Chapter 4.3

Creating Supportive Environments for CALL Teacher Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a study undertaken on the impact of pedagogical and technological innovations in language teaching and language learning, with a special focus on creating online institutional environments to support teachers' autonomy in computer assisted language learning (CALL). This study took place at MUELC, a self-funded teaching institution that belongs to a network of Australian universities offering English Language Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS). Significant expansion in student enrollments has resulted in programs across four locations with all language teachers involved in CALL delivery. Fostering and supporting teacher autonomy became the key premise for the creation of multifaceted in-house CALL support initiatives, one of them an online portal containing resources for teaching and learning as well as tools for reflection on practice and opportunities for professional development. Language teachers have been building this intranet portal site using the theoretical frameworks of practitioner-based inquiry and organizational change management. The evaluation of this study reflects the duality of the research aims; namely, the features of the developed product and the learning process of the teachers involved. This may be of value to other language institutions embarking on similar online projects.

INTRODUCTION

The research site is a university English language center established in 1988, initially with about 80 to 100 students. The first CALL classroom was

fitted in 1992 with a CALL specialist employed to promote the value of computers in language learning. Since then, the center has been offering weekly language sessions in a computerized environment that aims to equip students with computer literacy and lifelong learning skills to assist them in diverse sociolinguistic contexts.

Increased student enrollment resulted in a serious shortage of specialist CALL teachers, ensuing a conscious decision to involve all language teachers in the delivery of CALL. In order to achieve consistency and quality of CALL delivery across programs, language teachers needed to be adequately prepared and supported. This was (and continues to be) achieved by removing barriers to using technology for teaching and, specifically, through organizational efforts supporting teacher autonomy. As a direct result of these activities, teachers' attitudes to CALL have become more positive. CALL in-house training, support programs, and other means of removing barriers to teaching with technology have been a major contributing factor to this change (Chylinski, 2005).

The current study has directly evolved from these organizational initiatives aimed at supporting teachers in CALL delivery and professional development. Due to continuous expansion, the center now operates on four campuses. This necessitated some of the support structures for CALL programs to become independent of their physical locations. The main project aim was thus to create a common space online that would centralize access to CALL materials, ensure consistency of information available to all campuses, and assist with professional development in CALL, thus supplementing current work practices. The other aim was to record all factors that influenced the instructional design process and record thoughts, feelings, actions, and behaviors of the research members. The qualitative, practitioner-based inquiry approach chosen for this study meant all these factors could be meaningfully interpreted.

BACKGROUND

There is a large number of acronyms and terms used to describe teaching and learning with new technologies. For this chapter, the term Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) was chosen, as it emphasizes "the whole range of possible roles the computer could play in language learning" (Levy, 1997, p. 82) and because this is the term by which computer-aided instruction is referred to at the language center in question.

The theoretical grounding and literature for this chapter focus on professional development in CALL informed by the fields of second language acquisition, adult learning theories, Information and Communication Technology in Education (ICTE), diffusion of innovation theory, and action research methodology. Figure 1 depicts this chapter's focus, main knowledge fields, subthemes, and how they intertwine.

History of CALL with Some Insights to Teacher Professional Development

Warschauer and Healey (1998) identified three phases of CALL in their overview of the use of computers for language teaching in the last 30 years. They observed gradual but irregular transition from the behavioristic phase of CALL through to the communicative and, most recently, its integrative phase. An alternative and, we would like to argue, more encompassing attempt at the analysis of the history of CALL is provided by Stephen Bax in his paper titled *CALL—Past, Present and Future* (Bax, 2003). Rather than describing phases, Bax provides three approaches to CALL teaching; namely, restricted, open, and integrated. He argues that this helps to alleviate confusion with time periods and methodologies and allows for a better description of teaching and learning practices.

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