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Initial experiences with CALL

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This was my first semester with CALL, and I have been invited to write a paper about my experiences with CALL. Given that I'm still unearthing the minefield that CALL appears to be I suppose I should start by explaining why I opted to teach in one of the CALL rooms. Well, and in short, I wanted to understand how to use a computer assisted language laboratory largely because I expect all future language teaching environments will offer it. This might be somewhat of an overstatement or exaggeration so I'll restrict this to perhaps those universities with sufficient funds available to offer CALL rooms. In short then, this paper summarizes my impressions of having first used CALL this semester.

In my non-CALL conventional classrooms my students appear to acquire language skills through a variety of different (*and* conventional) practices I've developed over the years. Faced with CALL for the first time I assumed that the use of technology *per se* wouldn't necessarily lead to effective learning in the same way. I soon realized that I needed to develop some activities in order for students to benefit from this technology. I wanted to learn, with the students, how to maximize the potential of CALL. In an immediate impression, I began to notice that the learning environment created was different from my regular teacher-orientated classroom. The CALL appeared to change the dynamics of classroom interaction. Students appeared to interact with peers and give feedback and support each other (more) in the CALL classroom. As a result and at the beginning I could see that, as a teacher, my role was somewhat subordinate in the CALL environment.

As the semester progressed I began to notice other benefits over conventional classrooms. For instance, when students read from printed materials (or textbooks) they use skills such as skimming, scanning and inferring words from within a given context. However, when presented with a monitor, students needed to decode graphics, audiovisual images, and different texts from their screens. In addition, when students chose information from computers, they needed to critically evaluate materials in order to find appropriate information. Hence, the students learned rapidly to negotiate a multiplicity of media and discourse. In this sense, CALL involved not only passive learning as one would associate with conventional printed materials, but also involved active and genuine decision making processes. The student learning therefore became individualized, and very much student-centered, compared to more traditional and linear textbook-based instruction and, in this sense, CALL appeared to supplement my traditional teaching with the aid of this wonderful new technology. Also the CALL room appeared to offer a genuine array of learning choices. The students benefited from being able to progress at their own pace and select materials or options based on their own individual needs. This was in stark contrast to the conventional classroom which is restricted by many factors such as peer pressure, restricted interaction, physical environment, and teacher initiation. It seems that faced with a computer as the base of communication, the students appeared to feel less pressure. I wonder if it is an overestimation to assert that the students felt more comfortable working individually with their computers given the likelihood of not wanting to make mistakes in front of their peers.

In summary, some brief conclusions after

my first semester:

I found a number of other related benefits, and there are numerous others of course, but in short:

- Responses and feedback with CALL are immediate and anonymous
- CALL appears to accommodate different learning processes and learning styles
- Students can review material at their own pace
- Students can initiate interaction with meaningful outcomes
- Information gap activities appear genuine and offer multiple practices (and reinforcement) compared to a conventional (textbook-based) teaching environment
- CALL offers a variety of learning exercises by using the technology

That said, and in response to the above benefits, using CALL is not without its pitfalls; again, in short:

- Feedback / effective monitoring of all students varies – I felt it was difficult to listen to all the members in my class of 48 students during a 3-5 minute information exchange
- Need to revise syllabi in order to accommodate different learners' responses to the technology (my syllabus changed significantly as my understanding improved!)
- Individual students *can* work at their own pace – but there are problems with *pairs* or *groups* of students having finished activities
- Choice of teaching material is crucial in order to offer meaningful practice
- Student and teacher need to become familiar with the new learning technology quickly
- CALL doesn't always work! (i.e. the technology can let you down)

Overall I have thoroughly enjoyed using CALL this semester in spite of the above stated pitfalls. CALL appears to offer genuine information exchanges that conventional language teaching classrooms cannot. Nevertheless, I assume, the level of success of a CALL class will always depend on the students and teacher. My successes this semester may be as a result of the particular group of students I taught. I may have been blessed by a particularly adaptable class. However, whatever the makeup of the student group, CALL appears to offer a tremendous array of opportunities over and beyond the conventional language teaching classroom. I'm hoping that I can understand how to use it fully over the following semesters in order to create an effective CALL learning environment.