

## The Status of Computer-Assisted Language Learning in Iran

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### **Abstract**

This review sheds some light on the advantages of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and how it is used in the world to teach foreign languages. The main focus of the present paper is on the current status of Iran in terms of inclusion of CALL in foreign language teaching contexts. Based on the results of the previous research, the writers conclude that the use of technological facilities is very limited in Iran compared to some other parts of the world and steps have to be taken to provide conditions which meet second language teachers and students' needs.

**Keywords:** computer-assisted language learning, CALL, teaching foreign languages in Iran

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

All over the world, the need to acquire a foreign language is on the increase. A considerable number of methods have been proposed and implemented in this field in order to improve the conditions under which foreign languages are learned. Recently, the use of computers and technology in educational contexts in general and in foreign language teaching contexts in particular has been inevitable as computers have influenced every aspect of our life. The history of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) which is defined as “the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning” (Levy, 1997:1, cited in Pirasteh, 2014), goes back to the 1960s (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). According to Azizinezhad and Hashemi (2013), CALL includes traditional drill-and-practice programs employed in the 1960s 1970s, as well as the use of concordances and interactive whiteboards, computer-mediated communication (CMC), mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), virtual learning environment, and web-based distance learning. This paper takes a look at the current state of Iran with regard to the implementation of technology common in EFL courses throughout the world.

## II. CALL AND ITS IMPLEMENTATIONS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

CALL programs are currently employed in foreign language courses and by individuals to help learners develop their second language skills, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and their understanding of foreign cultural attitudes and values, as well as evaluating them in these aspects. Growing numbers of studies in this respect suggest that CALL is not only an effective way of learning/teaching a foreign language now, but is also moving toward promising directions.

Since the 1960s, three generations of CALL have appeared in chronological order: behavioristic CALL, communicative CALL, and integrative CALL. Today, however, all three of these paradigms are in use and none has disappeared (Warschaur & Healy, 1998). The extensive use of technology in language classrooms has prompted researchers to investigate the effectiveness of CALL in learning language skills (Ehsani & Knodt, 1998; Brantmeier, 2003; Jones, 2003; Hulstijn, 2003; Altun, 2005; Amirshuibani & Iraj, 2014), and different language areas (Jones, 2003; Hung, 2006; Cobb, 2007; Meng, 2009; Kilickaya & Krajka, 2010; Pirasteh, 2014).

As learning languages is a natural thing, people's immersion in real situations in which the target language is spoken may be the best way to learn that language. Language immersion contributes to the learners' development of functional skills in both written and spoken language as well as cultural awareness (Nieminen, 2006). Not all learners have the opportunity to learn a foreign language in a native-speaking context. Today, however, technology provides us with virtual reality (VR) environment, "which is a computer-generated interactive artificial world that "creates the illusion that the user is immersed in a world inside the computer—an environment that contains both screens and the controls to change those scenes" (Beekman, 2005, p. 148, cited in Inoue & Bell, 2006). Accordingly, a large number of studies have been devoted to this area: Ibáñez et al.'s (2011) implementation of a 3D multi-user virtual world for language learning; Amoia et al.'s (2012) implementation of a serious game for second language acquisition in a virtual environment; Santally et al.'s (2012) design of socio-constructivist environment for distance e-learning; Hundsberger's (2009) investigation of foreign language learning in Second Life, a 3D virtual world, to name a few.

## III. WHY USE CALL?

In spite of a number of remarks against CALL (McDermott, 1991; Snir et al., 1993; both cited in Friedrich & Karslioglu, 2003), it is claimed that CALL technologies are invaluable aids to language teaching and learning provided that they are used appropriately (Kötter, M. (2006). Inoue and Bell (2006) have listed the advantages of using technology for educational purposes under three categories. Here the three categories and several examples of each, taken from their work, are mentioned.

- *Teaching practice* (makes teaching more interesting with greater resources; for language learning, repetition is important, and the computer does an excellent job by providing repetitious drill and relieves the teacher of this often arduous task; adds a lot to a lecture, especially when students are not dealing in their first language; helps keep

students' attention and in-class motivation; fast and powerful means of sharing information).

- *Student learning* (makes information available to students online, rather than having them rely exclusively on readings; the Internet allows even the most remote student to find out about the world; technology allows students to go at their own paces and make up for missed classes; has the potential of serving diverse learning styles; reaches visual learners).
- *Preparation and research* (students can access online information when convenient; it helps to be more efficient and keeps students up to date; it really has the potential to expand a knowledge base; the convenience and volume of information available through a computer stroke is amazing).

