

Editorial*

We are particularly delighted to have been invited to edit this special issue of *IJOAL* on *CALL in Second Language Acquisition: New Approaches for Teaching and Testing*.

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), considered a fad or novelty for many years, has finally achieved the recognition it deserves, thanks to new multimedia computing and the World Wide Web. With hindsight, one can see that the so-called first generation of CALL applications was restricted to the operation of mechanical activities such as games or matching activities which provided learners with instant feedback – the “correct solution.”

However in the nineties, a second generation of programmes focussed attention on the potential for selecting, organizing and accessing knowledge through new technological advances. With the help of computer-mediated teaching, students could gain access to authentic audio and video materials – DVDs, webcasts, video blogs, videotexts etc – and technological tools for the improvement of L2 pronunciation and oral language development through automatic speech recognition systems, text to speech software, chats etc. Web-based instructional design promoted learner autonomy and feedback by means of online resources – instruction involving the consultation of corpora, online dictionaries, glossing, grammar tools etc. – and students could also communicate with one another and with the teacher in real (synchronous) or delayed (asynchronous) time enhancing socialization and cooperative learning.

Nowadays distance learning is administered through digital platforms on an unimaginable scale in terms of the numbers of users and the geographical distances covered. We now see the advent of emerging technologies such as networked-based multimedia, SKYPE and podcasting, MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning), as well as the impact of CBTs (Computer-Based Tests), WBTs (Web-Based

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Tests) and CATs (Computer-Adaptive Tests) in language testing as a quick and effective instrument for language assessment.

Nevertheless, these learning experiences have often been criticized for being driven by technology and not by psychopedagogical models. In the new millennium we still don't know much about how the use of computers influences learning. To date CALL has been based more on intuition and experience than on sound pedagogy and research. Thus we are approaching a third generation of CALL which undoubtedly will prioritize the search for a more learner-centred and task-based pedagogy drawing upon a variety of psycholinguistic and pedagogic sources. In sum, the key issue in the next years will be not only to optimise CALL efficacy but also to address the urgent need to find ways to assess these new learning environments with the help of research-based methods. To paraphrase Dickens, we can conclude that:

These are the best of times and the worst of times, an age of digital technology and an age of search for a pedagogical model and reflective practice; an era of the quantitative and qualitative study of learning processes and outcomes and an era of the fallacy of technology for the sake of technology, a spring of enthusiasm and a winter of caution, we have everything before us.

This special issue of *IJOAL* contains in-depth articles on a broad range of theoretical and practical matters: history of CALL, online lexicography, data driven learning (DDL), virtual learning, listening technology and computer-based testing. Above all, we wish to provide ELT teachers and academics with new insights into CALL directly applicable to many of their own classroom scenarios and also offer research studies about controversial issues about teaching and testing in a CALL environment.

This issue opens with Shield's paper 'CALL: Using What We Know to Avoid Reinventing the Wheel.' The author, a very distinguished scholar and practitioner in this field, has been invited to incorporate a historical perspective of CALL. Thus she tries to describe developments in the use of new technologies over the past three decades with a presentation of trends and practices – not an easy task in the comparatively few pages available to her. To this end, she starts by addressing one of the big issues around CALL: the plethora of terms which have been emerging to encompass new technological advances – TELL, WELL, MALL, E-language learning etc. She then goes on discussing the historical context and the new research and practice in this subject. While 30 years is perhaps a short period in the history of

CALL, its remarkable changes have been so far and fast that Shield concludes with a plea for teachers and researchers to adopt a deeper understanding of existing findings instead of “the reinvention of the wheel.”

The next paper, entitled ‘Syntactic and Semantic Specifications in Online English Learners’ Dictionaries’ by Rizo-Rodríguez, offers a detailed analysis of the main online monolingual learners’ dictionaries *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*, and *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*. The author describes the merits of these online lexicons highlighting their readability, ease of access, hypertextuality, quick searching, etc. However, on the downside he establishes the differences from their printed counterparts, specifying the missing features – extra details about usage and collocations, lack of illustrations, etc. He argues that these online lexicons also compare unfavourably with their CD-ROM versions in terms of graphical interface attributes, accessibility and information retrieval, thesaurus-like consultation, complex searches, extra elements, multimedia resources, and customization (Rizo-Rodríguez 2008). The rest of the paper is devoted to a very precise and detailed study of the treatment of syntax and semantic specifications – many times overlooked – including some enlightening tables and figures.

The research paper, ‘Learning Outcomes and Learner Perceptions in Relation to Computer-based Feedback’ by Rosselle, Sercu and Vandepitte, makes an attempt to establish the extent to which feedback bears upon proficiency in language learning; this research is targeted at Dutch-speaking Belgian second-year students of translation studies. This paper investigates five different feedback types in order to gain cognitive insights into the learning process, concentrating mainly on the degree of explicitness to learning and the level of depth of processing. This exploratory study is an important attempt to understand the role of feedback in terms of the interplay between providing feedback in online learning and learner perceptions.

The theme of the next paper, ‘Traditional vs. Virtual Learning: Does it make a Difference? ADELEX - Assessing and Developing Lexical Competence,’ presents the design of a virtual course for enlarging the vocabulary of Spanish university students of English Philology. Thus, the author Moreno Jaén first describes the main characteristics of this modular course – pedagogical principles, syllabus, activities, communication tools etc – delivered through the digital platform ILIAS. In the second part of the paper, however, she

reports on student perceptions about relevant aspects of web-based learning such as the role of the teacher, planning of the course, effectiveness of activities and motivation in comparison with traditional learning alongside with the use of communication web tools.

Among the multifarious applications of corpus linguistics, data-driven learning (DDL) has been perhaps one of the most interesting approaches. Defined by its founder as “the ability to see patterning in the target language and to form generalisations to account for that patterning” (Johns 1991: 2-3), DDL is examined by Boulton in ‘Data-Driven Learning: Reasonable Fears and Rational Reassurance.’ He explores the extent to which DDL has been a useful approach in teaching and learning languages. In this respect, he argues that despite the considerable enthusiasm when it first appeared, DDL has not made major inroads to mainstream language teaching. Thus the paper explains at length some pitfalls of this promising pedagogical trend.

Another issue very much related to CALL is the use of multimedia for developing listening comprehension. In fact, digital technology allows a more efficient use of classroom listening by offering the socio-cultural aspect of spoken language. This aspect has been researched by Blasco Mayor in her paper ‘CALL-Enhanced L2 Listening Skills – Aiming for Automatization in a Multimedia Environment.’ In the first part she offers a state-of-the-art account of L2 listening comprehension borrowing from psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology, bilingualism, and applied linguistics, emphasizing the important role of listening in language acquisition in general. In the second part she establishes some criteria for selecting L2 listening materials and strategies implemented via a digital platform called *Labint*.

In our quest to provide teachers and researchers with new ideas on CALL, this issue would give an incomplete picture without delving into one of the sexiest issues in testing: computer-adaptive tests (CATs). In fact, over the last ten years, CATs have received a lot of attention from applied linguists at all levels as an important technological advance in language assessment. Parallel to the attention received by lexical competence, there has also been an increasing interest in the reliable assessment of such competence. Thus López-Mezquita Molina in her paper, ‘A Computer-adaptive Vocabulary Test,’ describes the design, construction and implementation of a CAT, as a valid and reliable way of assessing lexical competence. This research has been awarded First Prize in the national competition run by the Ministry of Education for doctoral theses.

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