

CALL LEARNER TRAINING: FROM THEORY AND RESEARCH TO INFORMED PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Due to the diversity of language learning technologies and the complexity of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) environments, it has been long argued that language teachers should not let their students work with technological tools or engage in learning environments incorporating new technology unprepared. It has also been suggested that CALL learner training should be provided for learners' effective use of technology and for teachers' successful implementation of CALL in a specific language learning environment. Accordingly, CALL learner training in several essential areas, serving not only to prepare learners but also teachers, should be provided. CALL studies have discussed theoretical framework in CALL learner training, the implementation of this training, its results, and its pedagogical benefits. This paper thus aims to transfer the knowledge from a review of theories and research studies into teaching practice. This is to support the value of learner training for CALL and the need for providing it, especially when the language classroom involves the use of technology to assist language learning process. The paper concludes with implications for second/foreign language (L2) education and CALL research, practice, and development.

Keywords: CALL, CALL learner training, second/foreign language (L2) education

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, technology, defined broadly in terms of software, computers, and other digital devices, has played a prominent role in all aspects of our lives and had profound impacts on the practice of foreign or second language (L2) teaching and learning. (Chapelle & Sauro, 2017; Golonka, Bowles, Frank, Richardson, & Freynik, 2014; Hubbard, 2009; Kessler, 2017; Lee, 2010; Levy, 2012; Stockwell, 2012; Thomas, Reinders, & Warschauer, 2013; Warschauer & Meskill, 2000). This is evident when a number of L2 teachers now consider providing a computer-assisted language learning (CALL) environment, a setting which involves the use of any technology for the purposes of developing language learning. It is also remarkable when a considerable number of CALL studies (Ai, 2017; Alm, 2016; Chotipaktanasook & Reinders, 2018; Hampel & Stickler, 2012; Li, 2017; Wang, 2015) were conducted in language classrooms to ascertain the pedagogical benefits and the educational effectiveness of technology for language learning. The opportunities that technology offers for autonomy, authentic target language, meaningful interaction, development in language skills, abilities to gain greater control over the learning progress, to name but a few, are thrilling.

While technology, teachers' abilities to use it, and tasks administered alongside it to complement language learning, usually get the credit for bringing the success, learners, who also play a major role in shaping their learning experiences and outcomes, seem to have received little attention (Hubbard, 2013). Particularly, some serious challenges learners normally encountered when using technology for their learning or when participating in a CALL environment have seen very little investigation in literature. A case in point is when learners receive little or no training in how to use language learning tools. This can be largely due to the assumption that technology will automatically improve learners' learning experiences and performance. Another potential reason for not providing CALL learner training is that today's learners, who are perceived as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001), are generally assumed not to require training because they are tech-savvy and already have necessary knowledge and skills to support their learning with technology. In practice, however, teachers should be aware that learners are not a homogenous population, but rather a diverse mixture of capabilities.

Although learners are capable of using digital technology in general, they may not be confident in exploiting a tool effectively for education-related purposes, especially for language learning (Cunningham, Rashid, & Le, 2019; Romeo & Hubbard, 2011; Winke, Goertler, & Amuzie, 2010). When CALL environments are new and CALL applications are complex to be used for learning, without the teacher's presence or supervision, some learners may not be always prepared to

learn. The consequence is that, learners cannot use technology effectively (Hubbard, 2004) to improve language learning, meet language learning objectives, and, in turn, acquire the language. In response to this situation, there has been an emphasis on the need for giving language learners CALL learner training. More specifically, language teachers should take on the responsibility to spend some time preparing and training their learners prior to their participation in a CALL environment.

While the past decade has seen a dramatic application of technology in language learning, teaching, and research, few attempts have been made to integrate CALL learner training into language programmes. Clearly, there is still a substantial distance in the theory of CALL learner training, research in CALL learner training, and the practice of learner training in language classrooms. This paper then aims to look at ways of bridging this gap and of implementing CALL learner training in this paper, an overview of CALL learner training is reviewed. Following this is examples of research and practice incorporating CALL learner training in L2 courses. Some significant practical considerations on the provision of CALL learner training are addressed. The paper concludes with implications for L2 education and CALL research, practice, and development, along with some final thoughts, suggesting that learners need training in different areas to thrive in a CALL environment.

