ICT and Modern Foreign Languages: Learning Opportunities and Training Needs

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ABSTRACT

This article is divided into two main sections. The first section considers why technology has not lived up to its expectations in bringing about improvements in language learning. Many learning opportunities are offered by new technologies but they are not fully exploited, mainly owing to the lack of relevant training offered to teachers. In addition, with the advent of the Web, there is a disturbing trend towards removing the teacher from the learning process — which is simply not acceptable.

The second section of the article looks at a website that offers a considerable volume of ICT training materials for language teachers, namely the ICT4LT website: http://www.ict4lt.org. The author examines the aims behind the site as a whole and the pattern of site visits, discussing the key issues and drawing conclusions based on an analysis of the pattern of visits to different modules of the site. Some important lessons have been learned regarding the type of training that teachers appear to need, for example: the continued interest in multimedia and the high demand for introductory courses. It is also evident that Web traffic is predominantly one-way and confined to certain sectors of the world, indicating that much more has to be done in order to stimulate discussion and to make the Web accessible to underserved regions of the world.

KEYWORDS: Technology, language learning, CALL, teacher training, ICT4LT, online education

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1. THE COMPUTER: PANACEA OR DELUSION?

Language teachers have been using Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the modern languages classroom for over 20 years. The boom period began in the early 1980s with the advent of the microcomputer, which opened up an exciting new range of learning opportunities for students of languages. The computer was hailed by enthusiasts as the panacea, but after the initial period of euphoria many teachers became disappointed with what the computer appeared to offer. This is a fairly typical sequence of events whenever a new technology becomes available to teachers. Oppenheimer (1997) writes:

In 1922 Thomas Edison predicted that ‘the motion picture is destined to revolutionize our educational system and [...] in a few years it will supplant largely, if not entirely, the use of textbooks.’ Twenty-three years later, in 1945, William Levenson, the director of the Cleveland public school radio station, claimed that ‘the time may come when a portable radio receiver will be as common in the classroom as is the blackboard.’ Forty years after that the noted psychologist B.F. Skinner, referring to the first days of his ‘teaching machines,’ in the late 1950s and early 1960s, wrote: ‘I was soon saying that, with the help of teaching machines and programmed instruction, students could learn twice as much in the same time and with the same effort as in a standard classroom.’ (Oppenheimer 1997:45)

But the situation at the chalkface is another matter:

The cycle began with big promises backed by the technology developers’ research. In the classroom, however, teachers never really embraced the new tools, and no significant academic improvement occurred. (Oppenheimer 1997:45)

The remainder of Oppenheimer’s article, which is significantly entitled “The Computer Delusion,” points out that few lessons have been learned from past mistakes — a view that I have expressed myself in an article entitled “Lessons from the past, lessons for the future” (Davies 1997). The key question that needs to be asked is: Why do new technologies fail to live up to their expectations? There are a number of factors that Oppenheimer mentions in his article, but one of the main reasons is the failure to allocate a substantial budget for teacher training after the initial purchases of computer hardware and software have been made. This is rather like buying a car without setting aside a budget for driving lessons. It is not the hardware that is at fault, nor the software that runs on it; it is the failure to train teachers to make the best use of the hardware and software.

Training, unfortunately, is one of the budget areas that administrators perceive as non-essential, and it is therefore often the subject of financial cuts in times of economic restraint. Continuing the analogy of the driving test, some administrators perceive ICT training as a one-off event: once you have learned to “drive” a computer you don’t need any further training. But computer technology changes so rapidly that constant and regular training is essential — and this is a major cost implication that is all too frequently overlooked. As for the budget, the crucial question is not the size of the budget but how it is divided up. My personal recommendation —
and one that I used to follow as a language centre director is:

- 30% hardware
- 30% software
- 30% staff training and materials development
- 10% contingency (unforeseeable costs)

Training may take a variety of different forms, e.g. staff may take time off to follow an intensive course, or they may be funded to attend a conference in order to update their knowledge. Above all, training for language teachers has to address their specific needs. A little and often is recommended.

