Computer: A Device for Learning English Language
A Summary of Advantages and Disadvantages

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Abstract

Does computer create learning atmosphere? Why are students forced to learn English through computers? CALL progammes provide the learners with a novelty. They teach in varying and more interesting learning conditions and present English through games and problem-solving techniques. They offer a valuable source of self-access and self assessment study adoptable to the student's level. As CALL is a technological aid for learning, it has a number of advanced facilities that can help a student to learn a language with proficiency to communicate. It provides a facility which allows the student to listen to model pronunciation, repeat and record the same, listen to their performance and compare with the model, and do self-assessment. It has become inevitable in today's context but, at the same time, it poses certain challenges.

Key words: CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning); roles of teacher and students; advantages and disadvantages

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Introduction

Why should the English teachers use computers for their students? Does computer really create learning atmosphere? What is CALL and how it is useful to the English learners. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is an approach to language teaching and learning in which computer technology is used as an aid to presentation, justification and assessment of material to be learned.

CALL is a form of computer-based learning which carries two important features: individualized learning and bidirectional learning. "It is a form of student-centered learning materials, which promote self-paced accelerated learning. CALL is an interactive method of instruction that helps learners achieve their goal of learning, at their own pace and ability" (Suresh Kumar and Sreehari 2007: 3). This paper gives a detailed picture of CALL and its uses, the role of teachers and students, advantages and disadvantages of CALL.

The old and traditional face-to-face teaching in a classroom continues to be used in these days. Many teachers want to teach English by using modern technology. It includes a lot of beneficial points. The learners also like computer-assisted language learning because of visualization. Reinhard (1995: 54) says that "80% of understanding comes from visualization and much less from hearing, although retention rate is higher for the latter."

Computers can motivate the students and fill them with confidence. Students easily get the concentration needed using computers and they acquire the technical knowledge also. R. Taylor (1980: 82) expressed that "computer assisted language learning programs can be wonderful stimuli for second language learning. Currently, computer technology can provide a lot of fun games and communicative activities, reduce the learning stresses and anxieties, and provide repeated lessons as often as necessary. Those abilities will promote second language learners' learning motivation. Through various communicative and interactive activities, computer technology can help second language learners strengthen their linguistic skills, affect their learning attitude, and build their self-instruction strategies and self-confidence."

The learners who learn English through computers have extraordinary knowledge of various things. Robertson (1987: 315) says that "the participants who joined computer-assisted language learning programs also had significantly higher self-esteem ratings than regular students. Today, with the high development of computer technology, computers can capture, analyze, and present data on second language students' performances during the learning process."

Why a Language Laboratory?

In the past, laboratories were used for purely science courses. The role of the teachers of English was to teach English text books. Now, it is totally changed as English teaching means not only teaching grammar, syntax and vocabulary but also teaching communication skills. Language

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teaching in the past was conducted mainly in the classroom with teachers' teaching and students' passive learning, and with the aids of blackboard, recorders and videos. Students are tired of traditional English classes. They seem to give more attention to this new style of teaching and learning. As a result, when using a computer, students may study more actively. It is a novel thing in India to introduce laboratory for language learning while it is very common in Western countries to train children in the laboratory to enrich their language learning experiences.

The language laboratory is very useful for assessing students' pronunciation. It provides students with the technical tools to get the best samples of pronunciation of the language. The electronic devices used in the laboratory will excite the eyes and ears of the learner to acquire the language quickly and easily. The learners can remember the pronunciation if they listen to computer reproductions. The laboratory's collection is designed to assist learners in the acquisition and maintenance of aural comprehension, oral and written proficiency, and cultural awareness. The language laboratory offers broadcasting, television programmes, web-assisted materials and videotaped off-air recordings in the target language. In a word, we say that a learner can obtain the experience of having interaction with native speakers through the laboratory.

Hence, the language laboratory has become the need of the hour in any language learning process for communication. J. Richards (2001) says: "The language laboratory exists to help one to use technology effectively to communicate. It is not merely for learning a single language, but can be used for teaching a number of languages efficiently. To acquire a sensibility for the sounds and rhythm of a language, one has to hear the best samples of a spoken language."

Here, we would like to list the usefulness of language laboratory.

1. It provides practices for students through experiential learning.
2. It is a tool designed not only for English teaching but also for teaching other languages.
3. It increases students' motivation to learn.
4. It encourages greater interaction between teachers and students.
5. It helps one to learn pronunciation, accent, stress and all other aspects of the phonetics of a language.
6. It enhances student achievement and enlarges global understanding.
7. It emphasizes the individual needs and increases authentic materials for study
8. It enables one to conduct courses for various groups of people like students, faculty members, business people, etc.
9. It helps students to prepare for international examinations like IELTS, TOEFL and other competitive examinations.
10. Online courses and paperless examinations can be conducted through the language laboratory.

