CALL and the Teacher's Role in Promoting Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

In the last decade high technology, notably in the form of computers, has established a powerful presence in foreign and second language pedagogy. A common justification for the use of computers in language teaching and learning is that it is said to promote learner autonomy, which researchers and practitioners alike now set as a very important goal. This article probes the relationship between computer-assisted language learning and autonomy, focusing on the role of the teacher in making the technology an effective learning opportunity. Quoting several examples of current CALL applications, the paper contends that the success of CALL depends to a great extent on an active role for teachers, whether in a classroom or a self-access centre. How can a teacher play this role without compromising the student's independence? The article offers a response to this question and affirms that in CALL the teacher has a role to play in developing students' sense of autonomy.

Introduction

There seems little doubt that CALL is presently the most innovative area in the practice of foreign or second language teaching and learning. Advancing with the technology, it continues to offer new pathways for learners. Moreover, published research in recent years shows learners genuinely raising their level of proficiency in the target language and cites encouraging instances of learner autonomy, which modern teaching methodology regards as a highly desirable outcome and which CALL claims to promote. However, perhaps because of the association with autonomy, research reports tend to give little or no attention to the role of the teacher. They focus, not unreasonably, on learners, who, individually or together, are supposed to get on with the work themselves. The question of what teachers have to do to make a CALL task or project successful, apart from setting the assignment, is not viewed as an important consideration.

In this article, I examine some of the constraints on the practice of CALL, constraints which, if not taken into account, can lead to failure or limit success and render the goal of autonomy more distant. It is the teacher who has to deal with such constraints. I argue, therefore, that the teacher's role in CALL needs to be more potent than has been acknowledged so far. Of course, placing more emphasis on the teacher puts the achievement of autonomy at risk: in the last part of the article I suggest reasons why this need not be so.

Autonomy in theory and practice

Firstly, it is important to accept that CALL can genuinely lead to autonomy, to a state in which learners exercise as much control as possible over the learning process and are as little dependent on the teacher as possible. Although the causal relationship is commonly assumed or referred to in the research, it should not be taken for granted. The opportunity for self-study, which the computer offers, is no guarantee of autonomy, especially if the range of roles and options provided to the learner is restricted. This occurs, for example, when the computer is merely a substitute instructor - the computer as tutor, to use Levy's (1997) expression - and transfers no authority to the learner in terms of decision-making. However, the versatile modern generation of CALL programs, exploiting a gamut of applications from word processing to Virtual Learning Environments, tends to show awareness of the need to give the student significant responsibility for the management tasks in his or her learning. It is entirely credible that such programs "can promote the development of learner autonomy to the extent that they can stimulate, mediate and extend the range and scope of the social and psychological interaction on which all learning depends" (Little, 1996: 203).

Impressive illustrations of this extended range, which language teachers could barely conceive a decade ago, are now ready to hand. To improve academic writing, a skill in which CALL could until now offer relatively little assistance, students can make use of an online reference allowing them to consult electronic resources beyond those of grammar-check, dictionary, and thesaurus. For instance, there are tools that, incorporated into a word processing program, allow writers to refer to resources about the language while they compose. One such tool provides a means of automatically formatting references and in-text citations, thus drawing the attention of writers to the correct exploitation of secondary sources and "reducing the likelihood of inadvertent plagiarism" (Milton, 1997: 247). The learners make the inferences themselves. But the most striking opportunities for autonomous behaviour are in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). An asynchronous tool such as e-mail exchange enhances metacognitive awareness: learners can reflect on their and their interlocutors' responses, scrolling back through texts to reconsider grammar, vocabulary, and rhetorical strategies; they can refer to resources like an encyclopaedia or dictionary without noticeably disrupting the flow of discourse. (See Shield, Weininger and Davies, 1999, for cogent arguments for the promotion of both cognitive and metacognitive strategies through CMC.) Further evidence of the effectiveness of CALL in promoting autonomy is emerging from the observations of teacher-researchers and the testimony of the learners themselves. Reporting on a collaborative Web-page creation project, for example, Toyoda (2001) maintains that students "formulated their tasks independently right through to the end of the semester" and "were able to carry on their work without the teacher's detailed instructions..."

Constraints on the practice of CALL

Theoretical arguments and reports of CALL in practice such as those cited above may give the impression that the path towards autonomy is broad and straight. So what are the constraints? I identify here four major constraints on the potential success of CALL projects and their prospect of cultivating autonomy. (The biggest constraint of all, of

course, is the absence of technical support. Without it, CALL simply cannot proceed. In the following discussion the provision of technical support is assumed.)

Learners' lack of technical competence

Most initial CALL classes are likely to have a mixture of technical abilities, perhaps the whole range from complete or near-novices to expert users. Yet no activity or project can succeed without a prescribed level of mastery. Some of Toyoda's students whose experience with computers was very limited needed a good deal of guidance in locating information on the Web, and without such guidance, they wasted a huge amount of time sifting through useless information (Toyoda, 2001). One reason why the trial multinational MOO project of Shield et al (1999) failed was that "lack of MOO experience caused great problems, especially in groups where no member had previously used MOO". A CD-ROM environment is not necessarily friendlier. Student evaluations of Burston and Monville-Burston's (1999) French CD-ROM revealed that the users were "uneasy with the technology" and needed help from the teachers with it.

A solution is to place those learners who know less with those who know more, assuming that the latter is willing and patient helpers. At any rate, it is the teacher who has to take responsibility in this situation: to resolve the inequity, she or he has to recognise the students who need training and make sure it is provided. For a Web-page design or MOO project, the instruction could take hours, during which the target language is not necessarily being used communicatively.