II. THE DREAM — OR NIGHTMARE?

ICT offers a wealth of learning opportunities for students of languages, and the discrete use of computers in the classroom can undoubtedly enhance a language teacher's performance, but educational administrators and business training managers often have a blinkered view of computer technology, perceiving it as a way of automating the learning process and saving money on staffing. I wrote the following description of an imaginary scenario as an illustration of how business training managers perceived computer assisted language learning (CALL) in the early 1990s. To some people this is a dream; to others it is a nightmare:

A business trainee is sitting at a computer following a language course. Step-by-step, the computer presents the essential vocabulary and structures. These are accompanied, where appropriate, by still and animated graphic images, photographs and video recordings. As new words and phrases are introduced, authentic male and female voices pronounce them and the learner repeats them. The learner's voice is recorded by the computer and played back. Any errors in pronunciation are indicated graphically on screen. Offending syllables are highlighted and additional practice is offered on sounds which the learner finds difficult. At the end of each presentation sequence, the computer tests the learner's grasp of the new vocabulary and structures. Marking and recording those words and phrases which have been imperfectly recalled and offering feedback points of grammar that the learner appears to have misunderstood. The learner has access at all times to an online dictionary, a reference grammar and verb conjugation tables. At the end of the work session the learner's progress is recorded by the computer, which enables the thread to be picked up at the next session. In addition, the learner's progress records — along with those of all the other trainees following the same course — can be accessed at any time by the training manager. (Davies 1992:113)

This fully-automated, programmed-learning approach was in vogue for a number of years. It derived to a large extent from the dreaded three-phase language lab drills:
1. Stimulus
2. Response
3. Feedback
The main difference between early computer programs and language lab drills was that response analysis and branching were introduced into the above sequence, thus making it possible for interaction to take place between the learner and machine without the intervention of the teacher. The novelty value of the interaction soon wore off, however, and software designers began to look around for more interesting ways of using the computer. The considerable learning opportunities that computers offer were not fully exploited in the early days. It was therefore easy to dismiss computers as “drill-and-kill” machines.

But new ideas were forthcoming. Seminal works by Davies & Higgins (1982, 1985), Higgins & Johns (1986), Jones & Fortescue (1987), Hardisty & Windeatt (1989) listed a growing variety of CALL programs. Computers could do more than offer automated gap-filling and multiple-choice exercises. The following list is by no means exhaustive:

1. Reordering exercises — e.g., line and paragraph reordering
2. Text manipulation — including the innovative total deletion exercise
3. Word games
4. Action mazes
5. Simulations
6. Adventures
7. Discovery and exploratory programs
8. Guided writing programs
9. Reading comprehension exercises — including timed reading
10. Listening exercises
11. Building a personal database, e.g., vocabulary, grammar
12. Email activities

In addition, there was a move away from the behaviouristic, teacher-independent learning scenario that I describe above. As long ago as 1986, Chris Jones wrote an article with a title that says it all: “It’s not so much the program: more what you do with it: the importance of methodology in CALL” (Jones 1986). Computer programs, he pointed out, have to be integrated into the classroom in just the same way as other materials. His message is clear: Don’t try to remove the teacher from the language learning process. Jones’s advice is just as valid today as it was in the mid-1980s:

1. Try it and see what happens. Don’t pre-judge.
2. Don’t expect the program to do all the work.
3. If things don’t work out, don’t automatically blame the program. The problem may lie elsewhere.
4. Above all, use your imagination. (Jones 1986:178)
III. THE DREAM KEVISITED

Warschauer (1996) distinguishes three main phases of CALL:

- Behaviouristic
- Communicative
- Integrative:
  - Multinmedia
  - Internet

At the time of writing this article, we are well into phase three. We have progressed beyond the behavioural phase, which began with the first CALL programs in the 1960s and extended into the early 1980s. Since the late 1970s we have dabbled in various ways with the communicative approach — and will probably continue to do so for some time.

III.1. Multinmedia

Multimedia CALL, which became widely available towards the end of the 1980s, was a breakthrough insofar as it offered high-quality sound and video that could be integrated with the well-established combinations of text and graphics. Initially, multimedia was only made possible via interactive videodiscs, which required expensive and cumbersome equipment. Some interesting interactive videodisc products emerged: Montevideo (Schneider & Bennion 1984), Expodisc (Davies 1991). A la rencontre de Philippe (Fuerstenberg 1993). All of these fall into the category of simulations.

