

Defining the Roles of the Teacher and the Students in a Computer Assisted Language Learning Environment

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Introduction

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) applications can be very useful in delivering effective English as Second Language (ESL) courses at the tertiary level. However, designing and developing CALL applications require expertise from various disciplines including English Language Teaching (ELT), Information & Communication Technology (ICT), Graphics Design etc. designing and developing CALL applications can be undertaken only by a team with members from different fields. Developing CALL tools demands the involvement of computer programmers, ELT teachers/researchers, cognitive psychologists, Graphics Designers and User Interface Designers. (Ellis 2004)

The process of designing and developing CALL applications is a demanding task. At the same time, the implementation of the CALL applications in the learning environment is equally demanding. There are a lot of differences between a conventional learning experience and a Computer Assisted Language Learning experience. It demands a drastic change in the outlook of both teachers and students. This paper aims at discussing the new roles assigned to the teacher and the students in a CALL enhanced English Language Learning course.

CALL tools offer a wide range of unique features to the learning environment. The use of such features can make ELT effective. For example, CALL allows both group learning as well as individualized learning in an ESL course. The capability of CALL application in ESL courses is highly potential such that it misleads many teachers to approach it as a method. However, CALL is only a tool. A proper understanding of the capabilities of CALL would help a teacher deliver effective ESL courses. Because CALL primarily focuses on learning and not on teaching, which is the need of the hour, CALL materials are used as part of the learning process and not as the teacher resource. CALL applications are fundamentally student-centered which allows both individualized and self-paced learning. CALL has been in vogue for several decades now. And, it is known by different terminologies: technology-enhanced language learning (TELL), computer- assisted language instruction (CALI) and computer-aided language learning. In spite of these terms, the concept only refers to the use of computers in language learning.

CALL in Improving the Four Language Skills

Numerous researches in evaluating the effectiveness of CALL applications in ELT have been conducted all around the world. These studies report that CALL applications are significantly effective in improving reading and listening skills. A majority of CALL applications are also focused mostly on providing lessons to develop reading and listening when compared to lessons on writing and speaking. One of the reasons for such a scenario is the present capabilities of technology used in CALL. Even though CALL is in its interactive phase entering the intelligent phase, many applications are simple drills to help students practice reading and listening (Domingo, 2007). CALL is presently capable of offering lessons in writing but assessment of writing performance is still not impressive owing to limitations in Natural Language Processing (NLP) capabilities of computing (Stepp, 2002). As far as speaking is concerned, many attempts to design and develop lessons focused on speaking skills have been developed in spite of NLP limitations. Students are exposed to and made to engage in real-time yet controlled communication activities using Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) tools like Chat (Ehsani, 2007).

CMC applications like Chat are effective in allowing students to have an immersed experience in speaking through communication. Even text-based chatting applications are effective in this regard. Video Conferencing brings immediacy to the communication process as it is a synchronic application. It also allows real person-to-person communication with both visual and auditory communication. This makes learning process more authentic (Stepp, 2002). Human-computer interaction cannot be effectively used in ELT because of its limitations. Advancements in Microsoft's voice recognition application, Google's Assistant, and Apple's SIRI have been rapid and impressive, which makes real-time human-computer interaction for routine communication needs possible if not efficient, however, utilizing these applications in helping students improve their speaking skills is still in the initial stage. Evaluation of speaking is not yet perfect. Only two applications: one using a graphical representation of speech, and another using limited voice recognition, is currently in use (Ehsani, 2007; Domingo 2007).

Delivering Effective CALL Courses in ESL

The potential of CALL is so high that its effectiveness is overestimated by most teachers who use it for the first time. As a result, they forget that CALL is only a teaching aid – one of many elements that constitute the learning process. Consequently, they come to a wrong conclusion that CALL applications are unsuitable for their teaching/learning needs. It should be noted that many factors are to be considered in determining the effectiveness of a CALL application in an ESL course.

Environment is the first factor that should be considered during the evaluation. The learning environment of an ESL course in a country like India is usually person-to-person. The teacher and the textbook are the only sources of knowledge. There is usually a blackboard-and-chalk which is the only teaching aid used. In such a conventional environment, any introduction of CALL would be a drastic change. Students will not show any progress in using CALL until they become familiar with the new environment. In determining the effectiveness of CALL, the

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proportion of instruction through CALL and instruction through the conventional mode should also be taken into account. Acclimatizing the students to a CALL environment is essential in implementing a successful CALL course. The teacher should also be familiar with the CALL environment. Teacher's familiarity with CALL can go a long way in reducing the anxiety of the students in using a new learning process.