CALL LEARNER TRAINING: OVERVIEW

CALL learner training is a process with the goal of “promoting the development of technology competence specifically for the purpose of second language acquisition” (Hubbard & Romeo, 2012). It has been considered as a crucial factor for the successful use of technology (Barrette, 2001) and proposed to be an important first step in engaging learners to use CALL effectively for language learning (Hubbard, 2004). CALL learner training is generally divided into two dimensions: 1) technical training in how to operate and control the computer and specific applications and 2) pedagogical training in how to effectively connect CALL activities to desired learning objectives. However, learners should be also encouraged to become motivated for, comfortable with, and confident of using technology. To this end, the psychological preparation suggested by Dickinson (1987) has been greatly emphasised in CALL literature. Romeo and Hubbard (2011) further suggests that learner training for CALL should also include strategic dimensions to allow learners to develop strategies specific to CALL. For effective use of CALL, this paper therefore proposes an integrated approach to CALL learner training which combines four important domains: psychological, technical, pedagogical, and strategic.

To prepare learners for the adaptation to and acceptance of the selected technology and its integration into English language classrooms, psychological preparation should be conducted during the first stage of CALL learner training process. Certain emotions, such as high anxiety, low motivation, low self-confidence, or frustration, are examples of affective variables considered as negative psychological factors acting like filters that interfere with learners' language acquisition process. Krashen (1981) states that low affective filter (i.e. the condition when learners have high motivation, positive attitude, high self-confidence, low anxiety) is necessary for language acquisition to take place. While some language learners naturally have low affective filter, others might experience various psychological filters while engaged in a CALL environment. Therefore, there is a need to help learners develop positive emotional variables.

According to Dickinson (1987) psychological preparation is a process of developing learners to work independently of the teacher. Thus, the psychological preparation should involve encouraging students to try self-instruction, facilitating a change of attitudes away from negative opinions, and helping them build their self-confidence and, in turn, become responsible and autonomous language learners while engaged in a CALL environment. In Wattana's (2013) study investigating the effects of gameplay on language learners' interaction and willingness to communicate in English, she was aware that not all learners like games, so she provided psychological preparation as part of her CALL learner training before asking her students to participate in the game used as part of her investigation. She carried out a range of activities to develop her students' positive attitudes towards playing digital games and using them in language learning, and to build their confidence in the abilities to work independently during gameplay.

Jones (2001) considers that an absence of technical support is a major obstacle to the potential success of CALL. Previous studies (Barrette, 2001; Hubbard, 2004; Kabata & Wiebe, 2005; Winke & Goertler, 2008) have constantly discussed the need for and the value of the provision of technical training for learners before CALL activities are integrated into language courses. Technical training can help minimise the amount of time learners spend focusing on technical issues while engaged in CALL environments and reduce the pressure on learners with low technological proficiencies, thus minimising the possibility of differences or gaps between them. Guided by Hubbard (2004), technical training usually incorporated both general computer training and training for specific applications. General computer training allows learners opportunities to develop and practise basic computer skills necessary to be utilised with particular technological tools. When it comes to the classroom or the research that involves new CALL learning

environments, training for specific applications is deemed important (Hubbard, 2004; Kolaitis, Mahoney, Pomann, & Hubbard, 2006; Wattana, 2013). This is because it can help teachers and researchers ensure that their learners and research participants overcome technical problems they might face, and help learners to avoid frustration, feel comfortable with the new CALL environment, and, consequently, be able to complete the assigned tasks offered along with technology.

Pedagogical training provides learners with explicit knowledge of the language learning process and new technology application and allows them to relate class's learning objectives to CALL activities, realise the full potential of technology, and gain a clearer understanding how and why it can be used effectively for language learning. Hubbard (2004) argues that it is the teachers' responsibility to see that their learners can make informed decisions about how to use CALL effectively to meet their learning objectives. Unfortunately, little CALL literature has reported that learner training in the pedagogical use of CALL is offered (O'Bryan, 2008).

