BOOK REVIEW

Evaluating Computer-Assisted Language Learning: An Integrated Approach to Effectiveness Research in CALL

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Ever since technology and computers were first introduced into language teaching and learning, there were doubts concerning whether multimedia resources had much to add to the language learning experience. These doubts underlined the need for a comprehensive evaluative model for CALL aimed at helping to determine the kinds of multimedia tools which are more effective in language learning, based on the measurable impact these resources make on the learning of language students. This book rightly responds to this need by means of providing a very useful and comprehensive evaluative model for CALL aimed at helping schools, colleges and universities to determine the kinds of multimedia resources worth investing in, based on the measurable impact these resources are capable of making on the learning of language students. The evaluative framework developed by Leakey is also very helpful for CALL researchers looking at the effectiveness of the use of different kinds of e-tools and methodologies. One of the strongest points of this framework is the fact that its usage is not limited to the evaluation of the language learning software. This framework can also be used to evaluate teaching methodologies and learning in computer-based environments, as well as the digital platforms used.

Leakey draws on current and past research on CALL and e-learning to inform his CALL evaluation framework. In addition, he explores the existing evidence for the impact of computers on language learning. Moreover, he applies this framework to the study of three kinds of media through main factors influencing both the language learner and language learning: the digital platform, the software program, and

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the pedagogy employed; concluding that an evaluative model for CALL should “deploy the appropriate metric tools and research approach to assess empirically both the impact of each distinct element and any added synergies that may operate when all the elements are working together in a real-life setting” (p. 3). The author successfully connects theory and practice. He describes the process of creating his evaluative framework in such a clear and detailed manner that researchers interested in developing and putting into practice a similar framework relevant to their research can easily apply Leakey’s framework to their own contexts.

The first five chapters of the book are more theoretical, whereas the remaining nine chapters present different case studies and a final evaluation framework. Chapter 1 has a self-explanatory title: “The Need for Systematic Quality Control in CALL.” It serves as an introduction which, as stated in the title itself, points out the need for “systematic quality control in CALL” (p. 1) and for empirical data capable of proving that CALL “makes an objective, measurable and significant difference to students’ learning” (p. 1). This chapter also provides an overview of the different studies carried out in the field of CALL, examining computer-mediated communication (CMC), web-enhanced learning (WELL) and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL); together with the different tools used at several educational institutions. At the same time, chapter 1 is a thought-provoking reflection on the state of the art and on the need for an integrated approach to the evaluation of CALL. The first chapter broadly introduces the theoretical framework and the research questions, and includes a summary of the chapters that follow, which deal with different case studies.

In chapter 2, titled “Swings, Spirals and Re-Incarnations: Lessons from the Past,” the theoretical framework is expanded; the main concepts regarding CALL pedagogy, SLA theory and the data collection techniques are defined; and the pedagogy, platforms and programs are introduced. Moreover, in this chapter the author expresses his interest in looking at effective ways of integrating all kinds of applications so as to benefit learners and the learning process as much as possible. He also explores the notions of effectiveness, hard and software, evaluation, normalisation in CALL, quantitative and qualitative data, validity, empirical versus judgmental approaches, positivistic versus phenomenological approaches, blended learning, and teaching methods. This chapter ends with an overview of the evolution of CALL, in which the authors argue that we are walking towards “Blended CALL” (p. 43), which can be considered as a development which reflects “uncertainty and eclecticism” (p. 43) and which has been defined by different authors in various ways. The author’s definition would be “the adaptation in a local context of previous CALL and non-CALL pedagogies into an integrated programme of language teaching and learning, drawing on different mixes of media and delivery to produce an optimum mix that addresses the unique needs and demands of that context” (p. 43, in Leakey & Ranchoux, 2005, p. 358).

Chapter 3, “Has CALL Made a Difference: And How Can we Tell?” raises questions for debate concerning the impact of CALL on teaching. These debates in CALL history are summarised in four main debates: “The improvement debate: Does CALL improve language learning? The comparison debate: Can comparative evaluations be of any value in demonstrating learning gains? The configuration debate: What combination of methods is best for measuring progress in CALL? The outcome vs. Processes debate: Do we only focus on measuring learning outcomes? What about learning processes? Can we measure the latter? If so, how?” (p. 59). These questions are explored throughout this chapter and different studies relating to those questions are presented. The lessons learnt from the different studies addressing the different questions raised by the four debates are said to inform an improved model for CALL evaluation. This model is introduced in this chapter and explored in the following one.

The improved model for CALL evaluation dealt with in chapter 3 is further explored in chapter 4, “A Model for Evaluating CALL.
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