The Role of a Teacher in CALL

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CALL brings many radical changes in the role of a teacher whose presence plays a prominence role when doing CALL activities. Teachers should be familiar with the resources and should be able to anticipate technical problems and limitations. The teacher's role as facilitator of learning—as guide, correspondent, motivator, and challenger, has increased in importance. Students need the reassuring and motivating presence of a teacher in CALL environments. It is teachers' responsibility to motivate the students in the conventional classrooms but in computer assisted language learning, computer will take the job. Most of the students prefer to do work in a lab with a teacher's or tutor's presence, rather than completely on their own. Unless teachers have computer knowledge, they cannot guide the students.

Noemi says that "In other words, instead of being directly involved in students' construction of the language, the teacher interacts with students primarily to facilitate difficulties in using the target language (grammar, vocabulary, etc.) that arise when interacting with the computer and/or other people" (Domingo Noemi, 2007: 13). A communicative language learning approach could be enhanced by the use of computer mediated communication. CALL programs that are based on graded practice in formal aspects of language would perhaps not be integrated as successfully into a 'communicative' classroom, but may be a useful supplement in a self-access mode for specific learners.

The Role of Students in CALL

Students should consult meaning and assimilate new information through interaction and collaboration with someone other than the teacher, be that person a classmate or someone outside of the classroom entirely. Learners must also learn to interpret new information and experiences on their own terms. Shy students can feel free in their own students'-centered environment. If they have any doubts, these can be clarified. This will raise their self-esteem and their knowledge will improve. If students undertake collaborative projects, they will do their best to perform these within set time limits. The learners have to try to observe the things in the computers and they can do so as they would get immediate feedback.

Advantages and Disadvantages of CALL

CALL presents many activities that focus on the language skills. The target language learning involves all language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Though the learners get all the language skills in classroom teaching, CALL mainly insists on the learners to perform listening and speaking activities. It motivates the learners towards language learning. The progammes which are loaded by teachers may make the students to learn new things. It enables the learners to think in a critical way. Using the systems in the classrooms, the students can improve their mastery of basic skills.

The following are some advantages that teachers and students get from computer assistance language learning.

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i. Individualization

Computer and its attached language learning programs could provide second language learners more independence from classrooms and allow learners the option to work on their learning material at any time of the day. Inhibited and other non-English medium background students from rural and urban places can greatly benefit by individualization. The programmes lead the learners to learn a language. The learners get freedom to pronounce words and escape from others comments on their pronunciation and errors of their sentences.

ii. Interaction and Negotiation

In CALL, students have opportunities to interact and negotiate meaning. They can learn all subjects in a language include grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary in the process of language learning by computer technology. They are allowed to learn all the four skills i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The trust that the students have that computer makes the learners faster than the classroom teaching is true. Students get a good interaction with the other members who attend the CALL so that they develop a good relation with community. Negotiation is compulsory in foreign language learning. The computer supports the teachers and students to be authentic audiences. When students listened to native speakers from the computer and practiced dialogues. The computer or the internet provides dynamic and realistic situations with native speakers speaking. Through the interaction with their classmates and teachers, they become communicative in English with proper body language and eye contacts.

iii. Computers Can Help Overcome Barriers of Space and Time

In traditional classes, students must attend the classes at particular time whereas computer assisted language learning, students can learn whenever they want. If an educational institution has a satellite system of computer laboratories, students can study English at various places on campus at any time. If the school has a network of computer laboratories, students can use the same materials wherever they are working. Students can even study at home if their personal computers have a link to their school's system or network. In addition, the teachers and students get materials and information from the websites of their own country.

iv. Computers are Very Useful for Teaching Composition

For writing tasks, computers will help the learners wonderfully. In the past, when a writing assignment is given, students have to write their draft first and after editing, they used to retype or copy it again. Writing is not only time-consuming, but also not easily kept afterwards. But with computers, students can use a word processing program to write their compositions and make corrections easily so that they do not have to retype or copy for their final draft. They can also edit their writing before they turn it in to the teacher, and then to revise the composition based on their teacher's comments.

