





# 6

## **A WALKTHROUGH JOURNEY WITH THE COMPUTER IN THE ESL CLASSROOM**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Educators have always been creative in their attempts to apply new technologies in their methods. In the past, there have been many examples of prominent uses of the language laboratory, radio cassettes, videos and televisions. However, in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, the computer technology provides a new learning environment with wealth pedagogic possibilities. The widespread use of technology has create new opportunities for language learning. It is important for language teachers to understand the new possibilities in teaching and students' interest so that they could help and encourage students to gain success in learning English language.

Thus, this paper intends to explore the benefits of computers in language learning and teaching. The benefits and limitations of computers in a language learning classroom will be discussed as computer is the main medium where huge amounts of information including the Internet facilities can be obtained. The advent of the Internet and the widespread use of technology has create new opportunities for language learning. Hence, the computer can create a world where students can explore freely. The computer helps language teachers and learners to create and obtain useful materials in a short time. This paper therefore, also aims at providing a description of how computer with leverage wealth of content can be integrated in

the ESL classroom. It intends to discuss how the computer fits into conventional language learning and teaching settings. Examples of the computer activities in the ESL classroom will be provided. The benefits and limitations of computers and the activities that can be carried out using the computer in language learning and teaching provide an insight into understanding the role computers in an ESL classroom better and how computers can complement conventional pedagogy.

### **THE BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS OF COMPUTERS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING**

For years, the language teaching resources of the textbooks have dominated the school curricula and appear to have satisfied most people. However, today books are giving way to the computer. The computer is becoming a popular educational tool in schools and higher education institutions. Recent developments in CALL offer exciting possibilities for improving the quality of language teaching and learning. Davies and Higgins (1985: 8) describe Computer Assisted Learning (CAL) as “a form of tuition in which the computer is used as an aid to the presentation, reinforcement or assessment of material to be learned”. In discussing Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Hardisty and Windeatt (1989: 5) regard CALL as “the term most commonly used by teachers and students to describe the use of computers as part of a language course”. Language teachers have started to see its potential capacity as one of the more powerful teaching aids in the language classroom. The following discussions present some of the benefits that computers may offer the language teachers and learners.

The computer as a tool enables its user to perform a multitude of tasks. In the past, language teachers found that preparing teaching materials, setting examination questions, and keeping students' record at times could be tedious, but now the computer helps them to perform

these works efficiently and save time.

The computer can create a world where the students can explore freely. They can use the computer as a tool to extend and enrich their thinking and imagination. As mentioned in the review of related literature, computer programs used in a language classroom may motivate students to learn. When the computer is used as a problem-solving tool, students work harder than ever before to successfully find a solution. In the process of operating the program, the students working in a group transform their individual work into a cooperative game where they take turns participating, or work together to complete the task. Straker (1989) suggests that communication skills can be developed with the use of a computer as it provides a focus for discussion.

Immediate feedback is another factor that may motivate students to learn. Most software provides immediate feedback. If a student enters a wrong response, the computer immediately points out the mistake and provides another chance for the student to try. Most software allows students to see their scores even though they do not complete their tasks.

The computer can provide privacy for those who prefer solitary study, or those who are shy of raising hands to respond or who fear their answers are wrong. Such students can work on their own using the computer in order to build up their self-confidence and courage. The computer creates a non-threatening and non-competitive learning environment. It will not criticise more than "Sorry, try again".

The computer also allows students to work at their own pace. According to Underwood (1984), working at one's own pace will motivate remedial students, students who have special problems, or students who need extra help to learn. Some studies show that students learn at a faster rate (in some cases up to forty percent faster) when computers are used (Rude, 1986: 5).

The students do not have to worry about the computer's time. The computer does not get tired or impatient. Doerr (1979) points out that, the computer also will not respond in a bias way to a student or be affected by the background of a student. As a machine, the

computer repeats a question or lesson as many times as required by the students, and the computer also waits until the students provide their responses.

Since computers can offer a lot of benefits to students, a question to be addressed is: “If the benefits that computers offer can help students to learn better, then should computers replace teachers?” The answer to this question is that the computer by itself cannot be as effective as a human teacher. Computer high technology cannot replace humans. The computer cannot provide extra help especially when the problem involves feelings. Fox et al. (1992), Higgins (1988), and Clement (1985), strongly agree with the incapability of the computer to make decisions, as it can’t even fix little mistakes by itself.

