

CALL IN THE YEAR 2000: A LOOK BACK FROM 2016

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This commentary offers a brief reflection on the state of CALL in 1997, when *Language Learning & Technology* was launched with my paper entitled “CALL in the year 2000: Still in search of research paradigms?” The point of my 1997 paper was to suggest the potential value of research on second language learning for the study of CALL. This look back from 2016 claims that theory and research in second language acquisition has proven useful for evaluating the quality of technologies for language learning.

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Like many articles in the late 1990s, “CALL in the year 2000: Still in search of research paradigms?” (Chapelle, 1997) looked ahead to the symbolic gateway into a new era of language learning and teaching. At the time of its publication, the potentials for language learning technologies had expanded dramatically because of improvements in hardware and software, not the least of which was the World Wide Web. The promise of massive progress was evident to those of us who had engaged with computer-assisted language learning (CALL) over the previous twenty years. But how would progress be made and measured? My article in the first issue of *Language Learning & Technology* (LLT) addressed this question. As of March, 2016, it had been cited 474 times according to Google Scholar, making it among the most-cited articles in the journal. Why has this article caught the attention of so many readers over the years?

I can only speculate about why so many professionals have read and cited this article, but I do know why I wrote it. To explain the motivation, I have to turn back the clock to the 1990s. *LLT* was launched into a much different professional landscape than the one it occupies today. The World Wide Web was relatively new even though we had been communicating via the text-based Internet for over ten years. CALL existed as a professional area of study with an organization (CALICO) and a professional journal in the United States, both born in the early 1980s and growing in the 1990s. The web was yet another addition to a progression of developing technologies that fed the imaginations of professionals in CALL. There was always something new to work with in higher education—new technologies, new software, and new ideas across many disciplines. What better environment could an academic dream of! What problem could serve as a meaningful starting point for the new web-based journal, *LLT*? The problem that was core to our work was how to evaluate the innovations that we were developing for language learning. Evaluation of technological innovations was very much an open question with a range of cross-disciplinary inputs to the process.

The main contribution of my article was the suggestion that research evaluating the quality of technologies for language learning could benefit from approaches taken to investigating instructed second language acquisition. Instructed second language acquisition, or second language classroom research, had developed considerable momentum through the 1980s and early 1990s (e.g., Chaudron, 1988). Such research examines teachers’ and learners’ face-to-face interactions and discourse as they unfold in the classroom. Results are informative for the design of instruction, feedback to teachers about their classroom behavior, and teacher education more broadly. Developed by and for second language researchers, classroom research is focused on language, for example, what language is used by teachers

and students, who talks how much during the lesson, how long the turns are, what functions are performed using the target language, and how language is repeated, recast, modified, and corrected. These data from the classroom are theorized in terms of their probable benefit for second language learning. In other words, instructed second language acquisition research interprets students' observable linguistic performance in a manner that allows for evaluation of the success of the classroom activities.

“CALL in the year 2000: Still in search of research paradigms?” suggested that CALL research might fruitfully be informed by the approaches used in second language classroom research. I pointed out that diverse cross-disciplinary perspectives are directed at a range of questions. These questions may be good for some purposes, but there is a need to specify the questions particularly relevant to CALL and to identify ways that they can be investigated through empirical research. Failure to do so in the past had resulted in product-oriented comparison studies about learning outcomes with no theoretical explanatory basis as well as studies investigating aspects of software performance, communication patterns, and community formation with unspecified links to language learning. The suggestion that theoretical concepts from instructed second language acquisition research should be useful for CALL research has been picked up, discussed and expanded to the point that it is typical for CALL research articles to begin with an explanation of the theoretical basis for the study. Importantly, today this theoretical basis typically is pertinent to second language acquisition.

The critical issue is that “evaluating the quality of learner language in an L2 task requires that some assumptions be held concerning the types of language use expected to be beneficial for L2 development” (Chapelle, 1997, p. 22). This statement is as true today as it was twenty years ago. The difference is that the second language acquisition research that can form the basis for CALL research today is much broader than it was in the 1990s. At that time, it was primarily interactionist second language acquisition (Gass, 1997) that theorized the type of linguistic input and conditions of interaction as well as characteristics of linguistic production in a manner that was useful for empirical research. Throughout the late 1990s and first decade of the 2000s, second language classroom researchers recognized the following:

Learning through technology depends critically on learners' access to and use of technology, factors controlled by circumstances that may be only partly under the learner's control.

Theoretical perspectives of language socialization, sociocultural theory, and activity theory open the theoretical lens to encompass the learner in context, thus making space for relevant factors such as learners' agency and identity, which affect opportunities for learning. (Chapelle, 2009, p. 750)

Analysis of the contemporary state of research on CALL suggests that approaches to research are being sought and that a variety of approaches are being taken. Perhaps in some measure due to the influence of my article, the variety of approaches includes a major representation from second language acquisition. Such approaches provide researchers with a frame of reference to interpret the value of the learning processes that students engage in as they use technology for language learning.

With a range of approaches to second language research to select from, CALL researchers are able to design evaluation studies to investigate questions of interest to second language teachers and researchers. Over the past fifteen years, expectations that evaluation research have a theoretical framing relevant to second language development have increased dramatically. It seems inevitable that the theory–research link be better structured around the specific claims designers wish to make about learning activities. Theoretical perspectives about what promotes learning allow researchers make value claims supportable by the behavior they observe and learners' reports of their learning processes. For example, researchers in many studies have looked for evidence of negotiation of meaning or learners' modification of their output based on feedback. Such claims lend themselves well to investigations that follow the research traditions

set out by interactionist second language acquisition. However, other theoretical perspectives are needed to interpret the private turns, strategic decision-making, or enactment of certain collaborative roles during online conversation. As *LLT* continues to bring us articles on critical issues in the field, I am certain that the topic of frameworks for planning research that serves in the evaluation of CALL will appear on its virtual pages.

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