# Chapter III
# CALL as Action

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## ABSTRACT

*The objective of this chapter is to offer a new approach for research in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). It starts with the assumption that CALL has traditionally emphasized unresolved dichotomies such as tutor vs. tool or individualized instruction vs. collaborative learning. It is argued that a unifying theory, capable of incorporating these conflicting views, is needed. For this purpose, Activity Theory, based on Vygotsky's ideas and developed by Leontiev, is proposed. It is suggested that research in CALL should focus neither on the individual nor on the community, but on the mediating tool that links them in situated context. CALL is seen as a cultural artifact that needs to be naturalized by the language teaching community.*

## INTRODUCTION

Mainstream theories in foreign language teaching tend to emphasize either the individual (focusing on such aspects as individualized instruction, learning styles, self-directed strategies) or the community (including methodologies such as community language learning, collaborative learning, study teams). The introduction of computers into foreign language instruction seemed to have contributed further to this dichotomy, raising awareness of the differences between a student working alone in front of the computer or interacting with others in a community of learners. The basic motivation for writing this chapter is the assumption that an emphasis on either the individual or on the community results in a reductionist approach to the problem, incapable of addressing the complexity of CALL. What is proposed, then, is to emphasize the point where they intersect. For the individual to interact with the community, he or she has to do something (ac-

tion), through some kind of mediation (tool). This is described here as the "action" approach. CALL as mediated action introduces a new paradigm in language teaching and research, putting the focus neither on the student nor on the teacher, but on the relation between them in the learning community.

The chapter is structured in two main parts: (1) CALL as divided theory and (2) CALL as mediated action. The first part reviews classifications that have been proposed to explain CALL and its development, starting with the tutor/tool dichotomy and evolving to the concept of CALL as an invisible technology. Whereas in the tutor perspective, the computer is still seen as a traditional teacher, conducting drill practice with individual students, in the tool view the computer is seen as an instrument used by people to communicate with each other. The movement from tutor to tool also signals a movement from a focus on the individual to a focus on the community, with an emphasis on collaborative learning.

The second part tries to build the concept of CALL as mediated action, using the Activity Theory perspective: human beings are different from other species because they create tools and are modified by the tools they create, thus evolving and producing history. CALL is described as a cultural artifact, with resources of its own, including higher interactivity and connectivity. It integrates with other components in the learning community, transforming the way teachers and students work and think. From this collective perspective, teaching and learning become a unified activity, distributed not only among the community members but also on the artifacts available in the environment.

The main objective of the chapter is thus to describe CALL as a mediating tool, standing between subject (usually the student) and object (usually the content to be learned). In this chapter, we argue that change, and consequently learning, will be more easily implemented if the emphasis is neither on the teacher, as has traditionally been done, nor on the student, as proposed by student-centered approaches, but on the instruments that link student to content, and the whole learning community, including teacher, other students, rules, and division of labor. We believe that an emphasis on the instrument, for its capability in binding all the elements in the community, offers a more comprehensive view of CALL in situated practice, with more possibilities both for teaching and research purposes.

## CALL AS A HOUSE DIVIDED

The idea of CALL as either an individual or a social activity can be related to CALL classification attempts, three of which are detailed here, not only for their historical impact on the area, but mainly for their relevance to the line of reasoning developed in this chapter. They are the magister/pedagogue distinction, as proposed by Higgins (1988), the CALL phases described by Warschauer (1996), and the approaches suggested by Bax (2003).

The acknowledged need for a theory to explain CALL (Levy, 1997) has led some investigators to propose different theoretical frameworks, which resulted in different classifications. One of the earliest was postulated by Higgins (1988), who viewed the computer as playing two opposite roles in CALL, either as "magister" or "pedagogue." Thus, the magister:

*wears an academic gown to show that he is qualified in subject knowledge. Visible in his top pocket is his salary check, symbolizing the security of tenured appointment. In one hand he holds a handkerchief, symbol of the care and concern which (we hope) he feels for individual learners. In the other he carries a cane, symbolizing the authority to evaluate, praise and censure. In front of him is the book, the symbol of the order of events, the structure which is imposed on him by the syllabus makers and which he will impose*

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