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COMPUTER-AIDED LANGUAGE LEARNING CHALLENGES: PROS AND CONS

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Annotation
The computer system is not able to mimic the complex socio-communicative competence of a live teacher. In other words, a person's linguistic intellect is the only thing that comes to the conclusion that "trying to create an intellectual language teaching system is wrong"

Keywords: Computer, CALL system, oral speech, multimedia, text, video and animation, computer system, speech technology, interactive speech.

Introduction

The exercise of spoken language skills has received increasing attention among teachers. Foreign language curricula focus on productive skills with special emphasis on communicative competence. Students' ability to engage in meaningful conversational interaction in the target language is considered one of the most important goals of the second language education. This shift of emphasis has generated a growing need for instructional materials that provide an opportunity for controlled interactive speaking practice in and outside the classroom.

With recent advance in multimedia technology, computer-aided language learning (CALL) has emerged as a tempting alternative to traditional modes of supplementing or replacing direct student-teacher interaction, such as the language laboratory or audio self-study. The integration of sound, voice interaction, text, video, and animation has made it possible to create self-paced interactive learning environments that promise to enhance the classroom model of language learning significantly. A growing number of textbook publishers now offer educational software of different sorts, and teachers can choose among a large variety of different products. Yet, the practical impact of CALL in the field of foreign language education has been rather modest. Many teachers are reluctant to embrace the technology that still seeks acceptance by the language teaching community as a whole.

A number of reasons have been cited for the limited practical impact of computer-based language instruction. Among them are the lack of a unified theoretical framework for designing and evaluating CALL systems; the absence of conclusive empirical evidence for the pedagogical benefits of computers in language learning;

and finally, the current limitations of the technology itself. The rapid technological advance has raised both the expectations and the demands placed on the computer as a potential learning tool. Teachers and second language acquisition (SLA) researchers alike are now demanding intelligent, user-adaptive CALL systems that offer not only sophisticated diagnostic tools, but also effective feedback mechanisms capable of focusing the learner on areas that need remedial practice. The computerized language teacher should be able to understand a user's spoken input and evaluate it not just for correctness but also for appropriateness. It should be able to diagnose a student's problems with pronunciation, syntax, or usage, and then intelligently decide among a range of options (e.g., repeating, paraphrasing, slowing down, correcting, or directing the student to background explanations).

Computer system is not capable of simulating the complex socio-communicative competence of a live tutor. In other words, the linguistic intelligence of a human is the only one to conclude that the attempt to create an "intelligent language tutoring system is a fallacy" [2 Salaberry p. 11]. As the speech technology isn't perfect, it is of no use at all. If it "cannot account for the full complexity of human language," why should we even bother modeling more constrained aspects of language use (Higgins, 1988, p. vii)? This sort of all-or-nothing reasoning seems symptomatic of much of the latest pedagogical literature on CALL. The quest for a theoretical grounding of CALL system design and evaluation tends to lead to exaggerated expectations as to what the technology ought to accomplish. When combined with little or no knowledge of the underlying technology, the inevitable result is disappointment.

We suggest that we consider the following four scenarios:

1. A court reporter listens to the opening arguments of the defense and types the words into a steno-machine attached to a word-processor.
2. A medical doctor activates a dictation device and speaks his or her patient's name, date of birth, symptoms, and diagnosis into the computer. He or she then pushes "end input" and "print" to produce a written record of the patient's diagnosis.
3. A mother tells her three-year old, "Hey Jimmy, get me my slippers, will you?" The toddler smiles, goes to the bedroom, and returns with papa's hiking boots.
4. A first-grader reads aloud a sentence displayed by an automated Reading Tutor. When he or she stumbles over a difficult word, the system highlights the word, and a voice reads the word aloud. The student repeats the sentence--this time correctly--and the system responds by displaying the next sentence.

At some level, all four scenarios involve speech recognition. An incoming speech signal elicits a response from a "listener." In the first two instances, the response consists of a written transcript of the spoken input, whereas in the latter two cases, an

action is performed in response to a spoken command. In all four cases, the "success" of the voice interaction is relative to a given task as embodied in a set of expectations that accompany the input. The interaction succeeds when the response by a machine or human "listener" matches these expectations.

Technology use also encourages students to spend more time on task. As they search for information in a hyperlinked environment, ESL students benefit from increased opportunities to process linguistic and content information. Used as a tool for learning, technology supports a level of task authenticity and complexity that fits well with the interdisciplinary work inherent in content-based instruction and that promotes the acquisition of multiliteracies.

By taking account of learners' needs and making provision for learner choice in this way, one of the major advantages of using computers in language learning--their capacity to allow learners to work at their own pace and in their own time--can be more fully exploited. It then becomes our task as researchers to evaluate, with learners' assistance, the effectiveness of environments such as these in improving their listening and viewing comprehension as well as their approaches to learning in these environments.

These research findings suggest that in our efforts to prepare ESL students for the challenges of the academic and workforce environments of the 21st century, we should adopt a pedagogical model that incorporates information technology as an integral component and that specifically targets the development of the range of literacy deemed necessary for success in a digital, information-oriented society.

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