Time frame is another factor involved in delivering effective CALL courses. CALL is usually considered as an advantage in teaching ESL courses because it reduces the duration of the learning process. However, such an advantage cannot benefit first-time users of CALL. Any standard guidelines on the expected time frame of the course should be subjected to reevaluation by the teacher while introducing a CALL course. Following the prescribed time frame and expecting the students perform has the possibility to render the course less than effective, if not ineffective. Apart from these two main factors, the following questions become relevant in the context of computer literacy: "Will those [students] that will be involved in the learning process be conversant with the use of CALL software? Are the instructors sufficiently knowledgeable of the software and the principles behind its use?" (Okonkwo, 2011). Apart from these, location, culture, resources, teacher, pedagogical approach, didactical strategy, intended learning outcomes, task briefs and task outcomes are also important in delivering an effective CALL course.

The Role of the Teacher

Teacher has a very significant role in introducing CALL into the learning environment. It is a multifarious role: "resource provider", 'manager', 'coach', 'researcher' or 'facilitator'" (Okonkwo) The teacher should not only be aware of the intention of the designer in designing the CALL application. But s/he should be aware of the students' understanding of the designer's intentions without complicating their knowledge about the CALL application. It is the primary duty of the teacher to evaluate the relevance of the designer's intentions to the present situation and accordingly instruct the student. The pedagogical frame work of the application is an essential factor, and the teacher should be aware of its various aspects. "It is clearly inadequate to consider the design of the software in isolation from its pedagogical setting." (Okonkwo, 2011) At the same time, the teacher should not be intimidated by the application. It is only when s/he introduce innovations in implementing the CALL course that remarkable effectiveness can be obtained. Anderson & Draper (1991) assert, "most times software gets used in ways not predicted by the designer".

The role of the teacher in a CALL course changes drastically from that of a conventional course. Teachers, intimidated by the erroneous notion that CALL would eliminate the need for teachers, become anxious and fail to realize the new roles assigned to them under CALL. The fact that CALL cannot replace a teacher should therefore be reiterated until teachers feel comfortable around CALL. "Instead of handing down knowledge to students and being the center of students' attention, teachers become guides as they construct the activities students are to do and help them as students complete the assigned tasks." (Okonkwo, 2011)

The teacher's role as the source of knowledge is changed to the role of a facilitator. The teacher is not the source of language learning in a CALL course. The teacher monitors the learning process s/he compliments the CALL application. In terms of language practice, the teacher supplements the CALL application with human presence. CALL is a tool through which the teacher channels language learning. "Elimination of a strong teacher presence has been shown to lead to larger quantity and better quality of communication such as more fluidity, more use of complex sentences and more sharing of students' personal selves. However, teacher presence is still very important to students when doing CALL activities." (Okonkwo, 2011). The presence of a Teacher is essential to solve any technical problems. The teacher is irreplaceable when it comes to encouraging and motivating the students towards learning. The teacher becomes inevitable in conducting revisions and reinforcements. Students also prefer the teacher's presence during learning to independent learning in the absence of the teacher.

The Role of the Students

The role of the students also changes in a CALL course. They can no longer be passive participants. Their responsibility in learning becomes central to the learning process "learners must negotiate meaning and assimilate new information through interaction and collaboration with someone other than the teacher" students should become the users of the language in the class to initiate learning. It is their responsibility to initiate the learning process with their peers. They should learn to work in a team. They should expect and accept collaborative learning. However, CALL courses would allow shy students to open up. Because there will not be the teacher's direct presence. Peer learning will definitely be beneficial to such type of students. Ravichandran (2000) noted that because the use of technology redistributes teachers' and classmates' attentions, less-able students can become more active participants in the class because class interaction is not limited to that directed by the teacher.

Conclusion

Computer Assisted Language Learning can be a highly potential tool in English language learning. However, a proper understanding of the capabilities of CALL and the factors that determine its effectiveness is paramount in harnessing the true potential of the technology. The CALL environment is definitely different from the conventional environment. Both the teacher and the students should be aware of the differences. They should understand that their roles change in a CALL setup. Understanding and executing their roles will go a long way in delivering effective CALL courses.

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