Learning strategies are techniques learners use to facilitate and enhance the learning process (Oxford, 1990). While they are normally offered in traditional instruction, Hubbard (2004) points out that training learners to use effective strategies should work well in CALL. Teachers, researchers, and developers should prepare learner strategy training to provide learners with strategies, techniques, practice, and skills that they can employ for successful interaction in CALL. In a study by Kolaitis and his colleagues (2006), the team met regularly, with the consultant, to analyze features of the CALL listening, grammar, and vocabulary software to be used, and develop strategies for using it. The team also helped identify learning goals including an understanding of why particular exercises were used to support learning targets. Once these goals were identified, strategies which can be used to meet them were created. For listening, for example, learning strategy training included pre-listening strategies, techniques for playing audio and video clips, interaction between those clips and the transcripts, and strategies for understanding and using comprehension questions. When learner training was implemented in their classes, learners were asked to complete paper-based CALL journals to reflect on their learning and engage in collaborative debriefings both with the teachers and among themselves.

When learner training for CALL is offered, Hubbard suggests that it should center on the five principles (2004). The first principle encourages teachers to experience CALL themselves to know CALL from the learners' perspective. The second principle suggests that teachers give learners teacher training by providing them with practice and the same information teachers have.

The third principle, using a cyclic approach, encourages teachers to give their learners an opportunity to explore and familiarize a new application or environment for a short period of time before providing any detailed training on how CALL can be used for language learning. In this principle, key concepts and strategies should be also repeated reviewed in a learning cycle. The fourth principle, using collaborative debriefings, encourages teachers to allow their learners to discuss their experiences with CALL in pairs or small groups and to reflect on and explain the procedures they have used. The fifth principle, teaching general exploitation strategies, expects teachers to train learners in general strategies for exploiting CALL in ways beyond those seen by the developer.

CALL LEARNER TRAINING: RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Barrette (2001) reviewed recent CALL studies, noting that some researchers typically did not document their percipients' current level of proficiency in and familiarity with common computer application. Nor did they provide any training in the programs used in the studies. She also surveyed her own students, discovering a wide range of abilities and familiarity with a variety of applications considered useful for language learning. Following the survey, she trained her students in the effective use of technological tools for language learning. A follow-up survey reflected significant improvements in students' familiarity and confidence levels with them. Accordingly, she pointed out the importance and the value of developing computer literacy and of CALL learner training.

Later, Winke and Goertler (2008) investigated learner preparedness for using technology in language learning. The authors surveyed over 900 students in first and second year classes in French, German, and Spanish at a large Midwestern university, USA. They reported that students varied considerably in their access to and familiarity with technology for language learning. They also reported that many students did not know how to handle compressed files or record and edit audio and video files. Building on the previous study, Winke, Goertler, and Amuzie (2010) looked over 2,000 language learners' readiness to study in hybrid language learning courses at Michigan State University. While the overall findings were similar to 2008's study in terms of learners' computer literacy, the interesting result was that students in less commonly taught languages were less prepared, in comparison with those in commonly taught languages.

Goertler, Bollen, and Graff (2012), reported on student readiness in two hybrid Spanish courses at the same institution as the previous studies. Comparing results in those courses with those in the 2008 group, they found that, although student readiness was superior to the previous

group in several measures, such as keyboarding skills, they did not have sufficient skills for successful learning in a hybrid or online language course. This suggests a need for training in specific strategies and technology skills before they are required to engage in the environment. Wattana (2013) drew on Hubbard's (2004) guidelines for CALL learner training to prepare her students prior to their participation in the game environment. The training was conducted through varied activities, in several essential areas, and on an ongoing basis. Apart from the favourable results, she found that learner training could prepare and guide her students to use computer games in ways that were effective for accomplishing the assigned CALL tasks. Moreover, she noticed that the training helped her students become confident when participating in game environments.

Kolaitis, Mahoney, Pomann, and Hubbard (2006) reported on a project that implemented Hubbard's (2004) learner-training principles into an ESL program at a community college. They found that while some of the learner training principles were helpful, others, such as giving learners teacher training and finding time for collaborative debriefings, proved much more of a challenge for teachers. They noted, however, that developing the materials and procedures for training their students allowed them to have a clearer view of the need to link software use to learning objectives and to teach specific CALL strategies to promote that linkage.