Interactive videodiscs were supplanted by CD-ROMs, which ran on much less expensive and more compact equipment, but the video quality they offered was pitiful compared to that offered by the earlier 12-inch videodiscs. This forced CALL software developers to take a major leap backwards. Pedagogy was sacrificed at the expense of technology, and few imaginative, language-oriented simulations were produced for many years — LPI’s Oscar Lake series being a notable exception; http://www.languagepub.com. It is only recently, with the advent of DVDs, that video quality has caught up with that offered by older technology.

More recently, we have seen programs incorporating speech technology — formerly the preserve of institutions with huge R&D budgets — and it is now possible to interact with a computer using one’s voice as well as the keyboard and mouse. Popular programs such as Syracuse’s TriplePlay Plus (now known as SmartStart) and Auralog’s Tell Me More Pro have brought speech technology to the masses. My latest mobile phone incorporates speech technology, so that now when I am away from home I don’t have to dial the number but simply press a button and say “phone home” clearly — and it works!
111.2. The Internet

There is no doubt that the Internet — especially the World Wide Web, which is a subset of the Internet — has made an enormous impact on many people’s lives. The Web dates back to 1989, when Tim Berners-Lee’s brilliant flash of insight spawned HTML (Berners-Lee 1998). Berners-Lee came up with the idea of the Web as a solution to the problem of information continually getting lost while he was working at CERN, the European Particle Physics Laboratory in Geneva. As a newcomer to CERN, he found it difficult to find out what was going on, and the Web — initially confined to CERN — was born. When the first Web browser was released in 1993 it became possible for the layperson to access information that previously only computer scientists had been able to retrieve using more complex tools.

It did not take long for teachers to realise what a valuable source of information they now had at their fingertips — information that they could download and exploit in the classroom. Later on, the Web began was used to store and present interactive exercises. But then pedagogy took another leap backwards, as most of the earlier Web-based exercises were just sets of multiple-choice or gap-filling drills of the “point-and-click-let’s-niove-on-quick” variety. Web-based interactive materials have undoubtedly improved but they have a long way to go before they catch up with the pedagogy and functionality offered by CALL programs delivered on CD-ROM or DVD. Only the delivery medium has improved, as Web-based activities can be accessed anytime and anywhere — at least in theory.

The Web has initiated a veritable revolution in education, especially in the areas in distance learning and New Learning Environments (NLE). NLE has become closely associated with the Web. I say “associated with” because NLE is a difficult term to define precisely. Originally, NLE was associated with a wide range of technologies and their applications to learning. It embraces a vision of learning that encourages learner independence (learner autonomy), and offers opportunities for distance learning and life-long learning. with the teacher becoming more of a facilitator than instructor. In recent years, however, the focus in NLE appears to be on the Web as the ideal delivery medium. My personal view is that this focus is far too narrow, as it overlooks the benefits of other tried and tested technologies. But educational institutions are rushing headlong into putting all their learning materials on the Web, in spite of the fact that there are many aspects of CALL that cannot (yet) be executed properly on the Web. CD-ROMs and DVDs — and even the interactive videodiscs of the 1980s — are far superior at handling sound and video, for example, which is why a hybrid approach is necessary. Furthermore, the role of the teacher in the language learning process is crucial to success.

The Web is undoubtedly a remarkable invention. My home telephone bill bears testimony to the many hours that I spend “surfing the Web” and managing three different websites. Thanks to the Web I am now able to carry out research that would not have been possible in pre-Web times. But there is, as Claire Bradin puts it, a “Dark Side of the Web” (Bradin 1997). In spite of
this negative sounding title, Bradin presents a realistic and balanced view of the pros and cons of the Web in language learning and teaching. Felix (2001) presents a comprehensive survey; a wealth of information on websites that learners and teachers of languages may find useful, as well as a number of detailed case studies and reports on research into students' and teachers' attitudes to learning languages via the Web. At the beginning of her work Felix makes the following statement — which should be heeded by all Web enthusiasts: "...it takes a very special person to learn and, especially, speak a language without face-to-face communication" (Felix 2001:8).

In her survey of available Web materials, it becomes clear (thankfully) that relatively few websites attempt to take the teacher out of the language learning process:

...what is freely accessible on the Web is often only part of a larger package that also invariably includes face-to-face teaching. It is likely that the most exciting learning takes place off-line in the creative processes negotiated between teachers and learners, sometimes across continents, in which the Web features as a tool rather than instructor. (Felix 2001:190-191.

