DEVELOPING PRACTICAL ENGLISH SKILLS
IN THE CALL CLASSROOM

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I began using CALL classroom facilities in the fall of 2003, at first for listening classes, and later gradually developing course plans for reading, composition, and oral communication classes as well. Here I will present a brief survey of the basic techniques I use in each of these areas, and also refer to my recent efforts to incorporate the basic functions of WebCT.

Listening

Although I initially investigated various software products that are available, such as Listen to Me, I concluded that as a native English speaker it would be better for me to adapt my own teaching method to maintain as much personal one-to-one contact with the students as possible, using the computers as supplementary tools. Even with such limited usage, I find they enhance the quality of my one-to-one contact with individual students remarkably. For first-year classes, I generally use commercial textbooks that present news articles on current events. I proceed in two-week units. The first week begins with basic training, warming up by listening to the textbook CD and proceeding to adapt the textbook exercises to natural one-to-one communication, with a focus not only on mastering the essential vocabulary appearing in the textbook but also developing flexibility, the ability to comprehend key terms in their various grammatical forms as well as synonyms and antonyms. The second week is advanced training, largely via dictation and shadow work, combining reinforcement of vocabulary with focus on a specific task or skill such as distinguishing between fact and opinion or cause and effect; this is followed by a quiz. I find the students are pleased to be able to combine practice listening to a real live native English speaker with practice improving their English word processing skills. I rarely sit at the teacher's console but rather spend the entire time circulating around the room, leaving console manipulation to my TA. I work with pairs of students: for example, the first student may listen and shadow while the second student takes dictation, which is shown on the center display. The two thus cooperate to complete the problem, while the rest of the class can compare their own efforts and observe my corrections. For the bi-weekly quizzes, I adapt news stories on the same topic, balancing both micro and macro listening problems. The students correct these themselves the following week. We also spend follow-up time on diagnosing errors to strengthen weak points, and use the quiz stories for additional advanced training during the end-of-term review before the final exam; material that was originally used for micro problems can later do double duty for macro content reading practice. While the selected partners are giving the model response, I can see and hear the others all madly tapping away, much more highly motivated than they would be in a conventional classroom — and not only because they know that I will be peering at their dictation efforts (which are impressive!) on the screen as I make my way around the room; they palpably perceive the accelerated progress achieved through the concentrated, cumulative training.

Reading and Composition

The second course plan I developed for the CALL classroom was a reading class. In this class I also proceed with two-week units. The first week we begin with careful high-volume reading; the second week we proceed to practice speedreading, after having achieved

essential literacy in the given topic. Homework assignments are designed to help the students master both micro and macro reading skills. They first learn to use Internet resources to gain a sense of common collocations and synonyms for key vocabulary related to the given topic, and write short sentences based on models they have downloaded. They then write summaries, which they peer review themselves using the center display to confirm reading comprehension (factual accuracy and interpretation) and check for inclusion of all the main ideas; I can also offer editorial guidance concerning grammar, style, and abbreviated expressions for concise abstracts. The second week we switch to speedreading, using various short articles with different angles on the same topic, and conclude with a quiz. Here I find the CALL functions especially helpful as they enable precise control of word counts and timed exercises.

Oral Communication

My oral communication classes also proceed in two-week units. For a first-year class, I tend to use a commercial textbook with general themes such as entertainment, environment, health, science, and technology news. For a second-year class, I allow the students to design their own symposium. For example, a humanities class may choose the general theme of World Peace and have discussions on the five specific topics of Nationalism, Nuclear Proliferation, Racism, Religious Intolerance, and Sexism, selecting articles about current events in various regions of the world related to each of these topics. The first week is input, the second week is output. That is to say, the first week is spent doing drills based on the selected reading, similar to those used in a listening or reading class, but with heightened awareness that the ultimate objective of the exercises is to prepare to express their opinion about the topic in discussion the following week. The second week is devoted to discussion in various formats, including pairs, small groups, competitive debate panels or cooperative

problem-solving committees or symposiums, and presentations followed by question-and-answer sessions. I do not speak in class the second week. The students do all the talking, while I record the proceedings. Before moving on the next unit, I give the students edited transcriptions of each discussion with feedback about their errors and ways to improve.

