On Computer-Assisted Language Learning and the AEC
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Introduction

In this essay I add to the discussion on CALL, LEO, and technology use at the AEC. I begin with a brief discussion of CALL and LEO and then survey issues and challenges relevant to the broader field of computer-assisted language learning. Before I conclude with some additional uses of CALL-related technology at the AEC, I offer the beginnings of a pedagogical agenda for the AEC that incorporates CALL.

CALL and LEO

To survey CALL resources at the AEC, we can start with our computer lab, Learning English Online (LEO). A brief look at the LEO website, http://www.aec.ku.edu/leo-lab, shows a number of resources and activities LEO makes available to faculty and students. Among the online resources are links to Dave's ESL Café, NPR.org, and TED talks. There are also links to "over 1,000 quizzes, tests, exercises, and puzzles…" (http://www.aec.ku.edu/leo-lab). LEO offers support for cloud based educational programs such as online dictionaries and grammar guides and ESL software such as My English Lab from the textbook Focus on Grammar. Students can record themselves in LEO or use the computers to write papers, check email, or work on typing skills.

Faculty members working in LEO are skilled users of technology and are among the most knowledgeable or tech savvy at the AEC. The following AEC faculty members were assigned percentages to work in LEO this semester: Sam Billen, John Hestand, Katie McClintic, Monica McCuistion, Sam Parkes, and Joshua Shireman. LEO faculty members have different strengths and, as a team, can address most questions or find out the answers. The team offers numerous workshops and other opportunities for AEC faculty to sharpen their skills on widely used instructional software (e.g., Blackboard) as well as software specifically designed for language teaching and learning. Supported by six student assistants, the LEO team is also prepared to help students with questions about software, hardware, or other related concerns.

Survey of Issues and Challenges in CALL

To survey issues and challenges in the field of CALL, I turn to a recent Modern Language Journal Special Focus on CALL. In particular, Garrett (2009) discussed trends and issues that have changed over the years and new trends and issues facing CALL today. Over the years, CALL has gone through changes in "the relationship between pedagogy, theory, and technology, physical infrastructure, efficacy, copyright concerns, categories of software (e.g., tutorial, authentic materials engagement, communication uses of technology), and evaluation" (p. 719). One challenge in CALL we face today requires us to rethink grammar instruction based on recent advances in functional and meaning-based analyses of grammar (pp. 730-731). Another challenge we face would be technologies and materials necessary to online learning (pp. 731-732). Two additional CALL issues are (1) the use of computer-mediated communication (social computing) and (2) teacher training and professional development (pp. 732-733).

Garrett (2009) brings up research agendas, specifically relating CALL and SLA theory (pp. 733-734).[1] Garrett goes on to make an appeal for more "research that evaluates current CALL practice…[and] also research that opens up radically new approaches to language teaching and learning…"(pp. 733-734). Noting that we already have some understanding of "sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and discourse aspects of CALL" (p. 734), Garrett adds that a psycholinguistic approach to instructed SLA should be explored in the context of CALL research. Also appropriate to a CALL research agenda are in-depth case studies on individual learners and their use of technology to learn a second language.

Garrett (2009) adds that we should continue to develop professional organizations such as the Computer-assisted Language Instruction Consortium (CALICO) and the International Association for Language Learning Technology (IALLT) (p. 735). I interpret Garrett's self-acknowledged controversial suggestion that these two organizations merge, as one way to develop professional organizations. Of course joining and contributing to a CALL professional organization also helps with the development of the profession as well as one's personal professional development.

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[1] Also see Chapelle (2009) in the same volume of the Modern Language Journal for more on CALL and SLA theory.

Toward a Pedagogical Agenda for CALL at the AEC

A central question to consider at the AEC is whether we can articulate a pedagogical agenda that utilizes CALL in ways that keep our Center effective, flexible, nimble and moving students to their academic program as efficiently as possible. To this end, we can focus on assessment and instruction. We might start with a new kind of proficiency test that does more than assess a student's proficiency. Test results might also detail specific outcomes students have met or still need to meet. The test would then automatically place students in the appropriate levels and classes. Students might also get a print out of their weaknesses along with a list of specific videos and activities that they can access on the AEC home page to help them improve in the relevant skills, grammar, and vocabulary.

A more ambitious project would be to team up with KU Core (general education) instructors who make heavy use of computer-assisted instruction in their courses. We could amend their videos and PowerPoints and create EAP materials out of them. For example, we could enrich videos with closed caption and dialog pop up boxes and other devices which correspond to Bhatia's (1983; 1993) concept of easification.[2] The idea is that we can use computer technology to provide students with the language and academic culture they need to understand content in their classes directly without the option of simplifying authentic materials or offering conventional ESL skill-based classes. I would predict that ESL materials we might create would also be welcomed by native speakers of English.

Many reasons come to mind for not thinking beyond instructional software (e.g., Blackboard, FOG, etc.), CALL workshops, and activities (quizzes, games, etc.). For example, the two suggestions mentioned above would take much time, effort, and expertise to accomplish. There are also questions about how much money in terms of percentage should be allotted to these activities and how much help Bhatia's (1983; 1993) easification (and other) devices can really offer students at the lower levels. These kinds of questions are appropriate and should be asked. Questions and answers, however, should keep moving us forward and never paralyze progress.

As we interpret our profession, we must insist on maximizing our efficiency and effectiveness, two goals that computer technology is specifically designed to achieve. Computer technology should help us adjust our practice and instruction to be most practical and most directly relevant to the KU academic environment and help us accomplish the most efficient and effective way to reach the goals and objectives we set. This will require us to revisit our goals regularly, ask the hard questions, and be free to adjust instruction, and/or materials, and/or program organization, and/or internal bureaucracy accordingly. The result is an effective, flexible, nimble, and technology-informed AEC that moves students most efficiently to the next level of proficiency they need to be successful in their academic program. The constant advancing nature of CALL is ideally suited to help us maintain this kind of progress.

Some Additional Uses of CALL-related Technology at the AEC

There are additional uses of technology at the AEC for us to consider. Technology will be helpful in tracking the academic records of students who are concurrently enrolled in ESL and non-ESL courses as well as former AEC students who take English 101. This kind of data collection can help us find out how successful our instruction and proficiency assessments are. Computer technology can also help determine the kind of academic English our students need in order to be ready for their academic program. For example, we can develop a KU corpus of academic English or run analyses on other corpora of academic English and use our findings to enrich the AEC's curriculum and assessments. Administrative technology will be useful to enroll students and help with section changes, late enrollment, and withdrawals. Such technology can also facilitate counseling appointments and help us get rid of bulky and inefficient paper files. As our new database goes online, we may be able address some of these broader uses of technology at the AEC.

Conclusion

The AEC has a strong foundation in CALL. LEO, LEO faculty, and other interested AEC faculty are leading the way in using computer technology in instruction. Computer technology is immensely powerful and should also be used to help us think past instructional software and activities to articulate a central role for CALL in our pedagogy. Steps toward increasing technology's influence at the AEC include the creation of EAP materials in conjunction with colleagues who teach KU Core classes, the development of a new proficiency test that automatically places students, and research that is

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[2] "Easification" is the process of rendering a text more accessible to non-native speakers by keeping the integrity and authenticity of the text. This is in contrast to "simplification" which can include changes in vocabulary, grammar, organization, and content to an original text. For more on differences between simplified and authentic texts see Crossley, et al. (2007).

aimed at determining the kind of academic English we should teach at KU and level of proficiency our students need to reach in order to be successful in their academic program.

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