Cunningham, Rashid, and Le (2019)'s small-scale study was carried out with 8 international students who enrolled in English for academic purposes (EAP) courses in New Zealand in order to investigate how training in the use of MS Word affected students' awareness and use of the writing support features available in this software. After training adopted from Hubbard's (2004) principles and Romeo and Hubbard's (2011) model, students showed increased awareness of the affordances of MS Word. They also reported their confidence in using computers for writing, their positive attitude towards technology, and their enthusiasm to get more training in using technology for language learning effectively.

It seems clear from these seven studies that CALL learner training is necessary to bring all students to the level of readiness needed for effective use of technology in support of language learning. Since CALL activities often take place outside the classroom, different dimensions of training should be provided by the teacher or the researcher, and learners should know how to incorporate strategies and some understanding of pedagogical principles to a CALL environment.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

CALL learner training is a process aimed at developing learners' abilities to effectively use technology to acquire a language. Informed by a set of five principles (Hubbard, 2004) 1) experience CALL yourself, 2) give learner teacher training, 3) use a cyclic approach, 4) use collaborative debriefings, and 5) teach general exploitation strategies, learner training for CALL should include psychological, technical, pedagogical, and strategic components. In other words, there should be 1) psychological training in how to prepare learners for the adaptation to and acceptance of selected technology, 2) technical training in how to operate the computer in general and specific applications, 3) pedagogical training in how to effectively connect the tools to specific language learning objectives, and 4) learner strategy training in how to apply appropriate strategies while engaged in CALL activities. The evidence brought to this paper suggests that CALL learner training should play an important role in L2 education and CALL research, practice, and development and that a greater emphasis should be placed on learner training for CALL than it currently does.

Technology has been found to provide pedagogical benefits for language learning and teaching. However, some language learners might be unable to fully make use of the potential of technology for developing their language skills due to lack of knowledge, skills, and training in using technological tools effectively. Despite the exposure to a wider range of ICT in their lives, it does not necessarily guarantee that learners have sufficient skills and confidence using technology, especially for language learning. This can be used to inform certain practice and offer several implications for L2 pedagogy. Perhaps, the most obvious implication is that learners who have knowledge of, skills in, or familiarity with technological tools are likely to be able to use them effectively to achieve the desired learning objectives. This suggests that teachers should not only integrate CALL into the course and simply know how to teach with it, but they also need to bring all of their learners to the readiness levels necessary for effective use of technology through the provision of learner training for CALL. It should also be pointed out that learners need time and training to learn how to use the tools not only from a technical but also other perspectives. At a practical level, this implies the need for specific training or teacher education in CALL so that teachers can understand what CALL learner training is, why they need to provide it, and how they can implement it.

When CALL is included to the curriculum, learner training requires teacher's confidence, preparation time, and class time, and it could be more complex than expected. In other words, it is unlikely to be as simple as providing CALL learner training and hoping that it will facilitate

effective use of technology for language learning. In fact, in order for CALL learner training to work well, teachers should have a carefully constructed lesson plan, and a clear objective of conducting CALL learner training.

When training is offered, teachers should not expect that all learners can work with technology. Some students need a greater amount of time to learn certain skills relevant to a given technological tool and apply them to achieve CALL tasks. Others might be able to pick up these skills easily, employ them appropriately to participate in a new learning environment, and use the tools in ways that are effective for the development of their language. Accordingly, teachers must be patient and eager to help those who need extra time and further assistance. Teachers are thus in the dedicated position of preparing and training their learners.

It is also clear from the evidence reported here that the majority mentioned the need for CALL learner training, and that CALL learner training is important for CALL activities. This has possible implications for CALL research, practice, and development. To illustrate, learner training should not only apply to studies involving newest CALL environments or using advanced technology. Prior to the investigation, a CALL researcher should also provide training sessions to increase the potential for desired learning outcomes to take place. To the CALL practitioner, technical training should not be the sole form because it is not only one type of training that is helpful. Other kinds of training should be incorporated, and this should be done on an ongoing basis. For CALL developers, in addition to initial tutorials in how to use the application, which are commonly ignored by learners, additional support should be provided, based on the sound understanding of key principles that guide the creation of CALL activities and of the role these principles play in language acquisition.

Overall, this paper has explored issues that need to be considered. It has argued that CALL learner training should be provided, and that teachers, researchers, and developers should take this into account for the sake of learners' effective use of technology for language learning.

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