Learners' lack of interest

Clearly, a large number of foreign language students, like students everywhere, are fascinated by the computer, and they would regard computing skills along with the acquisition of English as "essential for survival in the modern world" (Sergeant, 2001:241). According to surveys that I conducted at an Australian university in 1997 and 1999, a very large proportion of respondents, students of EFL, wanted to improve their English through computer use, and a comparable survey conducted by a colleague at a university in Thailand revealed a 100% interest (Jones, 2001). Nevertheless, some individuals do not take to the computer as a tool for learning a language. Just one or two such individuals in a class raise an awkward dilemma for the teacher, who can set out for them the rewards of CALL but cannot oblige them to learn by this medium. The question is thus ethical. Once the teacher recognises this, she or he has to face the managerial question of what alternative tasks to devise. It may be that the students' resistance to CALL arises from a laudable recognition of what kind of learners they are not and thus in a sense, they exercise their independence. Such a response could be regarded as a corollary to Aoki's (1999:9) claim that knowing "what kind of language learner one is and how one learns" is a characteristic of the capacity for autonomy. According to Burston and Monville-Burston (1999), there is a category of learners who experience "perceptual/cognitive overload" when faced with multimedia: one of the fourteen students in their study appeared to fall into this category.

Learners' disinclination to be autonomous

The overwhelming majority of learners are likely to be interested in learning English utilizing the computer, yet even among these students who are committed to CALL some may prefer the teacher-directed environment to the self-directed mode that proponents of autonomy favour. Felix (1997) noted this phenomenon when she led a CD-ROM course in German for her Australian students. Most of her learners enjoyed the program and appreciably improved their language proficiency through it but, in the end, reported that they preferred it as a complement to classroom instruction and did not care for it as a set of stand-alone activities for self-access. It is worth remarking that these students were of advanced level and might have been expected to manage their learning more independently. In planning a CALL project or program, the teacher has to accept the possibility that it lends itself fully or in part to teacher direction and/or that the learners' preference is for teacher direction. With CMC, self-direction must be the goal, but it need not be the only learning mode throughout CALL.

Poor interaction among learners

Communicative activity in CALL is greatly favoured these days, whether it takes place between groups or individuals online or "around" the computer, to use Little's (1996: 213-16) expression, where two or more learners work on a program together. However, interactions of these kinds do not always run smoothly. Toyoda (2001), for instance, cites the case of a student of Chinese in a CALL project who complained that she did not enjoy the freedom in her class because there was no communication between the students around her: "We would go to class and people would just sit in front of the computer and that was it. I'd arrive in class and do my e-mail and there was no class communication". Moreover, among some learners, there might be a psychological or cultural predisposition against talking about oneself openly, as CMC tends to require. Galloway and O'Brien (1998:8) warn that a "key-pal" project involving Japanese students could fail "because of the cultural reticence of Japanese to self-disclose". Teachers have to be alert to such situations and take steps to enhance the quality of communication in class and, as in the case of learners who do not wish to learn by CALL, be ready to provide alternative activities.

A threat to autonomy?

In a variety of ways, then, the CALL teacher's role is active and demanding - more so, I would argue, than current research is ready to acknowledge. Can it be said that CALL entails a degree of "teacher-directedness" that compromises the pro-autonomy teacher? To answer this question it is worth considering views of learner autonomy in general, where there is more reference to the teacher's role than in the specific area of CALL research.

According to its proponents, autonomy is a desirable goal in all language learning wherever it happens. However, a self-access centre is where independent learning activities are concentrated. It offers all kinds of learning opportunities free of the constraints of the classroom - those of time, an unbending syllabus, fear of making face-threatening errors, and teacher direction. The learning here may occur "together with other learners" (Holec 1985:175), assisted by anyone else, including the teacher. Hence

the emergence of the concept of "interdependency" in the discussion of the bases from which autonomy develops. It is arguably central to the development of autonomy (Voller 1997:109). No diminution of the teacher's role is entailed, merely a shift of responsibility. However we describe his or her role (facilitator, guide, counsellor, and so forth), a teacher should be on hand to give individual help - help towards autonomous learning. The paradox, as Sheerin (1997:63) reminds us, is that "all learners need to be prepared and supported on the path to greater autonomy by teachers" (her italics).

Into this context CALL fits very well. The role of the CALL teacher is not different in general terms from that of any teacher supporting students' progress towards autonomy. What is different is that she or he cannot be an effective CALL teacher without knowledge of the range of learning opportunities that CALL offers. The acquisition of this knowledge should include specific training in what I would term "CALL pedagogy", that is, the exploitation of those opportunities for the benefit of the learners. Responding to the four constraints discussed above, for example, this teacher will require two kinds of pedagogical preparation:

1. Technical training to anticipate the needs of computer novices in everything from word processing to Web searches and MOO. This will be used to prevent students from wasting precious time on relatively minor mechanical and decision-making matters. It also serves - let us be frank - to save the teacher from losing face at moments when the teacher is supposed to have greater competence than the student.

2. Training in the ability to deal sensitively with students who, for any reason, resist CALL or the sort of autonomy that CALL offers, or fail to interact socially and communicatively through or around the computer in situations where such interaction is considered part of the learning.

The best possible promotion of autonomy utilizing CALL depends on such teacher preparation. Are language teaching institutions ready to provide it to their working teachers? A full answer to this question is beyond the scope of the present article. However, I cannot resist concluding with a provocative personal reflection: it seems that most institutions are far more willing to buy expensive technology than they are to offer their teachers formal training in its applications.

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