The book concludes on a note which is both positive and realistic:

Finally, however, highlone sites cite the potential of Web for learning. It is difficult to imagine what any of this will ever replace best practice; face-to-face teaching. What is becoming more and more obvious with emerging research is that the new technologies offer excellent potential for adding value to classroom teaching in a large variety of ways. (Felix 2001:358).

The potential is there, the learning opportunities are there, but are the "customers" there? It was interesting to read the report in The Times (29 November 2000, p. 9) headed "King leaves Internet readers in suspense". Stephen King has decided not to complete his Web novel The Plant because — according to King — "it failed to grab the attention of readers on the Web". King found that a surprisingly high proportion of the readers accessing his site (75%-80%) made the "honesty payment" for being allowed to download chapters. "But", he said, "there are a lot fewer of them coming. Online people have the attention span of a grasshopper."

Critics of the Web lament the disappearance of traditional educational environments, citing the dubious ethics of those who wish to turn our universities into "Digital Diploma Mills" — the title of a five-part series of articles by David Noble (Noble 1997-2001):

In his classic 1959 study of diploma mills for the American Council on Education, Robert Reid described the typical diploma mill as having the following characteristics: "no classrooms," "faculties are often untrained or nonexistent," and "the officers are unethical self-seekers whose qualifications are no better than their offspring." It is an apt description of the digital diploma mills now in the making. Quality higher education will not disappear entirely, but it will soon become the exclusive preserve of the privileged, available only to children of the rich and the powerful. For the rest of us a dismal new era of higher education has dawned. In ten years, we will look upon the wired remains of our once great democratic higher education system and wonder how we let it happen. That is, unless we decide now not to let it happen. (Noble: op. cit. Part 1)

Other critics include Press & Washburn. The preramble to their article entitled "Digital Diplomas" says it all:

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Welcomie to the brave new world of higher education, where professors are "content experts," classes are "courseware," and students are custoiiiers. But just wliat is a dot-corn degree worth?" (Press & Washburn 2001)

Harsh words, but the above authors make some very important points that should not be overlooked in these times of technohype. The Web certainly has its "Dark Side", and evidence is already emerging from North America that online learning may go the same way as some of the early Web businesses that have crashed so spectacularly. Evidence comine out of North America suggests that e-learning courses do not recruit well:

In 1997, facing a projected 50 per cent increase in the state's student population over the next decade, Utah governor Mike Leavitt announced the formation of Western Governors University, a cyber-college backed by governors from 19 states that now offers online courses from 40 schools. "We are turning around the old notion that to be educated one had to go somewhere," Leavitt declared in a speech before the U.S. Senate's Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee. "We are going to bring the knowledge and information to the learner," providing students with a high-quality education "while holding costs in check."

By January 2000, Western Governors University had enrolled a mere 200 degree-seeking students. (Press & Washburn 2001)

There is no question that the Web is impressive as a collection of reference materials and as a delivery medium. It's a huge library that is accessible from your home, and it contains an increasing wealth of resources for language teachers. But do we really want to deliver whole courses via the Web? Do we really want to deprive young people of the valuable experience of leaving home, studying and socialising with their peers, joining societies, going to clubs and parties, travelling, and falling in love? Do we really want to breed a generation of screen-gazing zombies? I fear that as e-learning expands we are losing sight of the essential difference between education, the growth of the self for one's own lifelong purposes, and training, the shaping of an individual for others' short-term purposes. E-learning is more suited to training rather than education. And who is going to employ someone who has obtained an e-languages degree? Most employers expect a languages graduate to have had many hours of face-to-face contact with native speakers and, preferably, to have spent a substantial period of residence abroad. Assessment is another issue: I would expect a languages graduate to have passed written and oral examinations that had taken place in a properly controlled environment.

Learning languages via the Web is a controversial matter, but there is no question that the Web does offer considerable opportunities for the delivery of training materials. In the following sections I focus on the ICT4LT website as an example of a collection of ICT training materials for language teachers. I examine the aims behind the site as a whole and the pattern of visits to the site, discussing the key issues and drawing conclusions based on an analysis of the pattern of visits.
IV. ICT4LT

IV.1. Background

The ICT4LT website is the outcome of a project funded under the Socrates Programme of the European Commission and is located at http://www.ict4lt.org. It is the result of over two years' intensive work by an international team of experts during the period September 1998 to December 2000. The website offers 15 training modules in ICT for language teachers at three different levels in English, Italian, Swedish and Finnish, and it is continually updated.

