

CALL for SLA: Does its Benefits Outweigh its Costs?

Farah Sultana Akbar

Teachers College, Columbia University

The rate at which computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has evolved during the last three decades is remarkable. With annual conferences devoted to its various aspects, books being published regularly, and at least four international journals dedicated to this specialty, CALL continues to grow given the interest and commitment of the professionals and stakeholders concerned. A closer examination of the major aspects of CALL, such as its design and material, research, and practice (especially the relevant kind of teacher education) would reveal a gradual but steady increase of specialization and sophistication, thus attesting to the enormous potential of CALL in facilitating language learning (Levy & Stockwell, 2006).

Nowadays, most CALL materials consist of interactive multimedia presentations with sound, animation, and full-motion video. This is a huge step forward from the CALL materials 30 years ago, which were solely based on basic textual gap-filling tasks and simple programming exercises (see, for example, Papert, 1984). However, this leap has not been completely linear in the sense that the old and obsolete materials have not always been replaced by new and improved ones. One of the main reasons for such a disconcerted effort is that these materials are usually designed by either teachers with limited technical skills or technicians with no experience in teaching (Beatty, 2003). Considering that one important goal of a CALL program is to encourage learners to delve more deeply into the content, it is imperative for the curriculum and CALL program to be structured in the form of a sequence or a series of developmental levels. In addition, it is important that CALL learners be challenged to perform at higher levels of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy, going beyond mere knowledge and comprehension activities to application, analysis, and use of the content. In order to better design CALL materials along this line, there is a need for more interdisciplinary collaborations and partnerships. Otherwise, learners might feel confused and lost in the enormous sea of information using the World Wide Web (WWW). It is through such collaboration(s) in the design of software programs and materials that CALL may become *complementary*, as opposed to merely supplementary, to instructed second language (L2) learning.

Over the years, second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have revealed the differences in the quality and quantity of language produced in synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC), the bulk of which has focused mainly on the development of L2 grammar and the lexicon (Levy & Stockwell, 2006). This is possible with the growing availability of synchronous and asynchronous technology tools such as e-mails, chats, Web 2.0 tools, etc. The jury is still out, however, as to whether – and if so, to what extent – CMC could actually contribute to SLA. One justification for introducing CMC in language courses has been the somewhat subjective view regarding the potential of technology in promoting language learning (Johnson, 2002). On an empirical level, preliminary research indicates that there indeed exists a relationship between CMC and L2 acquisition; meanwhile, an increasing number of empirical students have suggested that CMC can facilitate the acquisition process (see, for example, Payne & Whitney, 2002; Stockwell & Harrington, 2003). However, before making a verdict on the effectiveness of CMC vis-à-vis SLA, it is necessary to differentiate among the

different features of each tool, since the different social, psychological, and material considerations involved would affect the ways they are used to assist language learning to a considerable extent (Bhatia & Ritchie, 2009). Moreover, when individual preferences (e.g., learning styles) and variations in the use of language in different forms of CMC are taken into account, it becomes obvious that choosing the appropriate form(s) of CMC for a certain language context is no easy task (Levy & Stockwell, 2006). Having a thorough understanding of the characteristics and constraints of each CMC tool, as well as a principled approach to selecting different types of tools, then, can likely facilitate language teaching and learning. In short, they are crucial to the successful implementation of CMC for SLA.

In his review of the research on teacher education, Hubbard (2008) points out that technology education for language teachers is lacking in the majority of training programs, despite the increasing institutional demands for technologically savvy teachers to develop novel applications, and train the next generation of language teachers. To meet the growing demands of CALL in the L2 classroom and the desire for teachers with technological skills on the part of institutional employers (Hubbard, 2007), appropriate preparation of language teachers is required. Language teachers, both in-service and prospective, need to be able to make decisions about the optimal use of CALL, identify the appropriate CALL solutions, and understand the evolving role of CALL methodology and materials in their own classrooms (Chappelle, 2007; Kessler, 2006). That being the case, some teachers continue to see the effects of technology either too idealistically, or too pessimistically. Daud (1992) responds to this by suggesting that teachers be realistic and set reasonable expectations, and that those who use technology should not “expect the computer to handle all their students’ problems” (p. 69).

In conclusion, the successful implementation of CALL for SLA hinges upon the degree to which language teachers have clear pedagogical goals and objectives, the necessary knowledge of the CMC tools and options, and an awareness of the goals, needs, and skill levels of the L2 learners. It is also important for them to understand that the backgrounds, needs, and goals of the CALL designers, teachers, and researchers are very different, which would potentially lead to differential interpretations and applications of the prevailing theoretical models and frameworks. Evidently, there is still a long way to go before the benefits from CALL as a whole can truly be said to outweigh its costs and/or potential issues.

REFERENCES

- Beatty, K. (2003). *Teaching and researching computer assisted language learning*. London: Longman.
- Bhatia, T. K., & Ritchie, W. C. (2009). Second language acquisition: Research and application in the information age. In W. C. Ritchie, & T. K. Bhatia (Eds.), *The new handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 545-565). Bingley: Emerald.
- Bloom, H. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives, the classification of educational goals – Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*. New York: McKay.
- Chappelle, C. (2007). Computer-assisted language learning. In B. Spolsky & F. M. Hult (Eds.), *Handbook of educational linguistics* (pp. 585-593). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Daud, M. (1992). Issues in CALL implementation and its implications in teacher training. *CALICO Journal*, 10 (1), 69-78.

- Hubbard, P. (2007). Critical issues: Professional development. In J. Egbert, E. Hanson-Smith, & K. Huh (Eds.), *CALL environments: Research, practice and critical issues* (2nd ed.) (pp. 276-292). Alexandria, VA: TESOL.
- Hubbard, P. (2008). CALL and the future of language teacher education. *CALICO Journal*, 25(2), 175-188.
- Kessler, G. (2006). Assessing CALL Teacher Training: What are we doing and what could we do better? In P. Hubbard & M. Levy (Eds.), *Teacher education in CALL* (pp. 23-42). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Levy, M., & Stockwell, G. (2006). *CALL Dimensions: Options and issues in computer-assisted language learning*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Papert, S. (1984). *Microworlds: Transforming education*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Stockwell, G. R., & Harrington, M. W. (2003). The incidental development of L2 proficiency in NS-NNS email interactions. *CALICO Journal*, 20(2), 337-359.
- Payne, J. S., & Whitney, P. J. (2002). Developing L2 oral proficiency through synchronous CMC: Output, working memory, and interlanguage development. *CALICO Journal*, 20(1), 7-32.

Farah Sultana Akbar is a doctoral student in the Applied Linguistics program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her primary research interests include computer-mediated communication (CMC) in second language acquisition, especially error correction via CMC, and technology-assisted language teaching and learning. She is also interested in teacher education and curriculum development.