

Chapter 1

Moving Forward: Anecdotes and Evidence Guiding the Next Generation of CALL

Joy Egbert

Washington State University, USA

Omran Akasha

Washington State University, USA

Leslie Huff

Hokkaido University, Japan

HyunGyung Lee

Washington State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper is grounded in the concept that it is the use of the technology to support language learning, not the technology itself, which makes a difference in language learning contexts. From this foundation, this paper provides a brief overview of some of the issues in the field of CALL that currently hold import and may be even more central in the future. It addresses concerns in research, teacher education, classroom practice, independent CALL, and developing technologies. The purpose of this paper is to present one view of where the field is now and where it may go in the future in supporting the achievement of language learners with technology use.

INTRODUCTION

In order to keep any field moving forward into the future, its participants need to have a good idea of where it is currently. Because this is the inaugural issue of *IJCALLT*, it seems fitting to address both current and possible future issues in CALL.

Therefore, this paper presents a brief overview of some important research and understandings in the field of CALL and suggests how we might proceed in both the near and not-so-near futures. It starts with a discussion of CALL effectiveness and then briefly addresses a few crucial issues in the areas of CALL teacher education, classroom

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practice in CALL, and independent CALL use. It finishes with a discussion of developing technologies that may play a central role in CALL in the coming years.

IS CALL EFFECTIVE?

The handout in Figure 1 that contains abstracts or conclusions of several published CALL studies has been used with novice CALL researchers to initiate discussion of what CALL research tells us -- and what more we need to know from it.

This brief look at some current research abstracts is quite revealing. It shows, in essence, that research that falls under the auspices of the field of CALL is extremely diverse, that its methods are varied, and that it covers a wide spectrum of questions, populations, and theoretical underpinnings (for more detail on research issues in CALL, see *Modern Language Journal*, 93, Focus Issue, 2009, and Egbert & Petrie, 2005). More complete analyses of the CALL research (see, for example, Egbert, Huff, McNeil, Preuss, & Sellen, 2009; Levy, 1999, 2000; Uschi, 2008) point out the myriad problems, which include a focus on the technology without the context and/or without reference to language learning, lack of reliability, poor descriptive data, and overreliance on student perceptions. These problems make the data difficult to analyze, summarize, and compare. In addition to the problems with CALL research, the wide diversity in all facets of CALL studies inhibits the search for CALL effectiveness.

That is not to say that we do not know some important things about CALL. A large body of research has been conducted in the last 20 years, and general statements that arise from it include that generally students perceive technology as a good thing; teachers are worried that it will take over their jobs or leave them behind, and the results of effectiveness for language learning are mixed. However, a question in need of asking is

“effective for what?” Lack of specificity makes this question impossible to answer. If it means “effective for acquiring fluency” or “effective for engaging students” or “effective for teaching technical skills,” these are all quite different issues. Where one researcher may study CALL effectiveness for language remediation or practice, others might investigate the effectiveness of presenting content or acquiring a discrete grammar item. Even these foci are broad enough that they show the impossibility of claiming, from one or many studies, that CALL is “effective.”

The real issue for the future is whether we should try to make a blanket statement about CALL effectiveness. It would certainly be useful for educators to be able to point to research that makes the case that CALL is effective. Unfortunately, much of the research is currently used for just that, even though this conclusion is rarely warranted. Of great concern is the theoretical positioning that one size fits all, or that studies of technology use in one context readily transfer whole to another. As long ago as 1986, Chapelle and Jamieson, pioneers in CALL research, were telling us that effectiveness depends on a variety of issues. They noted:

Three questions are often asked about computer-assisted language learning (CALL): Do students like it? Do students use it? Does it work? These questions address practical concerns, yet they are based on two faulty assumptions. First, they assume that students think about act in a uniform manner, even though teachers and researchers alike agree that students differ in their learning styles and strategies. Second, the questions presuppose that CALL is a single method of instruction, whereas it is actually a vehicle for implementing a range of approaches representing a variety of teaching philosophies. These points do not deny the basic importance of asking questions about the value of CALL; instead, they indicate the need to modify the questions: What kind of students

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