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The Advantages and Disadvantages of Computer Assisted Language Learning and Teaching for Foreign Languages

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Abstract

It is a truth well known that education means first of all to act on behalf of some valuable beliefs that stand for a certain structure and functionality of the educational process. The factors involved in the teaching process, the educational tasks, all procedures and situations, as well as all auxiliary means involved in achieving education have to meet the social needs. And within the context of a society characterized by an ever changing and improving dynamics, the values that express the educational aim, the educational purposes and objectives must undergo a thorough transformation, in order to correspond the actual trends.

Keywords: Computer assisted language learning and teaching; foreign language teachers; CALL phases; CALL advantages; CALL disadvantages; educational technology development

1. Introduction

It is a truth well known that education means first of all to act on behalf of some valuable beliefs that stand for a certain structure and functionality of the educational process. The factors involved in the teaching process, the educational tasks, all procedures and situations, as well as all auxiliary means involved in achieving education have to meet the social needs. And within the context of a society characterized by an ever changing and improving dynamics, the values that express the educational aim, the educational purposes and objectives must

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undergo a thorough transformation, in order to correspond the actual trends. The rapid development of computers and Internet has made foreign language teachers consider computer assisted language teaching a component of languages learning pedagogy. That is why the traditional educational system is no longer accepted and has to take into account the technological and conceptual changes of the society. For example, in the traditional learning system the main goals were centred on acquiring knowledge, while nowadays the actual educational context and educational reforms have set as main objectives those factors and means that cover primarily the formation of attitudes and intellectual capabilities, and further assimilation of knowledge. Such requirements, of course, the selection of the educational content, all the factors involved in education are determined by the context in which education is developed. The paper, first, describes the different stages of development of computer assisted language teaching along the time, and then examines the advantages and disadvantages of computer usage in both foreign language teaching and learning. The main purpose is to make language teachers acknowledge both the advantages and disadvantages of using computers so that they can make the most of efficiency of modern technology to enhance foreign language learning. One important issue to be discussed is that there are still many teachers who do not own the computer “language”, and they first need training to learn to use the basics of computer, navigating the Internet and software programs that will allow them to create Internet-based exercises or applications. At the same time, the digital technologies era seems to belong to the young generation, as students are one step ahead their teachers when it comes to using computers. This is an important part that has to be considered and anticipated by the language teachers and needs as the same time to be turned into an advantage for teaching.

2. Short history of computer assisted language learning (CALL) development

Computer assisted language learning and teaching offers the language teacher and learner a lot of activities that, when carefully planned as part of lesson development, enable an easier and better understanding for language learners.

The role of the computer during classes as part of lesson development has known a few different stages of development and has nowadays become an integrative part of the language learning process. According to Barson and Debski [1] in 1996 there has been a gradual development for computer assisted language learning (CALL); it has known three different phases: behaviouristic CALL, communicative CALL, integrative CALL.

2.1. Behaviouristic CALL – advantages and disadvantages

The first phase was conceived and implemented in the second half of the 20th century, and then the computer served as a vehicle for delivering instructional materials to the students. The computer role was that of a tutor, and the materials delivered were repetitive language drills, as described by Taylor in 1980 [2] vocabulary, grammar and translation tests. Nowadays repetitive language drills and practice are still used as the approach offers a series of advantages:

- providing whenever necessary access to the same learning material is essential to acquiring a language;
- allowing students to access the same material over and over again and offering immediate and non judgmental feed-back every time is ideal for mastering a language;
- presenting such language materials on an individualized basis, without time keeping and deadlines, offering students the choice to study in their own rhythm is beneficial for owing a language.
2.2. Communicative CALL – advantages and disadvantages

There is a second phase of CALL whose main teaching approach was based on communication; it became popular in the years 1970s and 1980s. There are several types of programs developed and introduced during this phase. There were some programs that offered practice of skills in a format whose basic target was attained by playing computer games. Even if in this type of programs the computer still represents a tutor. Taylor and Perez [3] introduced in 1989 a CALL approach used for activities that involve communications and this involves computer as stimulus. The purpose of this CALL activity is focused on the students’ conversation, written tasks, or critical thinking. Another model of computers in communicative CALL refers to the computer as a tool, it is introduced in programs that allow learners easier understanding and usage of the language, such as spelling and grammar checks programs used in the process of writing.

One of the major challenge for the educators as well as for the CALL advocates was to overcome the obstacles of the language learning and to optimize the opportunities that would allow them to find new approaches that could help integrate technology in the language learning process. Recent development and advances in computer technology provided them with the necessary premises to take the steps to the next phase.

2.3. Integrative CALL – advantages and disadvantages

The third and current phase is integrative CALL, based on the technological development of multimedia computers and the world wide web. Multimedia resources – texts, sound animations, and videos – are all together now available for use in a single machine, which is usually the computer. The Internet as well provides the most widely used and accessed multimedia resources, through the World Wide Web because is the e-space where all multimedia resources are linked together and the can be run through at a click of a mouse.

