

CALL SIG Forum: Is the future of CALL in the hands of educational policy-makers or educational practitioners?

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In the context of globalization, there is an international policy push towards the implementation of IT in educational systems. Yet the literature indicates that transformation with IT in teaching and learning is not easily achieved. Using the Singapore context as a case in point, the paper argues that impressively high levels of IT penetration in both schools and homes are not sufficient to change language classroom practice. In order to close potential IT policy implementation gaps in wider classroom contexts, the paper ends with three interrelated suggestions concerning how language teachers can remain relevant and effective in emerging digital learning classrooms wherever they happen to be.

グローバル化を背景に、教育制度にIT(情報技術)を導入する政策が世界的に推進されている。だがこれまでの研究が示すように、ITによって教育及び学習を一変させるのは容易ではない。本稿はCALL(コンピュータ支援言語学習)の未来を考察する。CALLの未来を、ITが学校でも家庭でも非常に高度に浸透している状況で働く教員・教員指導者・研究者の観点から論じる。しかし浸透しているとはいえ、語学教育現場を変えるには十分ではなく、IT導入政策の格差も珍しくはないのである。デジタル学習が普及し始めた状況下で、関連ある情報を持ち効果的な教育を行い続けるために、何が語学教員に求められるのかを本稿で概説する。

This article is not about what technology does or how it can be best used in language learning from a technical point of view. Rather, given the title of the CALL SIG Forum, *Current Trends in CALL*, and the overall conference theme of *Language Learning for Life*, I am prompted to examine some of the principles that guide classroom practices in order to determine, if I can, where CALL is moving and who, or what, is charting that direction. I begin with a brief appraisal of the general state of affairs with technological innovations in education. Next, I will make some specific remarks about the attempted use of Information Technology (IT) in language learning based on some of my experiences as an English language teacher, teacher educator and researcher in Singapore. Finally, in order to show how potential gaps in IT policy implementation can be eliminated in CALL contexts beyond Singapore's shores, the paper ends with what I believe language teachers need to do to remain relevant and effective in emerging digital learning classrooms.

The changing world and technology

We live in times where the flow of capital across national boundaries leads to what Appadurai (1996) calls "a new order of instability" (p. 4). Our world is one that is characterized by mass and rapid change. Diversity is the norm and complexity often arises as an unwelcome result.

Under these turbulent circumstances the demand for human capital is urgent. In response to this need, economists, politicians, and policy-makers have instituted educational reforms that are designed to deal with upheaval and ensure (as far as possible) political and economic survival. As evidence of this, look at any government or ministry of education website. Note in particular how IT is a key element in the raft of measures on which forward-thinking nations have set to sea.

Yet the literature indicates, and personal experience confirms, that transformation in teaching and learning with IT is not as widespread or as deep as people would like. Why is that so?

Consider the findings of Cuban (2001) who went to the heart of technological innovation, northern California's Silicon Valley, to study the assumptions underlying the infusion of new technologies in schools. At the conclusion of his investigation he states:

Although promoters of new technologies often spout the rhetoric of fundamental change, few have pursued deep and comprehensive changes in the existing system of schooling. The introduction of information technologies into schools over the past two decades has achieved neither the transformation of teaching and learning nor the productivity gains that a reform coalition of corporate executives, public officials, parents, academics, and educators have sought. For such fundamental changes in teaching and learning to occur there would have to have been widespread and deep reform in schools' organization, political,

social, and technological contexts. From my inquiry into Silicon Valley schools I have concluded that computers in classroom[s] have been oversold by promoters and policymakers and underused by teachers and students. (Cuban, 2001, p. 195)

I quote at length here because I feel that Cuban's remarks deserve due recognition. They also demand a response as they point to the deadlock that seems to occur when policy-makers mandate the use of IT from above. Also note that Cuban's indictment against the technocrats' rhetoric is hardly new. From Papert (1987), through Postman (1992), and to Stoll (1996; 2000) we have been warned of the domineering and alienating effects of technology in society. Gaps, then, between intent in IT policy-making and successful implementation are not uncommon in education and I want to turn to consider how these occur by examining language teaching practices in one particular context with which I am familiar.

How IT policy implementation gaps arise in language teaching and learning: The case of Singapore

Singapore exemplifies the effects of technology-driven change in society particularly well (Towndrow, 2001). By any standard, the government's commitment to IT in education is impressive. In 1997, the first Masterplan for IT in education (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 1997) was launched. Through this initiative a phased programme of infrastructure building was undertaken that saw all schools equipped, networked, and trained to use IT for a variety of intended outcomes. Later, to keep up with the times, a

second Masterplan was introduced (Tharman, 2002) that sought to extract value from the first, especially in the areas of promoting thinking and creativity.