The team effort of the computer and the teacher, however, could create the best teaching. This view is supported by Thomas Dwyer that “put simply, I believe the computers in education are revolutionary because they make possible great teaching in a system dedicated to mass education. But they make this possible by supporting person-to-person educational influence, not by replacing it” (cited in Doerr, 1979: 12). Higgins (1988: 94) also supported the idea that great teaching and learning could be derived from the collaborative effort between human and computer. According to him, “... the computer is fast, accurate, and stupid. Humans are slow, inaccurate, and brilliant. When they are able to combine effectively, the results will be unimaginable”. Instead of threatening to replace good teaching, the computer offers a new opportunity for great teaching. Kenning and Kenning (1983) suggest that computer and teacher should not be seen as rivals, but as complements to each other.

Like any other educational tool, the computer has its advantages and disadvantages. The computer is sometimes more appropriate for some uses than others. It depends mostly on the creativity of the users to determine its effectiveness. Adams and Jones (1983: 32) further explain that, “... the computer is no more than an aid. Whether we use it, or how we use it, depends always on our own understanding of how pupils learn and our own assessment of whether and how this

machine can help us achieve our goals”. Language teachers therefore need not be threatened by the idea of the machine replacing them in language classroom. “While the computer has unquestionably enormous potential as an educational aid, providing new learning opportunities, it is clear that in many respects it cannot compete with the teacher” (Kenning and Kenning, 1983: 4).

The teacher is the one who guides, takes decisions and directs. Ahmad et al. (1985: 4) state that “the computer is a tool of itself incapable of action”. It is a “servant, and its’ role in education is that of a medium”. Along the same line, Clement (1985) and Higgins (1988) also stress that computers are not capable of solving problems without getting specific instructions from human beings. In this sense, Higgins (1988) points out the role of the computer as ‘pedagogue’ which means ‘slave’. It takes and obeys orders, never creates questions, and allows itself to be exploited depending on the user’s intelligence. Kenning and Kenning (1983:4) add that “not only do they (computers) operate mainly within the medium of the written language, but they operate in a predetermined fashion and cannot cope with the unexpected”.

It is important for students to be aware of their own capabilities and not to feel that they are not as smart as the computer. The students should know that computers have limited intelligence and they do not have creativity skills. Students should be taught computer awareness, which includes the social applications and impact of computers. Clement (1985) finds that only through the study of computer awareness, can understanding of the role of the computer in the life of the individual and in the world can be gained. He disagrees with the point of view which states that computer awareness comes only through experience. It may be too late to learn some of the drawbacks of the computers after experiencing them. If students were given computer awareness earlier, they would perhaps be more ready to challenge the computer. In a way the students would work hard to prove their capabilities.

The teacher and students should be aware that the computer can sometimes be overused. As more and more machines are introduced

in school, teachers need to monitor how they are introduced. If students often use computers individually there are possibilities for reducing the interactions between the students of the classroom. There are certain features of the computer that can be overused and, as a result, learning does not take place at the maximum level. The computer features of graphics, colour, animation and sound effects can be overemployed by material writers with the result that their valuable pedagogical benefits are diminished and their effectiveness seriously impaired. Some students may favour this kind of software. However, attention needs to be paid to make the students aware of their real needs when dealing with the software. With proper guidance, learning can still take place.

It may not be surprising to see students becoming de-motivated to learn when using computers. Some software is not user-friendly. The students may not be able to operate the program independently, because the instructions given may be confusing. Students are not interested in a program where they need to read the manual in order to operate it. Looking through the manual takes up their time.

To sum up, the potential roles of the computer in the ESL classroom are largely positive. Some of their characteristics are inferior to those of human beings, for example, they are unintelligent, have no mind, and no feelings. On the other hand, some of their other roles may be superior, for example, they can be very patient, and do not get tired. However, both humans and computer can eventually play an active and vital part in the language learning process. What cannot be denied however is that the introduction of computers in the classroom will initially be met with some opposition, or at least some uneasiness. After a period of time when its potential is realised, the new technology then may easily be accepted.

The drawbacks and limitations of the computer need not be the reasons for not wanting to introduce computers into a language classroom. Computers may make the learning experience more exciting, satisfying, and rewarding for the students and teachers if they are used wisely. This point is supported by Hammond (1984) in that the computer is a significant tool for encouraging students to

think and learn in an enjoyable and productive way if they support the existing curriculum. The proper integration of computer activities with other classroom learning activities may help to improve the quality of language teaching and learning.