The original aim of the ICT4LT project was to design a syllabus and to deliver a Web-based training course in ICT for teachers of modern foreign languages (MFL), but as the project progressed it became obvious that turning the materials into a full-blown course and getting the course accredited was much more difficult than anticipated. There were enormous administrative hurdles to overcome, and it was quickly realised that a considerable amount of online tutoring would be necessary — and costly. So at present the ICT4LT materials are mainly used as an online reference library. ICT4LT docs, however, form the basis of ICT awareness and training courses delivered in the traditional way in many educational institutions, and also in connection with regular in-service training courses for teachers. The ICT4LT materials consist of 15 modules at three different levels:

- **Basic Level**
  - Module 1.1: Introduction to new technologies
  - Module 1.2: Introduction to computer hardware and software
  - Module 1.3: Using text tools in the MFL classroom
  - Module 1.4: Introduction to CALL
  - Module 1.5: Introduction to the Internet

- **Intermediate Level**
  - Module 2.1: CALL methodology: integrating CALL into study programs
  - Module 2.2: Introduction to multimedia CALL
  - Module 2.3: Exploiting WWW resources on-line and off-line
  - Module 3.4: Using concordance programs in the MFL classroom
  - Module 2.5: Introduction to CALL authoring programs

- **Advanced Level**
  - Module 3.1: Managing a multimedia language centre
  - Module 3.2: CALL software design and implementation
  - Module 3.3: Creating a WWW site
  - Module 3.4: Corpus linguistics
  - Module 3.5: Human Language Technologies
IV.2. ICT4LT: Analysis

IV.2.1 Is the Web really interactive?

A key question that has arisen as a result of piloting ICT4LT is: To what extent do people perceive the Web as an interactive learning environment? The evidence from the ICT4LT statistics is revealing. The ICT4LT website received around 40 000 “hits” in the three-month period September to November 2001. This is an impressive indication that the site is regarded as a valuable bank of materials. In the same three months, feedback from visitors to the ICT4LT discussion list was zero. No one, apart from myself and one other member of the ICT4LT management team, contributed a single email to the discussion list, and I received no more than six personal emails from visitors to the site, all of which requested rather than offered information. This is in spite of the fact that the ICT4LT site contains numerous discussion topics to which site visitors are invited to contribute. This trend appears to be typical of the Web as a whole, i.e.:

- Web people are habitual “lurkers”.
- Web traffic is predominantly one-way, i.e. from the Web to the user.

Some initiatives must therefore be sought to stimulate feedback and debate among Web users. It is likely that this will require more intensive online tutoring.

IV.2.2. Where do visitors to ICT4LT come from?

A high proportion of visitors are based in educational institutions. Exact figures are difficult to come by, as often the visitor only leaves a numerical trace. The geographical pattern of visits to the ICT4LT site as a whole in the six-month period June-November 2001 is, however, revealing:

- Nearly 82% of ICT4LT site visits originated in Western Europe. This was to be expected, as the site is the outcome of a project initiated in the European Union.
- Visits from the three geographical areas of (i) North America, (ii) Central/Eastern Europe and (iii) “wired-up” Asia (Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand) were in roughly equal numbers, with around 4% each of the total.
- The next two main areas represented were (a) Australia/New Zealand and (b) Central/South America, with around 2.5% each. Significantly, Brazil led the field in Central/South America, with around 40% of the total number of visits from that area.
- A mere 1% of the total number of visits to the ICT4LT site originated in the rest of the world — which includes Africa, China, the Indian Subcontinent and the Middle East. 98% of the
visitors from Africa came from the Republic of South Africa and Namibia (a total of 119),
while only 13 came from other African countries. Only 27 visits originated in the whole of
the Indian Subcontinent, and only 4 in the most populous country in the world, namely China.

These figures come as no surprise. They reflect what is already known about the Web in general:
• The Web is not World Wide.
• Access to the Web is restricted to the richer, liberal countries of the world, i.e.
  (i) those that can afford connectivity, and (ii) those that allow people free access to
  information.

We have a long way to go before the dream of access to information anytime and
anywhere on the Web is realised.

IV.2.3. So What Do ICT4LT Visitors Want?