Let me offer a frank assessment of these developments. I have heard a lot said about IT, read many articles about its potential and seen a number of promising *showcases* of software and students' work. However, as I travel around schools supervising pre-service English language teachers on teaching practice and conducting in-service workshops and seminars for teachers, I see very little actual use of IT in language classrooms. In fact, I have only ever seen one teacher use electronic slideshow software in a lecture-style presentation and I also witnessed a very unfortunate incident where a trainee tried to use a visualizer but could not get the technical assistance she needed when it failed to operate in an observed lesson. My experiences lead me to wonder, therefore, how it is that IT is held at bay in the technology-drenched language classrooms and schools that I visit. I am also inclined to speculate about how much longer English language teachers in Singapore can continue to avoid its use. (My best estimate is between two and five years before replacement or redundancy.) Overall, I am convinced that *access* to technology is not a sufficient condition for its effective use. Nor might I add is training in IT of much use either. Rather than grow human capital, learning how technology works only serves to stultify practice when conducted *en masse* and out of context.

Let me be clear, I am not anti-technology. I maintain that IT can add tremendous value in language learning but this is only possible under certain conditions. These factors, as I attempt to explain in the next section, are attainable by all.

They can equip teachers to nullify instability, complexity, and diversity. Essentially, they are principles relating to widespread classroom practice that generate possibilities and allow language teachers wherever they happen to be to remain relevant and effective in emerging digital learning contexts.

Meeting instability, complexity and diversity in digital language learning contexts

For me, awareness is the keystone in enlightened digital language classrooms. I maintain that it is not what teachers know that is important. It is what they know about what they know that counts. In this I mean that teachers must acknowledge the boundaries of their expertise in order to identify those areas of contemporary classroom practice where they can most usefully turn their attention. For example, I consider the practice of trying to keep up with technological innovations to be frustrating and counter-productive. Some teachers I have met worry about their students knowing more than they do about the latest version of an arcane computer operating system. What a waste to exclude learners' experiences and expertise from the classroom! I advocate embracing what students know about technology and then moving forward from that point. I don't mind asking them which buttons to press or where to find a good Website. It is no good asking me about the best laptop to buy, I really don't know. My exclusive focus is on transforming pedagogy and developing generative and sustainable digital language learning classroom practices. Towards this end, I offer three interrelated ways in which I think teachers can keep themselves focussed on what they really should be doing best.

Ask why before what

Technocrats are usually replete with solutions for problems that people do not currently experience. This is particularly unhelpful because it can foster a dependent mindset where IT is used for its own sake. Teachers can be helped towards striking a better balance between IT educational policy-making and classroom practice by seeking reasons for using technology in response to the development of learners' needs and interests. For example, I recently conducted a workshop for English language teachers where I asked participants to work together to identify problems encountered in their classrooms. One group pondered a knotty issue—as teachers they wanted to do online editing of their student's writing but they lacked the time, focus, institutional flexibility, and IT knowledge to do this effectively. After some exploration they produced an action plan and a supporting rationale for the use of the 'track changes' features of Microsoft Office Word. I was particularly pleased with this idea because it is simple, exploits an under-explored resource, and is learner-centred.

Language teachers as learning task designers

The work of language teachers is diversifying. Not so long ago, issues relating to language course design and instructional materials production were the exclusive domains of curriculum specialists and professional writers. But, given the power, flexibility, and the ever increasing access teachers have to the means of production of digital media, the balance of power is shifting irrevocably into the hands of IT users and learners. One of the effects of these developments is that language teachers will have to balance an even wider range of institutional constraints and goals

when implementing learning tasks in their classrooms. This, we must acknowledge as a body of professionals, is *design* work (New London Group, 1996) and we must be ready for this eventuality.

In order to facilitate the design of digital language learning materials, a framework is required that acknowledges the *affordances* of IT in response to learning objectives and learners' needs. In this respect, I have proposed along with my co-author Michael Vallance (Towndrow & Vallance, 2004, p. 105) that IT works best in language learning when it is used as an integral part of a learning task. This axiom is realizable when IT makes possible:

- Activities that could not be done in the analogue world
- The integration of media
- Greater flexibility in terms of when and where learning occurs
- Access to a wide-range of information
- A focus on the processes and products of learning
- Discussion and consultation
- Feedback and assessment.

