

Computer-Based Language Activities

**Rodica Silvia STAN, Elvira OROIAN, Anca MOANGA,
Sorana ADAM, Mihaela MIHAI, Valentin MIHAI**

University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, Str. Manastur no 3-5 Cluj;
rodicasilviastan@gmail.com

Abstract. In the last decades computers have made a triumphal entry into education and have brought significant benefits to teachers and students alike. Recent challenges have gained a new quality, and it is teachers especially, with their pedagogic responsibility, who has gained a special role to play. They have to meet this responsibility not only by familiarizing themselves with the new technology, but by developing new strategies for coping with unforeseen masses of data and for assessing their value in the educational context. This article points out the ways computers have been used in English language teaching at the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine from Cluj.

Key words: technology, computer, method, Internet, skill, language acquisition

INTRODUCTION

Teachers have always tried to use methods for making the teaching/learning process easier and more joyful. One of them is by utilizing a computer as a medium which can help students learn a language effectively or what we usually call it, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). One of the advantages of teaching a language using the computer is that students can learn more than the language itself. There are many models of teaching English using CALL that can be applied in the teaching/learning process such as: the audio-lingual model, the cognitive-code model, and the humanistic model. The manner in which the computer is utilised in the classroom is crucially dependent on the teacher's own beliefs and views as to what constitutes a fruitful learning environment and as to what procedures best facilitate language acquisition. (Egbert, Hanson-Smith, 1999) Considering the many learner types and the various motivational orientations, the search for a "best" learning/teaching approach is as vain as the quest for the Holy Grail. Attempts have to be made to cover the whole range of computer applications.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We have come a long way from the rather naïve thought of the early days of computers and programmed learning, held by some at that time, that the computer could eventually come to replace the human being, the teacher; there has been a return to a much more sophisticated kind of computerized teaching using multimedia CD ROMS. In such programmes, students can listen to dialogues or watch video clips. They can click on pictures to call up the names of the objects they see. They can speak into the microphone and immediately hear a recording of what they have said. The program can keep a record of their progress, e.g. the vocabulary learned, and offer remedial help if necessary. Many of these CD ROM programs are offered as complete language courses. They require students to spend

many hours in front of the computer screen, usually attached to a microphone headset. This is why some teachers preferred not to use them in language teaching. Another of their serious drawbacks, is the fact that in many cases the course content is fixed. The teacher has no chance to include materials that are of interest and importance to the students interested in particular terminology. However, the CD ROM programmes contain collections of activities, which the language teachers use to help learners improve their language and communication skills. The manner in which the computer is utilised in the classroom is crucially dependent on one's own beliefs and views as to what constitutes a fruitful learning environment and as to what procedures best facilitate language acquisition.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a tester, the computer is very good at what is known as *drill and practice*; it will tirelessly present the learner with questions and announce if the answer is right or wrong. In its primitive manifestations in this particular role in language teaching, it has been rightly criticised. The main reason for the criticism is simple: many early drill and practice programs were very unsophisticated; either multiple-choice or demanding a single word answer. They were not programmed to accept varying input and the only feedback they gave was *Right* or *Wrong*. So for example, if the computer expected the answer "*does not*" and the student typed "*doesn't*" or "*doesnot*" or "*does not*", the result was negative without any further comment. It is not surprising that such programs gave computers a bad name with many language teachers. Unfortunately, there are now very many of these primitive *drill and kill* programs flooding the Internet. Despite their obvious disadvantages, such programs are nevertheless popular with many students. This is probably because the student is in full control, the computer is extremely patient and gives private, unthreatening feedback. Most programs also keep the score and have cute animations and sounds, which many students like. There are some programs which do offer more useful feedback than right or wrong, or that can accept varying input. Such programs blur the role of the computer as teacher or tester and can be recommended to students who enjoy learning grammar or vocabulary in this way. If two or more students sit at the same computer, then they can generate a fair amount of authentic communication while discussing the answers together. As a tool, the computer has been an unequivocal success in language teaching. Spreadsheets, databases, presentation slide generators, concordancers and web page producers all have their place in the language classroom, particularly in one where the main curricular focus is task-based or project-work. But the most important role of the computer in the language classroom is its use as a writing tool. It has played a significant part in the introduction of the writing process, by allowing students easily to produce multiple drafts of the same piece of work. Students with messy handwriting can now do a piece of work to be proud of, and those with poor spelling skills can, after sufficient training in using the spell check, produce a piece of writing largely free of spelling mistakes. The computer is primarily important as data source. The Internet is a great provider of information. Anyone who has done a search on the World Wide Web will know that there is already more information there than an individual could process in hundred lifetimes, and the amount is growing by the second (Sperling, 1998). This huge source of information is an indispensable resource for much project work, but there are serious negative implications. The computer is also important as communication facilitator. The Internet is the principal medium by which communication is possible at a distance, (e.g. by e-mail or by participating in discussion forums). In fact at Frankfurt International School the single most popular use of computers by students in their free time is to write e-mails to their friends.