#### IV. CALL IN IRAN

Teachers and students' willingness to use technologies is one of the main prerequisites for the implementation of CALL in educational contexts. Studies indicate that both Iranian teachers and students have positive attitudes towards the integration of technology into foreign language courses (Rahimi & Hosseini K., 2011; Dashtestani, 2012; Talebinezhad & Aziz Abarghoui, 2013; Jalali & Dousti, 2014; Amirsheibani & Iraj, 2014). However, the use of CALL in EFL courses in Iran is very limited in all settings including institutes, schools, and universities.

In the study conducted by Amirsheibani and Iraj (2014), for instance, the attitude of 101 English language teachers towards the effect of CALL on teaching writing was investigated. Data dealing with personal information and participants' perspective about using computer were gathered through questionnaires and it was revealed that Iranian teachers' attitude towards using CALL was positive. As another example, Talebinezhad and Aziz Abarghoui (2013) found that most high school students had positive perceptions of CALL and its use for EFL receptive skills.

The findings of Dashtestani (2012), who has studied the status of English institutes in Iran through questionnaires, interviews, and observations, suggest that although teachers expressed positive views about the use of CALL, they stated that they either did not use technologies in their classes or assigned internet-based homework activities to their students in few cases. The only technological tools reported to be used were mp3 player devices or computers mainly utilized to play audio-tracks in order to improve students' listening skills. The main teaching materials were printed textbooks. CALL activities such as electronic dictionaries, e-mails, word processors, the Internet, and visual aids were not used.

Another factor which contributes to the use of technologies in foreign language courses is to enable foreign language teachers to develop their own CALL materials. In another work, Dashtestani (2014) has analyzed EFL teachers' knowledge of and the use and development of CALL materials in Iran. The results of his interviews and observations reveals that EFL classes in Iran are not sufficiently equipped with CALL facilities. Furthermore, teachers are not trained

to use or develop CALL materials and only few of them use or develop these kinds of materials in their classes.

Researches carried out in Iran in the field of CALL mainly include those in which researchers provide a context to implement CALL (Rahimi & Hosseini K., 2011; Naraghizadeh & Barimani, 2013; Pirasteh, 2014; Amirshuibani & Iraj, 2014). Generally speaking, contexts in which CALL is the necessary and inseparable part of syllabi and curricula do not exist in Iran. To clarify this issue, one of the mentioned studies above is examined in detail. Pirasteh (2014) divided 52 homogenous university students participating in the general English course into an experimental and a control group. Both groups were taught 15 grammar points, the experimental group through e-mail and the control one through printed paper. A test administered to both groups revealed that the experimental group had learned the grammar points much better than the other group. As can be seen e-mail was used here only for the purpose of the study.

### **A. Demanding challenges to the use of CALL and solutions**

Lee (2000) has identified four common constraints on the practice of CALL: “a) financial barriers, b) availability of computer hardware and software, c) technical and theoretical knowledge, d) acceptance of the technology”. These barriers are consistent with those found in the above studies in Iran.

Mahmoudikia, Hoomanfar and Izadpanah (2014) have classified the barriers as well as contributing factors to the implementation of information communication technology (ICT) in Iran into four broad groups with more restricted factors as their subgroups:

- “Psychological factors (teacher’s attitude, computer anxiety, resistance to change, motivation, cultural perception)”
- “Professional development (ICT literacy and competence)”
- “Educational factors”
- “Biological factors (age, gender)”

The existent obstacles in Iran can be dealt with to a great extent through “inclusion of CALL in teacher training programs”, “provision of adequate CALL facilities”, “provision of adequate time for teachers to implement CALL”, “funding teachers to have access to CALL software”, “holding workshops and conferences on CALL and its implementation”, “awareness-raising programs”, “inviting teachers to take part in CALL materials development”, and “updating teachers’ knowledge about new CALL software” (ibid).

## **V. CONCLUSION**

In this age of technology, it is highly necessary for teachers around the world to implement CALL in their classes and Iran is no exception. The current situation in Iran does not provide the prerequisites for this enterprise. Accordingly, new and proper policies have to

be adopted in order to overcome the barriers encountered and to integrate technologies into foreign language curricula.

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