An important point to note about these conditions is that they can be ranked differently according to need and perspective. For instance, a teacher could achieve them all by presenting information to a class through a Microsoft Office PowerPoint presentation but there are bigger fish to catch in the sea. I consider the most compelling IT solutions in language learning to be those that involve a strategic shift away from

teaching and the teacher towards the exploitation of learner strengths. Usually, this will involve designing for student choice and decision-making.

New literacies

Evolving technologies (e.g. wide area networks, the Internet and the World Wide Web) herald new voices, new opportunities, new needs and methods in CALL contexts. Consider, for instance, the issues of attempting to interpret online information compared with those of reading a single author's work in the library. According to Warschauer (2004, p. 19):

Although all reading and research skills include selecting the right questions, choosing the right tools, finding information, archiving and saving information ... there is a great difference between reading a book in the library and assuming that the information in it is reliable ... and conducting research online, where the very act of reading cannot be done without making critical decisions at every step. Online readers must constantly determine whether to scroll down a page, pursue an internal link, try an external link, or quit the page and conduct a new search. In the past, "critical literacy" was presented as a special category of language education; however, in the online future, virtually all literacy will necessitate critical judgment.

I want to go further by stating that old CALL wine drawn from old pedagogical bottles will appear increasingly out of keeping in contemporary language syllabi. Surely, the way

to deal with growing language learning complexity is to provide even more access to material and the tools that are necessary to interpret, judge, and manipulate information as it flows to our learners (c.f., Hawkins, 1996). For example, Figure 1 presents instructions to students involved in a mini-classroom project that exploits a blend of in- and out-of-class activities designed for students of English as a second or foreign language at intermediate level and above (the initial idea and questions in stage 3 are adapted from Kennedy, 2000). The objective of the task is twofold: to promote the critical appreciation of texts and develop an interest in extensive reading. It is estimated that the project could take up to 2-hours of study time. The teacher and students require access to the World Wide Web and a school Web server running an electronic bulletin board service. Alternatively, the teacher could set up a group Web page facility (these are available free of charge at <groups.yahoo.com>).

In the Potluck reading mini-project, learners are given the opportunity to make choices within a structure that draws attention to relevant data. The final stage is somewhat lighthearted but it does have the potential to raise awareness of factors that influence learning behaviour. Overall, it is considered that IT adds value to the task by giving learners access to a wide variety of information and opportunities to discuss, justify and feedback to each other.

Figure 1. Instructions for a mini-classroom reading project using IT

Digital potluck dinner party

A potluck dinner party can be great fun. Usually, the host invites each of the guests to bring a dish of their choice (perhaps a starter, main course, or dessert) to share with others. Everyone gets to share a little of the great things available. This task is designed to provide a digital menu of texts for you to enjoy and think about.

1. The class is invited to a reading party. The first thing for you to do is to find an electronic text that you can share with your classmates. Using the World Wide Web, try looking for special interest magazines, comics or newspapers. Make a careful note of the URL (Web address) of the text you have chosen and read.
2. Next, place your text on the digital reading menu by posting a message on the class bulletin board. Give at least 3 reasons why you like the text. Also, don't forget to include your name and the URL of the text you want your classmates to read.
3. Now it is time for you to choose a text from the reading menu. Open your Web browser and follow the URL to something that interests you. Read the passage and then make notes in answer to the following questions:
 - (a) What is the title?
 - (b) Who is the author?
 - (c) What is the text about? Does it put forward a particular point of view?
 - (d) Are there any pictures or illustrations? Do you like them? Why or why not?
 - (e) Is the text interesting? Explain why or why not?
 - (f) Do you agree or disagree with the content of the text? Give reasons to support your answer.
4. Now post your comments on the bulletin board. You should also take this opportunity to view some of the other postings from your classmates.
5. Once everyone in the class has posted something, summarise the contents of the bulletin board to determine (a) the most popular text at the party and (b) the top 5 reasons why people like and/or dislike a reading passage.

Conclusion

So, to return to the title of my article—Is the future of CALL in the hands of educational policy-makers or educational practitioners? My answer to this riddle is “yes” on both counts. On the one hand we must rely on our bosses and political leaders to provide the IT equipment that we need for our classrooms but we should not let them or the technocrats have it all their own way. I have suggested that language teachers can (and in fact, must) wrestle for control of the work that only they can do best. In order to remain relevant and effective, we must pay active attention to the ways in which our classrooms are changing. Successful change is possible but it must be guided by principled practice. Hopefully, the points made above will prove to be useful in moving towards the articulation of an effective language pedagogy with IT that solves more problems than it creates in a variety of emerging contexts.

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