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Enhancing CALL using learner perceptions

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language teaching in a CALL environment offers a wealth of opportunities for engaging the learners in meaningful ways. Multimedia lessons, blended learning, task-based experiential learning, computer mediated communication, and dedicated CALL software all have a role to play in creating a more authentic and successful language learning experience. Students can also be afforded more control over their studies, promoting enhanced learner autonomy.

However, taking full advantage of all of this potential entails coming to grips with a number of challenges. These may be related to software, hardware, computer skills, and student stress in an environment where technology is constantly evolving. (Aurora, et al, 2014)

In order to address these issues and improve the CALL classroom experience, student surveys are a commonly used and effective tool that allows students the opportunity to submit their feedback and suggestions. (Yamanari, 2007)

What follows is a simple and brief example of using learners' perceptions to implement improvements in a Practical English course held in a CALL classroom environment. Two instances of the course were run concurrently with a total of 81 students.

2. BACKGROUND

Features and benefits of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

Technology has become such a ubiquitous part of our daily lives and so the case can be made that it should also be an integral part of our learning. The extent of the opportunities available on computers, smartphones and

tablets is beyond the scope of this article.

Many of the benefits relate to the following (Nedal, 2013) ...

- adaptability of CALL
- blended learning
- error analysis & self-correction
- immediate feedback
- individualization
- learner autonomy
- learning environments
- learning styles
- motivation
- multimedia content
- optimal use of time & convenience
- repetitive practice & reinforcement
- student - teacher relationships
- task-based experiential learning
- others ...

3. THE COURSE

Course description

The course was entitled Practical English. As the title suggests, it is a communicative skills-based course with lots of opportunities for listening, speaking and communication. The language of the class was nominally English only. Most classes featured sections for communication, activities and textbook based assignments using the computers. The textbook used features video news clips from Voice of America.

The Englishcentral. .com Website incorporates interactive exercises based on fluency, pronunciation practice and vocabulary with evaluations based on percentage scores.

4. CALL FEATURES

CALL features in the classroom include:

- Calabo software for supervised English communication with random partners. The teacher can listen to and evaluate the students' discussions in real time.
- EnglishCentral.com multimedia with listening, fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary exercises.
- Moodle learning management system. The Websites used were DavesLL.com and DavesLL.gnomio.com. The students were assigned adaptive study quizzes based on textbook exercises and vocabulary. This encourages mastery-learning whereby students can change their answers and fix mistakes as they study to improve their scores. Other discussion resources are also featured.
- A variety of short communication and review activities featuring powerpoint presentations, interactive Google Sheets game templates. etc were also used.

Other information

Lesson plans were written on the whiteboard and explained by the teacher during every class. Student progress reports listing all assignments and current grades were compiled and distributed to the students in week #8 of 15.

5. THE SURVEY

The student survey was carried out in week #12 of 15. It was facilitated using an online Google form and the responses were automatically compiled in a Google Sheets spreadsheet. It was kept brief. The students were allocated about 2 to 3 minutes to complete the form. Students were simply asked for cursory comments on class feedback and suggestions for improvement. Responses in English or Japanese were deemed OK.

All responses were anonymous.

The form basically consisted of 2 questions:

Feedback

この授業のよかったところ・継続してほしいところを書いて下さい。

(What was good about this class? What would you like to see continued?)

Suggestions

この授業について改善・提案できるところがあれば書いてください。

(Do you have any suggestions on how to improve this class?)

6. THE RESULTS

On the day of the survey 77 students out of 87 registered students (88.5%) were in attendance. Out of a possible maximum of 77 responses, 69 students (89.6%) chose to respond. 8 students did not respond. A total of 69 feedback comments and 60 suggestions were received.

These were translated into English; analysed and broken down into 119 discrete points for feedback and 81 discrete points for suggestions. They were then further collated into 22 distinct feedback categories and 20 distinct suggestion categories and subject to evaluation and reflection.

Here are the results for feedback and suggestions.

FEEDBACK	COLLATED	SUGGESTIONS	COLLATED
speaking	34	no suggestions	22
English Central	15	difficult to understand	9
CALL speaking	14	no response	9
teacher	9	length of study	7
please continue	8	homework is difficult to understand	6
learner autonomy	7	challenging content	4
activities	6	better explanations please	3
general	6	classroom environment	3
listening	4	hardware problems	3
pronunciation	3	computer manipulation	2
Thank you	3	more activities	2
English only	2	online study	1
classroom environment	1	partner using Japanese in class	1
continuous assessment	1	Please explain in Japanese	1
convenience of online learning	1	reluctant to ask questions	1
evaluation	1	seating	1
online learning	1	self-reflection	1
social aspect	1	something new please	1
textbook	1	timing	1
vocabulary	1	understanding evaluation	1
		Wanted to study TOEIC	1
		worried about speaking evaluation	1
TOTAL	119	TOTAL	81

7. DISCUSSION

Response rates were generally high. Overall impressions and opinions seemed generally favourable. The tone of the students comments indicated sincerity in listing positive features or feedback and constructive criticism or suggestions.

