

Chapter 65

Towards the Normalization of Web-Based Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in College English Instruction: Two Cases in China

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ABSTRACT

Since the turn of the 21st century, many Chinese higher institutions followed the trends of Web-based Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL) in College English instruction. After one decade's development, the effectiveness of this west-originated approach remains to be investigated. This chapter analyses two cases from two Chinese higher institutions, examining to what extent Web-based computer-assisted language learning is integrated into College English teaching and how the instructors and students adapt to it. The findings in the two cases show that lack of training for both faculty and students, technological defects of online systems, hybrid levels of students' English proficiency within one class have presented great challenges to the implementation of the new mode of instruction. While defining these obstacles, the second case, in particular, explored ways to address some of these challenges by the innovative use of internet technology.

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BACKGROUND

English is a required subject for Chinese students from primary school way up to college. The traditional English teaching in China was dominated by teacher-centered, book-centered, and grammar-centered approach. The typical English classroom in China is one where the teacher lectures most of the time and the students listen and take notes (Huang & Xu, 1999). As a result, students may score high in standardized tests while lacking communicative competence in real scenarios. Since the turn of the 21st century, with an aim of improving English teaching quality and students' communicative competence, the Chinese Ministry of Education began to promote the use of computer and Internet technology in College English instruction (namely, teaching English to non-English major college students). Now Web-based teaching models have prevailed in many higher institutions reaping the benefits of this new development and in the meanwhile presented various challenges in the implementation process. In this paper, the authors will analyze two cases of Web-based English teaching models, discuss to what extent the Web-based instruction is integrated into College English education, and attempt to provide suggestions on how to achieve better integration.

With the advancement of computer technology, the computer-assisted language learning (CALL) approach has taken off in the western countries since 1950s. Especially when the Web-based technology has been applied to modern education, many scholars proposed that computer, the Internet and related technologies should be an integral part of language instruction, calling for a normalization of Web-based computer-assisted language learning (Bax, 2003). At the turn of the century, Chinese higher institutions started to follow the western trends of Web-based computer-assisted language learning in its College English education. In 2000, the Chinese Ministry of Education invested 300 billion Chinese Yuan to set up the New Century College English computer-assisted language learning program, which boosted the fast development of the Web-based English teaching practice in Chinese higher institutions. In January 2004, the Ministry of Education issued College English Curriculum Requirements, highlighting that one of the goals of College English teaching is to foster students' autonomous learning ability. The Guideline points out that "the Chinese higher institutions should change the teacher-centered teaching approach with the help of the multimedia and Internet. The new teaching model should be based on modern information technology, Web technology in particular, enable English teaching to be freed from time and space restraints, with an aim of promoting individualized and autonomous learning style of the students" (Higher Education Department, Chinese Ministry of Education, 2004). In order to promote the application of Web-based computer-assisted language learning, in 2005, the Chinese Ministry of Education set up the "Flagship program of College English Instruction Reform," funding 31 higher institutions to apply Web-based computer-assisted language learning².

Then in 2007 and 2009 respectively, the Ministry of Education funded another 34 and 35 higher institutions in this program. With the great effort of the Ministry of Education, Chinese higher institutions realized the potential of Web-based instruction and now the Web-based computer-assisted language learning approach has prevailed in China's higher education institutions.

According to McCormack and Jones (as cited in Astleitner, 2001), Web-based computer-assisted language learning may exhibit the following characteristics:

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