Some teachers have set up joint projects with a school in another location and others encourage students to take part in discussion groups. There is no doubt that such activities are motivating for students and allow them to participate in many authentic language tasks. However, cautious teachers may wish to closely supervise their students' messages. Recent research has shown up the extremely primitive quality of much of the language used in electronic exchanges! According to the software that is available in the field, there are many models of language teaching that can be applied in the teaching/ learning process. Since the supply of programs available changes so rapidly, in this article the writer introduces five computer programs with their models of language teaching which can be used by an English teacher in teaching English to their students: Encarta, Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Hangman, Scrabble, and Longman Student (Eastment, 1999).

1. The Audio-lingual Model

The audio-lingual model claims that language is learnt through the acquisition of association of stimulus and response; the aim of teaching is to get students able to use structure automatically and unthinkingly in the appropriate situation. The techniques employed are usually drills in which students practice a particular, structural or lexical point until it becomes automatic, and exploitation activities which encourage transfer to less controlled situations. The prime belief of audio-lingual is that language is primarily speaking and listening, and that reading and writing are secondary skills that should be postponed as long as possible; the computer, however, depends almost totally on written language. For example, by using Encarta, not only can the students find the meaning of a word, but he or she can also hear how the word is pronounced. And by using Longman Student, the student can do listening exercises.

2. The Cognitive-code Model

The computer use of drills has in fact shaded over into another model, that of cognitive-code learning. For the advantage of the computer over the language is that it can analyze what the student writes, see if it conforms to the expected answer and tell the students minimally if they are right or wrong, maximally the nature of the mistakes. Correction by the computer is only an advantage if we believe that the student learns by conscious awareness as in cognitive learning. If the student is encouraged to do exercises in Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, or Longman Student's Dictionary, the computer will tell them if he is right or wrong. Some games in Encarta Kids, such as Word Scrabble and Spelling Bee can be useful for the student. Besides that, trying out Hangman and Scrabble can be a way for the student to exercise English vocabulary.

3. The Humanistic Model

The other popular model of language teaching is the humanistic, a collective name covering the somewhat different of methods united by their emphasis on their value of second language learning to the individual's own development, whether cognitive, emotional, social or whatever. The aim of humanistic teaching is not to relate the students to the use of language in the external world but to develop the internal world of his or her personality and mind. Computer puzzles and word games popular on computer, such as exercises in Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Word Scrabble, and Spelling Bee (Encarta Kids) can be useful for the students to develop the internal world of his or her personality and mind. Besides that, the students can also experience the exciting games of Hangman and Scrabble.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, there is a wide range of computer uses in language teaching. Typical existing programs concentrate on a limited area of language and are incompatible with most contemporary teaching models. It is hoped that this article will on the one hand spur on those involved with the communicative and humanistic models to start thinking how computers might be useful to them, and on the other side it provokes those involved with computers to develop techniques to exploit the unused potential and to make them more usable by teachers. Without such a bridge, the use of computers in foreign language teaching will turn into a meaningless activity, providing programs that no one actually wants to use about aspects of language that few people consider important. Computers in education have been disparaged as: *Answers in search of a problem*. And certainly many computer activities of dubious pedagogical value have been devised in the past simply to justify the existence of an expensive computer in the classroom. Nowadays, however, it is much more clearly understood that the computer can play a useful part in the language class only if the teacher asks himself what he wants his students to learn and what the best way to learn is. In most cases, the answer will probably not involve the computer, but there will be occasions when the computer is the most suitable and, for the students, the most enjoyable way to get the job done.

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