

CALL in the L2 Classroom: Possibilities and Limitations

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The number of possibilities that computers and computer-assisted technology have opened up for second language (L2) learners over the years is intriguing. However, one must bear in mind that even though computer-assisted language learning (CALL) does create situations for computer-mediated interaction, can it really replace face-to-face interaction or just be an alternative resource? In larger numbers, with shrinking budgets, many universities are formulating online options for students in which one professor lectures to thousands of students online, and graduate assistants grade their assignments. While such an approach may be suitable for some content areas such as an Introduction to Psychology course, I think it could have different effects (though perhaps limited ones) in an L2 classroom, simply because face-to-face interaction is so vital. To date, some SLA researchers have argued for the importance of interaction in the learners L2 development. In his Interaction Hypothesis, Long (1983) advocated a critical role for interaction. He asserted that learners will make conversational adjustments during face-to-face interaction, which will in turn facilitate L2 learning. Mackey, Gass, and McDonough (2000) further argue that “through interaction, some aspects of their attention may become focused on the parts of their language that deviate from target language norms” (p. 473). So in relating CALL to the existing body of interaction research in SLA, one question stands out: Will CALL provide the same opportunities for learners as face-to-face interaction?

Bhatia and Ritchie’s (2009) claim that “[technology] is a basic necessity of any teaching” (p. 549). At best, one needs to have a better and more nuanced understanding of the role, if any, of technology in the L2 classroom. In order to fully exploit the opportunities that technology offers us in the classroom, further research needs to be conducted for the purpose of understanding how technology can enhance certain aspects of the learning experience. First, knowing that human attention is a decidedly limited resource, how can we make sure that technology serves to enhance learning rather than serve as a distraction? Secondly, further research should delve into the question of which areas of language can be effectively taught utilizing computer technology and which areas are less amenable to its effects. Lastly, developmental readiness (Pienemann, 1989) is a major concern in language learning. How can we make sure that learners are developmentally ready to receive instruction that is technologically mediated? At present, L2 professionals are confronted with a vast array of products aimed at enhancing the language learning experience, and educational materials developers and publishers are constantly coming out with new innovations. However, much more research needs to be done to measure the effects of technology in the classroom, and when to use it effectively.

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