Chapter 13

ICT Integration in Post–Secondary English Teaching and Learning:
Evidence from Blended Learning Programs in the Arabian Gulf

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ABSTRACT

The positive effects of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) have been widely acknowledged in the body of literature. While the majority of studies concern the use of CALL in the West, there is a dearth of research on the use of CALL in the Middle East and in particular in the Arabian Gulf where the English language plays a prominent role and being able to speak English is the passport to attending higher education and gaining employment. This chapter documents two case studies in higher education institutions in the Gulf, one in Saudi Arabia and one in the United Arab Emirates. The studies show how the use of CALL positively affected Arab students' language skills and their attitudes towards learning English with technology, paving the way for further research in the Arabian higher education context, where the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for teaching and learning is gaining ground at a fast pace.

INTRODUCTION

Some of the most recent innovations in pedagogical practice are due to the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the traditional educational context. The ability to display and process text, hypertext, audio, video, pictures, animations, and voice recognition are only some examples of how ICT-based tools and resources can be implemented in language teaching. Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in classrooms has never been more affordable and versatile than it is today.

CALL has made gradual and constant progress since it first began in the 1960s (Levy & Stockwell, 2006). However, conceptually speaking, best practice in CALL is not clear at present, mainly due to the variability that characterises the field and the largely techno-centric approach applied by CALL enthusiasts that seems to overlook aspects of pedagogy and task design principles (Gitsaki, 2012). There is a plethora of views as to what CALL is and how it can be successfully implemented. Furthermore, the process of designing CALL materials has become a complex one as the practice of language teaching is moving away from the didactic, teacher-centered model and more towards communicative and content-based learning with authentic language tasks (Levy & Stockwell, 2006).

In countries where CALL has not yet been widely implemented, there is a problem of how CALL will fit into the paradigm of existing traditional teaching and learning practices. This chapter examines the use of CALL in two Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia (SA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In both these countries there is a well-established tradition of English language learning in schools and at university and the integration of ICT in language courses is gaining ground with significant effects in students' motivation and performance.

BACKGROUND

Impact of ICTs in Second/ Foreign Language Learning

The use of computers and the Internet in language teaching has varied throughout the history of CALL because of rapid technological developments. In fact, technology is developing at such a rate that we still cannot predict what the next development of computers and Internet technology is going to be. Consequently, the CALL field requires continuous attention from researchers,

who constantly seek to determine how best to implement ICTs in language teaching and learning.

There is an abundance of studies that have investigated the effectiveness of CALL in language teaching and learning (for a review of recent CALL studies see Macaro, Handley, & Walter, 2012). By and large, computers have been shown to be effective in facilitating the teaching and learning of language skills. In writing, most recently, studies have investigated the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools, such as e-mail, chat, discussion forums, wikis, digital story-telling, and blogging, for enhancing L2 students' writing skills (see for example, Fidaoui, Bahous, & Bacha, 2010; Greenfield, 2003; Lin & Wu, 2010; Lund, 2008; Mak & Coniam, 2008, Soares, 2008; Tsou, Wang, & Tzeng, 2006; Zhang, Gao, Ring, & Zhang, 2007). While results vary across the different studies, it was found that using computers for L2 writing can increase the amount of text students write and the discourse features of these texts (Mak & Coniam, 2008).

A number of studies have investigated the impact of ICT-based resources on improving L2 learners' listening skills (see for example, Decker, 2004; LeLoup, Cortland, & Ponterio, 2007; Liu & Chu, 2010; Verdugo & Belmonte, 2007) and have concluded that providing learners with access to multimedia resources enhances their listening abilities and provides them with instances of authentic use of the target language.

In reading comprehension, using computers and Internet technology can offer helpful resources to facilitate the understanding of unknown words. Online dictionaries and glosses, hypermedia and multimedia resources can help learners not only to better understand oral and written conversation, but they are also helpful for better word retention and vocabulary acquisition (Li, 2010; O'Hara & Pritchard, 2008; Peters, 2007; Silverman & Hines, 2009). In addition, Torlakovic and Deugo (2004) found that L2 students improved significantly in grammatical performance and confidence after being exposed to CALL grammar instruction.

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