronym CALL or not, many of our CBSE and ICSE and even State Syllabus students are in the habit of browsing and finding out suitable materials with regard to their projects and assignments. So, derivatively at least, a lot of Indian students also do practice CALL knowingly or unknowingly. In 2010, Sugata Mitra addressed an audience at the Oxford and explained how he had ventured with experimentations among children of various cities in India and other countries providing them with the simple and easy accessibility of computers and how within no time those children proved to know all about what could be achieved with a computer. In his inspiring speech, Sugata Mitra (2010) avers that "children will learn to do what they want to do". Interestingly, in a series of real-life experiments from New Delhi to South Africa to Italy, he gave kids self-supervised access to the web and saw results that could revolutionize how we think about teaching.

The focus of the present paper has been the use of computers in relation to learning English. But CALL is very much used in different countries like China, Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, Korea, Japan and many of the Gulf countries. With the technological development of having keyboards of each and every language, the computers or such electronic devices are also very much linked with usage for learning languages of these particular countries also.

I would like to wind up this paper with an interesting distinction made by Higgins (1985) between the role of the teacher as a *magister* or as a *pedagogue*. He extends this distinction to different approaches to using computers in language learning and teaching. *Magister* of course is a loan word from Latin and it means master in English. *OED* gives the meaning of *magister* as: “A mediæval and modern Latin title of academic rank, usually rendered by MASTER, but occas. employed Hist. or in speaking of foreign universities”. Consider the teacher as a magister who wears a gown, academic of course, or clad in white-collared or gentlemanly attire to show that he is qualified and has the authentic answers to all problems. Drawing his salary every month, he is also empowered to carry a stick, real or metaphorical, with which to ‘beat’ the children who give wrong answers. The pedagogue in contrast, is attributed to be the Greek slave by Higgins. But if you look at the word ‘pedagogue’ in *Oxford English Dictionary* only from the first sense of the word, which is obsolete except in reference to ancient times, this idea of pedagogue being the slave can be justified and so we retain that sense to follow the story line suggested by Higgins. The first sense of ‘pedagogue’ is given as: “A man having the oversight of a child or youth; an attendant who led a boy to school. Obs. exc. in reference to ancient times” (See *OED*, pedagogue, n, sense 1). In fact, the adaptation from Greek ‘*paidagogos*’ (παιδαγωγός) could mean ‘a trainer and teacher of boys’, as it is derived from *pais*, *paido* (παις, παιδο) meaning ‘boy’ and *agogos* (ἀγωγός) meaning ‘leader’. Higgins asserts however, that although just the slave who was supposed to escort the children to school, he [a pedagogue] is used by the patrician family to walk a few paces behind the young master. When the young master snaps his fingers,

he should come forward to give information, answer questions, or perhaps if that is what the young master wishes, be ready to conduct an argument or even to give a test. This pedagogue may be an expert but his expertise emerges only on demand as if he were a walking library. As a slave he doesn't earn very much and knows very well that, once he fails to deliver and satisfy the young master, he will have to starve.

I remember one of my esteemed and late Professors of Literature at college, to have been in full honour nicknamed as a “Dictionary”, as he was in the habit of mentioning almost all the possible synonyms of a particular word which appeared in the lecture. I do wish to pay homage to him on record. Those were the days when the potentialities of the use of computers in everyday lives were undreamt of. But the computers these days are unimaginably awesome and helpful for a student to reach any nook and corner of any field of knowledge which he wants to immerse himself into. If in the remote past, we could experience the rare instances of having a ‘human dictionary’ or ‘human encyclopedia’, we are not far away from arriving at ‘brainy, intelligent, sensitive and sensible computers’ which might make the communications much more intelligent and interactive and the final and ultimate phase CALL which is Intelligent CALL will be realized. Due to various reasons, I believe, at least in many affluent countries, and to a certain extent in the non-affluent countries, computers will definitely take the efficient role of being effective pedagogues fulfilling the needs of the learners to the best of the students’ satisfaction. In fine, CALL has a very significant role to play in the ‘autonomous education’ of the present day children and the youngsters in learning and acquiring the flair of any language.

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