The Internet provides a lot of advantages for language learning and teaching. It is also considered a very useful tool because it allows students the possibility to connect with the world, to create an authentic learning environment. It is a very handy tool because skills are easily combined and integrate in a single activity, in a natural manner. It is also a powerful tool because it gives the students control over their learning, individualising their needs accordingly, promoting at the same time learner independence and development of learning strategies. It is a motivating tool because it can provide access to a lot of funny games and communicative activities, thus reducing learning stress and anxiety, as they provide repeated lessons as often as necessary. It is an interactive tool because it offers the students the possibility to create their own materials and share them with other students, also giving them the possibility to communicate with native speakers, a chance for better understanding and more accurate meaning rendering. It is a resourceful tool because it gives students constant access to plenty of materials, such as newspapers and magazine articles, movie reviews, book excerpts. It is an educational tool because it offers students the opportunity to actively take part in activities beyond classroom and course books, in the target language, exchanging messages with native speakers and interacting in the target language, as part of cultural and social exchange, the outcome being an improvement in reading and writing skills. It is a confidence-gain tool because the Internet is text driven, and offers even most shy or hesitating people time and space to think and participate in discussions and information exchange, and by communicating and interacting, students will improve their linguistic skills, change their learning attitude by building self-confidence.

All the above mentioned advantages are lost in the face of some important obstacles that arise due to some objective reasons. Financial and technical problems seem to be the main problems. Financial problems are related to costs of the acquisition of computers, software, telephone lines and other expenses. Technical problems refer to the fact that computers due to their limitations of their artificial intelligence, computer technology is not able to handle unexpected situations as teachers can. Other problems can be the fact that both teachers and students need training in order to acquire ICT basic competencies that allow them to use the computer, otherwise students
may become frustrated, instead of being motivated to learn and teachers may refuse to use a technology that they cannot master.

Various but still huge amount of information on the Internet may lead to lack of focusing and hesitation in taking a decision regarding the best choice of materials.

Another disadvantage may be represented by the fact that the greatest part of the success of implementing CALL in classroom as part of lesson development depends on the teachers alone, on the way they use Internet resources. Warschauer in 1997 [4] proposed some guidelines for implementing CALL that are helpful for teachers who teach foreign languages. Mainly these guidelines refer to the way a good relationship between teacher computer and student can be established during classes of foreign languages, based on what the new vehicle that empowers lessons in quality and significance brings new, innovative and irreplaceable. In this context, the computer should be considered a useful tool if it can offer the students the information, practice and activities a book or other educational aids cannot. The computer should be considered a good choice if it offers a positive educational outcome by allowing teachers to integrate computer in their lesson activities, to encourage students to be more involved during classes, to help, assist and support them with the Internet tasks.

3. Actual challenges of implementing CALL

In addition to the advantages and disadvantages stated along the three phases of CALL development for the learning process, taking into account the main guidelines outlined above the actual CALL phase which is continuously developing, updating and improving some other advantages and disadvantages can be identified by teachers of foreign languages.

Among the advantages and benefits of integrating a computer during a language learning lesson development notable are the following:
- computer can promote language interaction between teacher and learners;
- it offers the possibility to simulate some processes and phenomena in motion through animation, and thus some experimental demos;
- methods and manners of organizing efficiently and modern the educational / learning process;
- getting used to computer technology from an early age influences students intellectual development;
- it offers the possibility of realising a string of didactic operations which are very important for evaluation, and also for developing students creativity;

Some disadvantages that may alter the educational process in general and language learning process as well can be:
- deterioration of the teacher role in the learning process;
- division in small sections and well delimited of content leads shortening the matter, favouring those students with analytic thinking, but not those with synthetic thinking;
- controlling step by step students mental activity by the teacher stops them from developing creative abilities and entrepreneur spirit and initiative;
- excessive individualization of learning can lead to denial of the teacher – student dialogue and leads to the isolation of the learning process from its psycho – social context.
4. Conclusion

Undoubtedly there are a number of positive aspects that are counterbalanced by the negative aspects regarding the way technology should be integrated into language learning classrooms. On the one hand, computers can very quickly allow access to a particular piece of information, whereas teachers looking for a specific section will definitely spend more time retrieving that piece of information. On the other hand, while computers will always deliver the same type of information in the same way, teachers in classrooms are very important because they offer various significant examples in order to provide a better understanding of a particular topic, adjusting their pace and rhythm according to the students individual needs.

The role of the teacher in the classroom is very important and even though computers have become part of the learning process, helping students with information, it is the teachers that can provide valuable feedback and offer always good information to their students, teach them how to correctly choose the right and genuine sources of information on the Internet and also be creative. In other words, computers are valuable tools for the learning process and the Internet can show a good potential for use during language learning and teaching, but the most important is the human factor, that is the teacher whose role is irreplaceable when it comes to providing moral guidance, to being a mentor who shapes career and social development and encouraging intellectual growth.

Concluding, even though computers cannot and should not ever replace teachers for the reasons above mentioned, and even if there are more advantages that favour computer assisted language learning and teaching in a classroom, such developing technology should only be seen as integrated into the learning and teaching process, as part of a daring endeavour in developing a successful educational system.

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