FEEDBACK	# of responses	
speaking	34	Students appreciated having opportunities to speak English on a wide variety of topics in class.
English Central	15	Listening, fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary interactive exercises were effective.
CALL speaking	14	Speaking on the headphones with random partners was fun. Being compelled to speak “English only” was helpful.
teacher	9	“Approachable”, “kind” and “helpful”, were some of the comments. I attribute this to the influence of CALL on the role of the teacher as facilitator rather than disciplinarian.
please continue	8	Some students expressed hope for no changes in the structure of the lessons.
learner autonomy	7	For many CALL assignments, students valued being able to decide whether to work at their own pace or to work collaboratively.
activities	6	Only 6 comments seems low. Fewer ensemble activities and more small group activities might be better.
listening	6	These were some general comments about the lessons being enjoyable(x7), fun(x3), perfect(x2) or exciting(x1)!
pronunciation	4	These comments reflect the students’ levels of autonomy and awareness.
Thank you	3	These comments reflect the students’ levels of autonomy and awareness.
English only	3	<i>(Thank you too!)</i>
	2	Compulsion can be helpful.

SUGGESTIONS	# of responses	
no suggestions	22	Depending on the context (feedback) these can be interpreted as positive affirmations of satisfaction or simple statements of facts.
difficult to understand	9	Explanations of the complexities of CALL are usually in English. Sometimes repeated in simple English. Occasionally followed by Japanese explanations and confirmation of understanding or a lack of. This usually seems effective. More student questions would help.
no response	9	The form field was left blank.
length of study	7	Some students want more time allocated to speaking in class.
homework is difficult to understand	6	Moodle adaptive study quizzes are new to most students. Explanations were given, but ensemble hands-on demonstrations would probably address this issue more effectively.
challenging content	4	The fluency in TV news programs is high and the content is challenging. I welcome and encourage lots of student questions and consultation.
better explanations please	3	I strive to make sure everyone understands and I always encourage more student questions. These 3 comments may also be related to the complexities of CALL and Moodle adaptive quiz paradigms.

classroom environment	3	The classroom is cold(x2). The classroom is too far away(x1).
hardware problems	3	These are mostly headphone problems. We are indebted to the IT staff for their constant support.
computer manipulation	2	Mastery of and fluency in computer skills takes time and effort to achieve.
more activities	2	More small group games may be warranted.
online study	1	One student wanted to do online study at home, but unfortunately was unaware that this is possible and highly recommended.

8. CAVEATS

A number of limitations should be noted. A cursory student survey such as this is akin to a momentary snapshot. A cross-sectional case study, not longitudinal. The required interpretation and reflection is inescapably subjective by nature to a greater or lesser extent especially when you are the teacher and these are your students.

This is an ongoing process, a work-in-progress where results are not final or necessarily widely applicable. Improvements and changes are probably best implemented on a case-by-case basis.

9. CONCLUSIONS

As an educator, it's always welcome to hear from students that at least something is working (well) in your class. Finding out exactly what seems to be working and how well it is being received is very useful. Being made aware of shortcomings that can allow for reflection and implementation of improvements is not always much fun, but it is also vitally important.

For this survey, attendance and response figures were high at 88.5% and 89.7% respectively. The tone of the students comments seemed sincere and well informed in listing positive features and feedback along with constructive criticism and suggestions

Ultimately, here are my top 09 possible strategies to be considered:

1. Continue with the same basic class structure --- communication and fluency; textbook assignments and CALL; other activities.
2. Extend CALL speaking assignments using repeated shorter sessions with different random partners.
3. Include more TOEFL components in the speaking sections.
4. Continue with EnglishCentral.com and Moodle.
5. Use ensemble hands-on demonstrations to enhance explanations, especially for Moodle adaptive study quizzes.
6. Increase the frequency of progress reports with more student teacher consultations to uncover and address issues and areas where comprehension is lacking.
7. Talk to students more to discover and remedy problems in a timely manner.
8. Find out more about how other educators deal with similar issues.
9. Try these strategies next time and then determine their success of failure with more surveys, reflection and discussion!

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