Basically, they want information. An overwhelming number of visitors enter the ICT4LT site via
the Index page and the language-specific Homepage. They start with an overview of what the site
is all about. They then progress to the Contents page, which contains a list of the 15 ICT4LT
modules. At this point the pattern of visits becomes interesting. The information that follows
refers only to the English language section of the site.

The Glossary of Terminology and the Resource Centre are visited more than any of the
ICT4LT modules, except Module 2.2 (Introduction to multimedia CALL), which is marginally
ahead of the Glossary in terms of numbers of visits. This seems to indicate that a high proportion
of visitors are just looking up information. In addition, people regularly navigate from links in
the main modules to the Glossary and the Resource Centre.

At the time of writing (December 2001), the order of popularity of the 15 modules is as
follows. In the sections that follow I shall highlight the changes that have taken place in recent
months and attempt to explain the pattern of visits.

1. Module 2.2: Introduction to multimedia CALL
2. Module 1.4: Introduction to CALL
3. Module 3.1: Managing a multimedia language centre
4. Module 1.1: Introduction to new technologies
5. Module 2.4: Using concordance programs in the MFL classroom
6. Module 1.5: Introduction to the Internet
7. Module 1.3: Using text tools in the MFL classroom
8. Module 3.3: Creating a WWW site
9. Module 3.2: CALL software design and implementation
10. Module 1.2: Introduction to computer hardware and software
11. Module 3.5: Human Language Technologies
12. Module 2.3: Exploiting WWW resources on-line and off-line
13. Module 2.5: Introduction to CALL authoring programs
14. Module 2.1: CALL methodology: integrating CALL into study programs
15. Module 3.4: Corpus linguistics

IV.2.3. a. Basic Level Modules

A high proportion of visitors to the ICT4LT site appear to be novices. The two modules that offer a general introduction to new technologies and language learning and teaching have remained for a long time near the top of the list of the most visited modules, and they are also the most popular Basic Level modules: namely Module 1.1 and Module 1.4. Does this indicate that there are still a lot of newcomers to CALL out there? The answer is probably "Yes, there will always be beginners". Evidence suggests that these two modules are used by a number of universities and teacher training colleges as the basis of introductory courses in ICT and language learning and teaching.

Module 1.5, Introduction to the Internet, maintains a high position, but it has fallen from a higher slot. Does this indicate that teachers are becoming more knowledgeable about the Internet, or is there now a more realistic appreciation of what the Internet can offer in comparison, for example, with multimedia, which is dealt with in Module 2.2 (Introduction to multimedia CALL) and has shot to the top of the list of all 15 modules?

Module 1.3, which focuses on the use of generic text tools in the languages classroom, declined sharply in popularity a few months ago, but it is now creeping up the list again, possibly as a result of the new information we have provided on PowerPoint and how to incorporate sound and pictures into word-processed documents and PowerPoint presentations. Language teachers in the UK are strongly encouraged to make use of generic software tools, including word-processors, database software, desk-top publishing packages, and even spreadsheets. This makes sense, as the tools are available in most educational institutions, so additional software purchases are not necessary. On the other hand, the preparation time that is required to make good use of such tools is often discounted. Furthermore, some educational administrators simply wish to avoid setting aside a reasonable budget for the purchase of dedicated CALL materials, so there may be an ulterior motive in encouraging the use of generic packages: i.e. save money on software and make the teachers work harder.

The introductory module on hardware and software, Module 1.2, has fallen from a higher position and now occupies the lowest slot out of all the Basic Level modules. It is the only "technical" module at the ICT4LT site — although it attempts to explain computer hardware and software in terms that the language teacher can understand. Most educational institutions have
a resident ICT specialist these days, so there is probably less of a need for the layperson to be familiar with the technical aspects.

IV.2.3.b Intermediate Level Modules

Module 2.2, Introduction to multimedia CALL, has remained consistently the most popular module for many months. The module begins by defining multimedia and looking back at earlier developments in interactive video. Technical aspects are briefly covered, and a representative selection of CD-ROMs/DVD-ROMs is described, giving the reader an overview of the wide range of learning opportunities the medium offers.

