ACADEMIC CALLS FOR COMPUTER ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is often perceived, somewhat narrowly, as an approach to language teaching and learning in which the computer is used as an aid to the presentation, reinforcement and assessment of material to be learned, usually including a substantial interactive element. Levy [1997:1] defines CALL more broadly as "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning". Thus, CALL has developed gradually over the last 30 years, into three somewhat distinct approaches which can be referred to as *behavioristic CALL*, *communicative CALL*, and *integrative CALL* [cf. Barson & Debski 1996].

The first phase of CALL, conceived in the 1950s and implemented in the 1960s and '70s, was based on the then-dominant behaviorist theories of learning. Programs of this phase entailed repetitive language drills and can be referred to as "drill and practice" (or, more pejoratively, as "drill and kill"). Drill and practice courseware is based on the model of *computer as tutor* [Taylor 1980]. In other words the computer serves as a vehicle for delivering instructional materials to the student. The rationale behind drill and practice was not totally spurious, which explains in part the fact that CALL drills are still used today.

The second phase of CALL was based on the communicative approach to teaching which became prominent in the 1970s and 80s. Proponents of this approach felt that the drill and practice programs of the previous decade did not allow enough authentic communication to be of much value. Several types of CALL programs were developed and used during this the phase of communicative CALL. First, there was a variety of programs to provide skill practice, but in a non-drill format. Examples of these types of programs include courseware for paced reading, text reconstruction, and language games [Healey & Johnson 1995b]. In these programs, like the drill and practice programs mentioned above, the

computer remains the "knower-of-the-right-answer" [Taylor & Perez 1989:3]; thus this represents an extension of the *computer as tutor* model. But – in contrast to the drill and practice programs – the process of finding the right answer involves a fair amount of student choice, control, and interaction. Another model of computers in communicative CALL involves the *computer as tool* [Brierley & Kemble 1991; Taylor 1980] or, as sometimes called, the *computer as workhorse* [Taylor & Perez 1989]. In this role, the programs do not necessarily provide any language material at all, but rather empower the learner to use or understand language. Examples of computer as tool include word processors, spelling and grammar checkers, desk – top publishing programs, and concordancers.

Yet, the challenge for advocates of CALL was to develop models which could help integrate the various aspects of the language learning process. As a result, integrative approaches to CALL are based on two important technological developments of the last decade – multimedia computers and the Internet. Multimedia technology – exemplified today by the CD-ROM – allows a variety of media (text, graphics, sound, animation, and video) to be accessed on a single machine. What makes multimedia even more powerful is that it also entails hyper media. That means that the multimedia resources are all linked together and that learners can navigate their own path simply by pointing and clicking a mouse.

Hypermedia provides a number of advantages for language learning. First of all, a more authentic learning environment is created, since listening is combined with seeing, just like in the real world. Secondly, skills are easily integrated, since the variety of media make it natural to combine reading, writing, speaking and listening in a single activity. Third, students have great control over their learning, since they can not only go at their own pace but even on their own individual path, going forward and backwards to different parts of the program, honing in on particular aspects and skipping other aspects altogether. Finally, a major advantage of hypermedia is that it facilitates a principle focus on the content, without sacrificing a secondary focus on language form or learning strategies. For example, while the main lesson is in the foreground, students can have access to a variety of

background links which will allow them rapid access to grammatical explanations or exercises, vocabulary glosses, pronunciation information, or questions or prompts which encourage them to adopt an appropriate learning strategy.

Thus, as we will see, the introduction of a new phase does not necessarily entail rejecting the programs and methods of a previous phase; rather the old is subsumed within the new.

References

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