## **LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING METHOD, AND CALL**

This paper also aims at providing a description of the communicative approach to second language learning and teaching. This method will be examined in relation to the use of computers to see where the computer fits into conventional language learning and teaching settings. Accordingly, this section attempts to look into the similarities and differences between the communicative approach and computer methods in the ESL classroom, and also to provide examples from computer instruction to see how they work in conventional method. The communicative approach does not necessarily represent others that may express similar models of teaching. The purpose here is to be as representative as possible concerning language pedagogy.

## **THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH AND CALL**

There are some computer programs that work similarly to the activities in the Communicative Approach. The computer programs may include activities such as simulation, role-plays, and discussions. These kinds of activity may generate pair work or group activities to take place in the language class, thus, creating communication, question and answer, or decision making activities among the students. Davies and John (1985: 46) believe that simulations provide “a context for discussion and will stimulate language among learners who tackle the task in a group”. In addition, Jones and Fortescue (1987: 71) suggest that “adventures have much the same potential in language



learning as other simulations – they can generate a lot of enthusiastic and communicative oral language as learners work in groups towards the solution, and can form the basis for various oral and written post-mortem activities”. In both the approaches, Communicative Approach and CALL, teachers play the same role. They may act as facilitators, provide assistance when necessary, and encourage students to carry out their tasks.

Language teachers can choose a computer program that may work within the Communicative Approach. For instance, the program that encourages students to compete against each other in order to complete a task assigned. This kind of program allows students to discuss, argue, make decisions while working in groups. There is a true, authentic and productive use of language.

In the process of operating the program, the students working in a group may transform their individual work into a cooperative game where they take turns participating, or work together to complete the task. Straker (1989) suggests that communication skills can be developed with the use of a computer as it provides a focus for discussion. Simulation is an example of a type of computer program which particularly encourages communication among language learners. Hardisty and Windeatt (1989: 55) describe a simulation as “a way of reproducing in the classroom as many features as possible of a situation that might be found outside the classroom”. Geisert and Futrell (1995: 93) define computer simulation as “a program that gives the illusion of a reality”. Higgins and Johns (1984: 63) consider the term ‘simulation’ as “a general term, covering a range of activities which involve decisions based on data from realistic situations”.

Bridging the gap between the classroom and the real world has become one of the most important concerns in language learning in recent years, for example in the context of the Communicative Approach. Krashen (1985: 70) states that, “in my view the goal of the language class is to bring the student to the point where he or she can use the language outside the classroom in understanding and communicating with native speakers”. The simulation programs enable teachers to involve students in activities they could not

otherwise experience and they can take the form of a role play, a problem-solving task, or a commercial management exercise.

Philips (1985: 29) suggests that simulation programs “usually involve the students, frequently working as one of a group in decision-making activities demanding the use of language in discussion, negotiation and argument”. Kenning and Kenning (1983: 157) support this by explaining that:

Computer simulations can thus be of great assistance in stimulating conversation; in confronting pupils with tasks to be carried out in the here and now, to prompt them to consult one another and argue the merits and demerits of a particular response. The conversation is not gratuitous, it has a genuine purpose – to try and arrive at a good solution – and this tends to make for a lively exchange.

Jones and Fortescue (1987) states that computer simulations provide a context for discussion. The students have reasons for speaking because they need to communicate their thoughts and opinions to their group. “They offer both a focus for oral activity and continually changing scenario for learners to talk about” (Jones and Fortescue, 1987: 63). They believed computer programs that are designed for group decision are less threatening to students especially who have little or no confidence in the target language. They will also lower students’ anxiety because there is no such thing as ‘wrong’ or ‘right’ answer. Davies and Higgins (1985: 13) similarly suggest that “there is no reason why the computer should not be used as a stimulus for group oral activity, with the teacher monitoring the response”. Through this we can see that CALL offers much to complement conventional pedagogy.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is hoped that the discussions on the benefits and limitations of computers in language learning and teaching provide an insight into

understanding CALL better. The analysis of the relationship between language learning and teaching method, and CALL portrayed how computers could be utilized in the communicative approach method. This paper illustrated that CALL is versatile and can be utilized within other method. The potential roles of the computer in the ESL classroom, therefore, are seemingly positive. More importantly, both human and computer can eventually play a complementary and active part in the language learning process.

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