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Pedagogical Reflections on use of the CALL System (2007-2008)

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Computer assisted language learning (CALL) offers a very wide range of possibilities for teaching target languages in an effective manner. In this short article, I would like to share a few of my own ideas on effective use of the CALL system, with particular reference to a pilot study use of a commercial language learning program, Rosetta World (hereafter RW; <http://www.RosettaWorld.co.jp>). The RW pilot study was conducted with first and second year students of engineering (all male except for one student). An account of negative factors in the implementation of the program will be followed by consideration of positive features and some concluding remarks. This will be followed by an outline of key teaching strategies and some interesting Internet resources.

There were two practical problems that hampered the effectiveness of RW for our language learners. One was that the advanced level RW was not available and many students did not feel adequately challenged with basic levels. Feedback questionnaire comments included the following: "It is a bit easy. So I gradually feel bored," "Rosetta World is too plain ... It is too easy for studying the language a little," "Not enjoyable ... reaction to click is slow," "It is simple action of clicking mouse, so I always feel sleepy." The second disadvantage was that RW software was not compatible with Cybermedia Center equipment and so the speech function of the program could not be used. It was possible for students to use the speech function if they accessed RW at another

location on or off campus, but this was difficult for some students to do. Other students told me they did not have the time to study English outside of class time, and the average response was for a thirty-minute self-study session with RW just once a week. A final pedagogical consideration concerns homework. The RW program is geared towards individual progress and is not appropriate as a basis for assigning homework to a large group of learners of varying levels of proficiency. This may account for the fact that some students expressed little enthusiasm for RW.

However, about the same number of students provided positive feedback, which brings us to the advantages of employing RW. The program harmonizes with a substantial number of second language acquisition studies that promote immersion type learning techniques along with integrated skill development. RW involves the use of real-life images, figuring out language without translations, providing answers to questions along with output that is modeled on first-language speaker pronunciation, and step-by-step advances in linguistic complexity. The combination of these elements of imagery, intuitive recognition of patterns, interactive participation and learning through guided instruction all combine to constitute an environment of immersion. Typical feedback comments included the following: "It is enjoyable, because it is easy to use and we can learn English watching pictures and listening;" "Enjoyable. Because we can learn good

pronounces [sic.];” “The R.W. program was enjoyable because it contains lots of pictures and it makes the program easy to understand.”

In the absence of the possibility of living in a country where English is the dominant language, RW is probably as close as one can get to creating an environment of immersion in a classroom or computer laboratory context. This makes it highly recommendable for practitioners of the Input Hypothesis of SLA (second language acquisition) theorist Stephen Krashen who argues that classroom language learning should approximate the immersive patterns of language learning of one’s first language in early childhood. The fact that RW lays emphasis on three of the four principal skills of language learning – listening, speaking, and reading – also makes RW worthy of consideration in any EFL (English as a foreign language) language learning context.

It goes without saying that RW must be assessed in terms of value for money as well in terms of compatibility with research findings from SLA theory. The program is quite expensive and my own evaluation would be that RW works well for learners who are highly motivated about language learning. It might be more appropriate to provide advanced courses of RW for students who have provided indications of such motivation (e.g., ITC students or learners from classes of advanced speaking and listening). However, the use of RW last year did not include the most advanced level, so it remains unclear if that level is appropriate for our students.

Regarding my own teaching strategies, I have students communicate with each other using headphones and in random pairs to discuss previously researched topics (e.g., from

www.breakingnewsenglish.com or from coursebook materials). I can listen in to student dialogues, which allows me to assist, encourage, and to monitor progress. Similarly, it is possible to see what students are typing, and a short writing period (nine or ten minutes) allowed for a break from the pressure of on-line production of language and for a focus on writing skills. With an advanced speaking class, I had students look through YouTube videos, take notes on the story depicted in short films, and then report their summary and evaluation to their groups. A difficulty with this activity, however, is that appropriate short videos are often difficult to find on the YouTube website. We made a change to the BBC’s English language website (www.bbc.co.uk) for a more effective activity, reading episodes from a radio “soap-opera” called “The Flatmates.” Each student would read four or five episodes from the program archives and then provide summaries of the main events of the narratives for other students. This activity seemed to work particularly well as the students gradually gained a sense of the characters whom they could listen to and who sounded like “real people.” Identifications made were also reinforced by language comprehension activities provided on the website such as quizzes and grammar analysis. Students can also contribute comments on a discussion board that contains messages from language learners from all around the world. I think that “The Flatmates” is an effective resource worth using next year, and I will continue to have students make Microsoft Power Point presentations in pairs on topics related to course material. Previously, it was necessary to explain in detail how to use Power Point and there were technical difficulties using it in the CALL lab.

Now, however, almost all students are well acquainted with the technology and can use it quite effectively for a high standard of presentations. This and the Flatmates activities were “pedagogical highlights” from my year in the lab and the RW pilot study was a very informative experience also that may be of interest to many CALL practitioners.