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iv. Global understanding:

English is spoken all over the world. Learning a language by CALL, learners will come to know what is going on around the world. It helps the learners through internet. It would help to the learners to understand English globally so that they will learn Indian English as well as foreign language.

v. Motivation

As in the place of teachers, computers will motivate the students to learn language. Student motivation is therefore increased, especially whenever a variety of activities is offered, which make them feel more independent. When they sit in front of the system, they spontaneously concentrate on the subject because it is a novel approach to most of the Indian students.

vii. Authentic Materials for Study

CALL provides authentic materials to the learners for study. Through these materials, learners are guided. Materials can be accessed 24 hours a day. Computer offers different types of topics very quickly. Teachers and students can use the time effectively in the process of language learning by using computer technology. Nunan (1999: 26) concludes that "interactive visual media which computers provided seem to have a unique instructional capability for topics that involve social situations or problem solving, such as interpersonal solving, foreign language or second language learning"

viii. Authentic Tasks

Students will get the authentic task by computers. Like classroom tasks, in CALL students will be indulged in genuine tasks. By the help of these tasks, students can learn a target language in practical situation. Teachers try to make their tasks authentic with the aid of software. Students experience foreign cultures in pictures and movies. The classroom environment learning enriches learning by overcoming the limitations of time, money, and resources. The activities may encourage the learners so that they may learn a new language.

Disadvantages

Besides the listed advantages of CALL, there are some disadvantages of using computer technology to students and teachers. Gips, DiMattia, & Gips (2004: 208) indicated that "the first disadvantage of computer and its attached language learning programs is that they will increase educational costs and harm the equity of education. When computers become a basic requirement for student to purchase, low budget schools and low-income students usually cannot afford a computer. It will cause unfair educational conditions for those poor schools and students. On the other hand, expensive hardware and software also becomes the big obligations for schools and parents."

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i. Basic Technology Knowledge and Learners' Lack of Interest

Teachers as well as students need the basic knowledge about the computers. Unless one has previous knowledge of computer use, the learning is not powerful. We do not find the teachers who have ample knowledge and mastery in the use of computers, in developing countries such as India. If learners do not have interest, they will be guided umpteen times by the teachers in classroom activities, but it is not possible in CALL. Some of the students, especially those who do not have computer knowledge, are not interested to learn a foreign language.

ii. Computers Are Very Expensive

Though computers have become cheaper, many schools and colleges in India, especially in rural areas, do not have computers for language teaching and learning. It is a big problem for schools and universities which cannot afford many computers. Even for schools that are rich enough, computer laboratories, once established, are not possible to be updated in time. Educational institutions are not able to update their computers and software and add new equipments and new programs.

iii. Computers Can Only Do What They Are Programmed To Do

Computers are machines. Complicated and powerful as they are, they still cannot take the place of teachers. They cannot communicate meaningfully with the users because they don't recognize natural language fully. They sometime cannot understand students' questions. They can only respond to certain commands that are already programmed in advance. Thus, many programs fail to meet users' individual demands. In addition, most classroom teachers have neither the skills nor the time to make programs. This has left the field to commercial developers, who often fail to base their programs on sound pedagogical principles. The quality of the programs is, therefore, questioned quite often, especially, by the language teachers.

iv. Computers May Cut the Students from the Classroom Environment

Classroom teaching, though with some weaknesses, is itself an art. In the classroom, teachers and students communicate with each other on both the knowledge they are learning and on their emotional feelings, which, in particular, makes the classroom teaching more attractive. Students feel that they are cut off from the traditional classroom environment and have less communication with the teachers and the people around them.

v. Computers Can Break Down

Computers sometimes may have technical problems and then break down. It doesn't happen always but a breakdown in the middle of classroom teaching may leave the teachers embarrassed, and waste a lot of time. A breakdown during students' autonomous learning may

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result in a loss of data and works, and students have to do some exercises from the beginning again because everything is programmed in advance. This is really a big challenge for students who are not very skillful with computers.

vi. No Creativity in Writing Tasks

Students write the essays and articles with creative notions in traditional classroom learning whereas there is a danger we find that learners may copy other ideas or articles through Internet. So students may depend too much on the computers. It will not enable them to think deep on their own. As computers provide correct spellings, the learners type and depend on the computers. Very few people write on paper these days and resort to word process using computers and this makes them forget the spellings.

Conclusion

CALL programs have become a new trend in language learning. However, computer technology still has its limitations and weaknesses. We conclude that computers must be recognized as a teaching tool. They are very good teaching aids for language teachers and they give language learners more freedom by being more accessible and versatile. Although they cannot replace the teachers, they help the learners to learn English language. Therefore, when we try to apply CALL programs to help student learning, we should recognize the advantages and disadvantages in current CALL programs and derive maximum benefits for our ESL teaching and learning.

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