WebCT

I use WebCT to post the original course schedule and any later revisions; to give homework assignments; to inform students of their quiz grades and of the average class results; and to post the correct answers to these quizzes for review in preparation for the final exam. For oral communication classes, I post all selected readings if a commercial textbook has not been used, and the edited transcripts of all discussions. As the time per person is limited in the bi-weekly discussions, the end-of-term review is a precious opportunity for the students to follow up on ideas they could only discuss briefly the first time around, and they seem to find special satisfaction in having a second chance to express themselves more eloquently after improving their speech skills as well as after having had time to reflect on the ideas that were shared.

Evaluation Standards

Evaluation of listening and reading quizzes, and of the final exams which are comprehensive extensions thereof, is largely objective. Evaluation of oral communication class discussions is a bit fuzzier, but is firmly based on effective use of vocabulary, relevancy of response to questions, and task completion (common tasks including cultural comparison, analysis of cause and effect, problem identification and ranking of solutions). I maintain "Before" and "After" versions of each discussion. The "Before" version is the basis of evaluation; the "After" version is provided as a model for future discussions, and the students know they will gradually be held to higher standards, that they are

forgiven certain errors the first time around but are expected not to repeat them.

Conclusions

The CALL classroom has facilitated English language education in all four skills far beyond my initial expectations. I had high expectations for effective results in listening from the start, anticipating that the technology would make repetition, which is essential for listening comprehension but tends to be boring, not only more efficient but also more pleasant, and those expectations were immediately fulfilled. The vast majority of students are fully engaged with each and every problem even when they are not being tapped for the model response. I also had relatively high expectations for the effectiveness of CALL technology in reading and composition classes, and was not disappointed, indeed I have been pleasantly surprised to find how attentive and focused the students become when sharing model sentences and summaries. A significant advantage of the CALL classroom, above and beyond simply using the Internet as a reference tool, is that they become more familiar with natural collocations when they are exposed simultaneously to a high volume of sample sentences selected by peers with similar interests but different individual perspectives, although caution must be exercised when giving instructions in the use of search engines to find sample sentences. Moving on to the next stage, comparing summaries side by side, as well as collaborating to combine their efforts, it is easy for the students to see collectively problems such as the omission of a main idea, the reason for a factual error, or lack of balance — and this collective experience has a decidedly cumulative effect. But my greatest surprise came in the area of oral communication. Initially, I was highly skeptical of the potential of the CALL classroom in this area, suspecting that the machinery would only be an obstacle to natural communication. But once they have established confidence as a result of having been given ample time for preparation, with guidance and

quick access to quality resources, I have found that a little innovation in group seating easily helps the students break free from the lure of the screen, and they basically keep their chairs turned to face one another during dedicated discussion time. Meanwhile, the combination of high-quality mikes and word processing capability enables me to take accurate notes in real time, far more efficiently than transcribing recorded conversations. I generally find it counterproductive to show the students the "Before" versions of their discussions and dwell on their errors, but I do provide a few "Before" and "After" excerpts, extracted from the original context and independent of any individual speaker, in end-of-term reviews (but they know who they are), as a final warning about common mistakes to avoid. It is immensely gratifying to see the students develop confidence and pride as they compare the transcripts of their earlier and later discussions and clearly see their own progress.

For me, the primary value of WebCT lies in its potential to augment both CALL and conventional class functionality by enabling both instructor and students to systematically monitor individual and course progress. I am a firm believer in the value of systematic continuity in language education, and as I wrote in my introduction to the report on the administration of the TOEFL®-ITP test here at Osaka University in 2005, I believe our best and brightest students seek more than a chance to practice "free" (which too often translates into "slapdash") English conversation. And they *deserve* more. I hope to continue to develop my effective utilization of both WebCT and CALL facilities to further enhance my ability to respond to their needs and aspirations.