

Chapter 6

Towards a More Naturalistic CALL: Video Gaming and Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Recent social and technological developments are placing independent access to the Internet within the reach of more and more foreign language learners, who are increasingly using this access to pursue interests online through the languages they are learning. Conceptualized in this paper as “naturalistic CALL”, this phenomenon is described as a logical step in the evolution of CALL and, in particular, of its ‘communicative’ and ‘network-based’ phases. Following a brief review of early studies in this area, a framework for research is described based on dimensions of location, formality, pedagogy, and locus of control. Potential issues for future research within this framework are also identified with reference to data from a study of multilingual video-gaming practices among young people in Hong Kong.

INTRODUCTION

Describing CALL as ‘using computers to support language teaching and learning in some way’, Egbert (2005, p. 1) offered an inclusive definition that also marked the distance that CALL has travelled since its origins in the 1960s. For many

years, CALL was essentially a specialized activity that bridged the fields of computer programming and language education. Now it has become a highly diversified field covering a range of pedagogical possibilities from the design of software and computer-based materials for the purpose of language teaching and learning to learners’ independent, out-of-school use of software and materials that are not designed for this purpose.

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This paper is mainly concerned with the latter end of this range of CALL activity, described by Thorne, Black, and Sykes (2009, p. 802) as ‘entirely out-of-school noninstitutional realms of freely chosen digital engagement’, which lies a step beyond students’ independent use of online resources for language learning, described Egbert, et al. (2011, p. 7) as ‘independent CALL’. We argue that, although purpose-designed CALL applications and activities will no doubt continue to play an important role in language teaching and learning for a long time to come, we also need to develop frameworks within the field of CALL for research on the more naturalistic direction that our students’ digital engagement with foreign languages is taking in the world beyond the classroom. We will develop this argument, first, through a brief discussion of the history of CALL and, second, by illustrating some key issues in research on naturalistic CALL with reference to data from a study of the multilingual video gaming practices of young people in Hong Kong.

FIVE PHASES IN THE HISTORY OF CALL

Reviewing the development of CALL up to the end of the 20th century, Warschauer and Healey (1998) divided its history into three phases, which they called ‘behaviouristic’, ‘communicative’ and ‘integrative’ (Butler-Pascoe, 2011). In the behaviouristic phase, which began in the 1960s, CALL referred to the design and use of computer programs that were designed either to teach or to provide practice in foreign languages. Applications were highly structured in pedagogical terms and often based on computer prompt – user response – computer feedback routines. In principle, CALL freed learners from the constraints of classroom instruction, but in practice limited access to computers meant that CALL activities usually took place in in timetabled lessons in the computer laboratory. Beatty (2010) also observes

that, although the CALL literature stressed the benefits of “privacy and individualisation”, early applications provided limited opportunities for learners to organise their own learning or tailor it to their needs.

In the communicative phase, inspired by the work of Underwood (1984), CALL applications were designed or selected on explicitly communicative principles. Text reconstruction, game and simulation packages were designed to engage learners in communicative problem-solving activities either directly with the computer or with other students engaged in the CALL task. In this phase, it did not matter so much whether applications were designed for the purpose of language learning as long as they stimulated communication in the target language. This also opened the door to creative uses of applications that were not specifically designed for CALL. These included new language-based applications, such as word processors, desktop publishing programs and concordancers, which could be used to manipulate foreign language texts in interesting new ways. From this point onwards, CALL involved both the design and use of language teaching and learning software, and the design of pedagogical activities to exploit all manner of computer technologies and applications. As a result, the CALL application now appeared less in the role of “teacher” in a dyadic relationship with the learner, and more in the role of “tool” in more complex triadic relationships involving actual teachers and other learners. At the same time, limited access to computers meant that communicative CALL activities were usually highly structured and typically took place in the computer laboratory, or often around one or two workstations in the classroom.

The integrative phase was characterised by the introduction of multimedia, hypermedia and interactive technologies and is now associated mainly associated with comprehensive language courses delivered on CD-ROM or across local laboratory-based networks. In some ways these applications represented a return to the behav-

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