The renewed interest in multimedia is curious, because multimedia CALL is not a new phenomenon, having made its first appearance in the 1980s. But as soon as educational institutions began to buy multimedia CD-ROMs in reasonable quantities in around 1993-94, the Web made its public appearance, apparently offering learning materials free of charge. This appealed to budget managers who were put off by the high prices of the early CD-ROMs. CD-ROM prices then began to fall rapidly from figures such as 500 euros to more realistic figures of 60-70 euros. It was not easy to network the early CD-ROMs — and it can still be problematic — and language centre managers were not happy with the idea of buying lots of single-user copies and issuing them on demand to students. Finally, computer magazines started to give away CD-ROMs free, and the large computer stores began to offer "budget" CD-ROMs containing poor-quality materials. The overall result was that multimedia got a bad name. It is only now that CD-ROMs are beginning to make a comeback, and at last we have the high-quality video we require on DVD. This may explain the high level of interest in Module 2.2.

In addition, ICT coordinators in educational institutions are becoming more aware of the variety of multimedia hardware and software that language teachers need. In the past it was not at all unusual for school network managers to have a very poor appreciation of the learning opportunities offered by multimedia to language students. I have been invited on several occasions to run workshops for language teachers on school computer networks that lacked one or all of the following: soundcards, headphones and microphones! The situation is changing, but perhaps not rapidly enough.

Module 2.4, which deals with the use of concordance programs in the languages classroom, has climbed steadily from a very low position and has maintained its present position at No. 5 for several months. This scene is indicative of a shift in methodology. Concordancers are useful in the following ways:

- The teacher can use a concordancer to find examples of authentic usage to demonstrate a point of grammar, typical collocations, etc.
- The teacher can generate exercises based on examples drawn from a variety of corpora.

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Students can work out rules of **grammar** and usage for them themselves by searching for key words in context.

Students are encouraged to be sceptical about explicit rules by drawing on the data provided by authentic texts.

Concordancers are not new, of course. The concept goes back hundreds of years, but it is only since the advent of the computer age that concordanders **became** commonplace tools for linguistic and literary researchers. Since the 1980s, concordancers have **been** available to the language teacher for classroom use — thanks to the pioneering work carried out by Tim Johns:

http://web.bham.ac.uk/johnstf. Johns wrote one of the **first commercially available classroom concordancers**: **MicroConcord**.

Using a concordancer, teachers can quickly produce handouts and exercises based on authentic materials, but more importantly, a concordancer turns the student into a researcher who can establish rules of grammar and usage for him/herself. In other words, concordancers have a key role to play in autonomous learning — or in *Data-Driven Learning* as Johns describes it. It is in the EFL world that concordancers have made their biggest impact, but it is clear from visits to the ICT4LT site that **MFL teachers are also beginning to see their value.**

Module 2.3, **Exploiting WWW resources offline**, has fallen from a high position to No. 12 on the list. I find this difficult to explain, as it would **seem logical to progress** from an introduction to the Internet (Module 1.5), which is still quite high in the list, to this module. One would therefore expect a higher proportion of visitors, but there is a fall-off of nearly 50%. Have the visitors had negative experiences with the Web and do not wish to **find out more**, or does the introductory module tell them all they need to know? Or, having looked at the other modules, do they find other things that are more interesting?

Felix (2001) is **enthusiastic** about the usefulness of the Web in language learning and teaching, but she is also realistic and does not hesitate to mention its shortcomings compared to other delivery media, e.g. the problems associated with bandwidth and plug-ins, and the lack of universal standards for accessing the Web. CD-ROMs are still **more reliable in delivering graphics, sound and video:**

> While improvements have not been uniliform, they have been achieved largely by way of better technologies that have led, among other things, to better presentations. This is notable in the case of graphics and sound. However, is it always a blessing; while we are still waiting for the long-promised broadband services to be widely available, sites using the latest developments in graphics can take a wearying time to download over a 56K modem. There are other problems online, too — some plug-ins do not work in every context, and some sites are available only to Internet Explorer or Netscape, while others cater for Windows but not Macintosh. The Web's ideal of universal standards is not always achieved.**"** (Felix 2001:189)

This is why the designer of online language learning materials is advised to adopt...
... hybrid approaches designed to avoid potential technical problems, such as downloading activities from the Web or to a self-contained Intranet, integrating CD-ROMs and the Web, or running audio conferencing or videoconferencing with Web activities." (Felix, 2001:190)

Perhaps ICT4LT visitors are beginning to appreciate that one needs a variety of approaches to CALL.

