KANSAI GAIDAI UNIVERSITY

A CALL to Communicate : The meaningful use of computers in English language learning

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A CALL to Communicate

—— The meaningful use of computers in English language learning ——

Dave Norman

For many teachers, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) conjures up images of rows of students working alone on tedious question/answer routines, with the teacher hovering around anxiously, hoping that the machines don't crash and that nobody asks a technical question. Although this may have been an accurate picture of CALL in the eighties and early nineties, recent developments in computer technology are making it increasingly easy for non-experts to incorporate CALL into their lessons, while the spread of the Internet gives us the ability to make CALL more interactive, meaningful and communicative. Even relatively basic skills with Microsoft Office and Netscape/Explorer allow teachers and students to use CALL in interesting and innovative ways, some of which are discussed below.

1. Email exchange

One issue that is often raised in discussions of student writing is that of audience (Hedge 1988, Felix 1998). While most real-life writing has a communicative purpose, much classroom writing goes no further than the teacher. The purpose of classroom writing is generally to practise English, and the teacher's response is usually a grade and a few comments, rather than part of meaningful, continuing communication with the student. Consequently, teachers often encourage their students to get a penfriend, as a way of getting them to communicate in the written language. Email "keypals" are a modern extension of this concept, with the added benefits of speed and convenience. Studies show that many students find email exchange stimulating, and that there are real learning benefits (Bee-Lay and Yee Ping 1991, McMeniman and Evans 1998). More formal email exchange on a class-to-class level is also possible. Staff and students at

Kansai Gaidai University and the University of Sydney have started a project using email to investigate each others' cultures. Australian students of Japanese and Japanese students of English choose questions about an aspect of their target culture, and email their partners in the target language. The Japanese-Japanese and English-English communication which is established is both personally meaningful and educationally useful (Norman and Iwashita, 2000). Teachers can find potential partner classes from Web sites such as Dave's ESL Cafe (http://www.eslcafe.com/), or merely by browsing the Web looking for teachers and classes with similar interests.

2. Project work

Project work is an established part of many language courses (Legutke and Thomas 1991), and this is an area where CALL can play a big part. Jonassen (1996) and Patrikis (1997) believe that we have allowed computers to dominate the traditional CALL experience by using them merely to set and mark exercises. Jonassen suggests that we use them instead as "mind tools" to aid us in our thinking. Humans are good at creative thought, while computers are good at data handling. The Internet can be used as an enormous source of information, spreadsheets can be used to analyze data, and word-processing packages or PowerPoint can be used to present it in oral or written form.

The Internet also gives us the chance to publish student projects, giving their work an audience outside the classroom and the potential for the students to obtain feedback from people who have read their work. Chawhan and Norman (1999) describe how they used a simple process to web-publish their students' projects. Levy (1997) has suggested that care should be taken to ensure that language skills, rather than computing skills, are required of students doing CALL project work. All that was required of the students in Chawhan and Norman's work was a basic familiarity with Microsoft Word and Excel. Students undertook short research projects, and wrote up their results in Word. The teacher then just used the "Save as HTML" command in Word '97 to publish the page on the web. A text box was inserted at the end of each group's project to allow readers to email questions and comments to the students. Responses were received from people in other countries who had found the reports while surfing the web.

While Chawhan and Norman's work focuses on the use of the Web as a means of publishing and

receiving feedback on student project work, Internet users can also be used as a source of data in project work. A site currently being developed at Kansai Gaidai University allows students to post questionnaires on the Web (Norman and Stoeckel, 2000). The students will receive electronic responses to their questionnaire, which they can then display on the Web site or use in class for oral or written presentations. The big advantage for students like those at Kansai Gaidai University, who are studying English in their own country, is that Web-posting their questionnaire gives them a far larger pool of respondents than would otherwise be available. This site, when fully functional, will be available for students anywhere who have a questionnaire they would like people to answer.

3. Class Web site

A class can work together to produce a Web page or site. This could present information about work the students have been doing that semester, or be about the students and their individual interests. Pre-intermediate level ESL students at the University of Western Australia wrote brief profiles of themselves using Microsoft Word, and then published these on the Web using the "Save as HTML" function. Photographs were added using both a digital camera and a normal camera and scanner. The teacher made a simple homepage for the class using Microsoft FrontPage (Norman 1999). The students found the exercise very motivating, and were pleased too that their families at home would be able to see work they had produced.

4. Interactive exercises

Web sites such as Dave's ESL Cafe (http://www.eslcafe.com/) often have interactive JavaScript quizzes, which are popular with many students. But, as mentioned above (Jonassen 1996, Patrikis 1997), the usefulness of this kind of exercise can be questioned. The students may be enjoying the exercises, but where is the communicative practice? One way around this is to get the students to produce the exercises themselves. The University of Victoria Language Centre has produced some very useful software called "Hot Potatoes" (http://castle.uvic.ca/hrd/halfbaked/), which allows simple creation of interactive cloze exercises, crosswords, quizzes and so on. To produce a cloze activity, for example, students could work in groups to discuss situations in which they have experienced communication difficulties. They can then write dialogues for these situations and choose words to be deleted to make the cloze. Using Hot Potatoes, this

cloze can then be converted easily by the teacher or students into a Web page, which all the students are then able to access in CALL class or for homework. An example of this kind of activity can be seen on the class Web site mentioned above (Norman 1999).

5. Discussion forums

Dale Bay at Aoyama Gakuin University has produced a Web site which makes innovative use of discussion forums (Bay 2000). Instead of just writing their opinion about an issue and inviting responses, students use this site to post end-of-term papers and reports. Readers of the site are then able to use the discussion forum format to add their comments, with the result that genuine discussion arises from the issues raised in the students' essays. The forums, which have a Japan focus, are open to anyone, and are currently being used by a number of classes in Japanese universities and colleges. The potential is there for students in the same class, in different classes at the same institution, or even at different institutions, to share their ideas and work, making students' written work much more meaningful.

6. Cutting-edge technology

The suggestions above highlight the potential to use computers and the Internet in a variety of useful ways in language learning. But perhaps the biggest obstacle these days is not using the computers, but integrating them into teaching. There is a tendency to think of CALL as a separate class, in a computer lab, with huge desktop machines dominating the environment and preventing pairwork and groupwork. This doesn't have to be the case. In 1996, Stanford University set up the "Flexible Class Lab" (http://acomp.stanford.edu/rooms/flexlab/) which uses regular furniture and laptop computers to give a normal classroom environment, in which computers can be used when necessary and then stored elsewhere. Recent advances in wireless computing mean that a building or an entire campus can be set up so that students and staff can use their laptops to connect to the Internet at any time and in any place. Keio University uses Lucent Technology's WaveLan system in this way, giving students campus-wide wireless connections to the Internet. This gives them the flexibility to integrate computers into course work to a degree that is not possible with standard computing facilities.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of and rationale for the use of computers within the Communicative Language Teaching paradigm. On-going classroom-based research into the effectiveness of some of these methods is being conducted by the author at Kansai Gaidai University. Preliminary results will be presented in the next issue of this journal.

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