

Ensuring Effective Second Language Learning via CALL

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Bhatia and Ritchie (2009), in their book chapter, present a very promising outlook of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and computer-assisted second language acquisition research (CASLAR). As CALL becomes an unstoppable trend in the field of education, there exist certain issues that remain to be addressed in order to maximize its potential and avoid rendering the application mere peripheral or gimmicky.

The first issue concerns the nature of input that learners receive through computer-mediated communication (CMC). With the help of the Internet, CMC has the potential to increase the amount of authentic or naturalistic input, and to provide a platform for equalized interaction. However, second language (L2) instructors should carefully factor in the sheer volume and multiplicity of information that learners encounter through this mode of communication, as well as the differential quality levels of input from the Internet (Garrett, 2009). The quantity and multiplicity issues may well overwhelm learners with non-targetlike linguistic data. Additionally, while such input or data may facilitate the development of fluency, its effects on the development of accuracy remain an empirical question. As such, careful pruning of the source of information and customized scaffolding are necessary first steps to ensure some level of effectiveness.

On a different note, the exact nature of the interaction between technology-based tools and learners' L2 processing warrants further investigation. For one, much of the literacy and reading research has shown that online reading alters reader's reading patterns from those of book-reading. The fact that the text is displayed differently in these two types of reading is likely to both qualitatively and quantitatively change readers' manner of textual engagement (e.g., Pugh, Frost, Sandak, Landi, Moore, & Porta, 2010). Many have therefore cautioned against completely substituting book-reading with web-based reading. By the same token, L2 learners may process input differentially when the latter is delivered via different modes. These areas all call for further empirical research.

Along the line of processing, learning via CALL also implies a high proficiency level in dealing with computer usage on the part of the L2 learners. The studies cited by Bhatia and Ritchie (2009) have focused on only a selected range of participants, and neglected a significant portion of learners who have yet to become computer-literate. For such learners, the use of technology would unavoidably place additional cognitive demands on their already taxed L2 processing, and thus is likely to hinder their acquisition. While they may not constitute the majority of the learner population, these learners obviously call for attention, and their needs should be taken into account in lesson and/or curriculum planning.

Last but not least, CALL seems to be lacking precise, consistent theoretical frameworks that guide its application and the manners in which it affects learning. Much of what is cited by Bhatia and Ritchie (2009) discusses the merits of CALL on the basis of existing paradigms in second language acquisition, such as Long's (1983) interaction hypothesis and input processing models (e.g., VanPatten, 1996, 2004). While these frameworks are sensible points of departure, they might also confine CALL to a peripheral role as a means for enhancing input and/or

interaction in L2 teaching. Apparently, a more profound niche, especially in terms of theoretical development, still awaits to be carved out for CALL.

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