Module 2.5, which deals with authoring programs, has slipped down the list to position No. 13. This is the lowest position of the three modules that provide information for teachers interested in authoring their own materials. The other two modules in this category — 3.3 (Creating a WWW site) and 3.2 (CALL software design and implementation) — have dropped respectively to positions No. 8 and No. 9.

Why has the do-it-yourself approach to CALL declined in popularity? Perhaps I was right when I made the following statement in an article written five years ago:

"The do-it-yourself approach to CALL software creation has rarely worked. Only those with hours of dedication at their disposal have achieved a success with it. The past is littered with dead authoring packages. (Davies, 1997:41)

It's a question of time — which most language teachers do not have. Teachers are mainly interested in buying off-the-shelf materials or a simple authoring tool, e.g. Camsoft's Fun with Texts or Wida Software's Storyboard, which generate a lot of work for the student with the minimum effort on the part of the teacher. Both of these packages continue to be bestsellers. It is significant that Module 3.3, Creating a WWW site, occupies the highest position of the do-it-yourself modules. This may be due to the availability of easy-to-use HTML authoring tools such as FrontPage and Dreamweaver, and exercise generators such as HotPotatoes. Or perhaps it has more to do with the Web as a convenient delivery medium — or an Intranet, which is becoming more common in educational institutions.

Module 2.1 of ICT4LT is concerned with CALL methodology and ways of integrating CALL into study programmes. Bearing in mind earlier work by Jones cited earlier on in this article (Jones, 1986), one would have expected this module to be a popular choice. Curiously, however, it has continued to rank consistently as the second least popular module for a period of many months. The module challenges views expressed by sceptics such as Oppenheimer (1997), to whom I refer at the beginning of this article. The author of Module 2.1 encourages the teacher to consider how students react to a piece of software and suggests a range of classroom activities that the teacher might introduce in order to enhance the impact of ICT. Module 2.1, in other words, addresses both learner's and teacher's needs, but for some reason or other this does not have much appeal. Could it be that teachers are not interested in integration and that they would rather let the computer do all the work?"
IV.2.3.c. Advanced Level Modules

One would expect advanced level modules in any set of learning training materials to be lower in popularity than the earlier modules. There is a natural fall-off as learners/trainees progress — which is well known to publishers of language learning materials: courses for beginners bring in the money.

It is no surprise therefore that the more academic modules, especially 3.4 (Corpus linguistics) and 3.5 (Human Language Technologies), are low down the list, respectively position No. 15 (bottom of the list) and position No. 9. Corpus linguistics is mainly of interest to university researchers, and Human Language Technologies appeal mainly to people who bridge the disciplines of human languages and computer science. Nevertheless, one cannot say that the number of visits to the pages of these two modules is insignificant. The most popular module, Introduction to multimedia CALL, receives three times as many visits as the least popular module, so the gap is not that wide.

As indicated above, the do-it-yourself approach to CALL, which is covered in Module 3.2, appears to be waning in popularity, apart from writing materials for the Web, which is covered in Module 3.3.

Module 3.1, Managing a multimedia language centre, was conceived as a module for the advanced trainee. Its popularity at position No. 3 seems to indicate that everyone wants to manage a multimedia centre rather than teach! The module contains a number of case studies, which probably accounts for its appeal, and there is a strong emphasis on management of the learning environment, especially ways of encouraging learner autonomy.

IV.3. ICT4LT: The Future

At present access to the ICT4LT website is free of charge. For the time being the site will consist of a bank of materials that can be accessed and downloaded. There will be no online tuition, but visitors may continue to address questions to the management team and to members of the discussion list.

Ways of integrating the materials into a Web-based learning environment such as Blackboard — with online tuition — are being considered. This is likely to be a lengthy process, however, and it is unlikely that the ICT4LT bank of materials in its present form will disappear. I shall continue to update the site on a regular basis.

One new module, Assessment and testing, is planned, and new case studies will be added to Module 3.1, Managing a multimedia language centre. Suggestions for further additions are welcomed.
V. A FINAL MESSAGE

I conclude this article with a final message to educational administrators:

- Computers offer a wealth of learning opportunities to language learners.
- Computers don’t work without software.
- Computers are tools for teachers — not replacements.
- Training staff to use computers takes time and costs lots of money — but it’s worth it in the end!

REFERENCES


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