Using the Computer in the English Classroom in Fachhochschul-Education

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on giving practical examples on how computers can be used to assist the language teacher and help the students to use and improve their foreign language skills. It aims at showing different possibilities of computer use in the classroom depending on the available resources (e.g. Internet access, EDP-Lab with/without Internet access).

1   Computer Use in ELT in General

Quite a lot of research has been done on CALL during the past few years. Most researchers, however, did not take into account that many classrooms don't have the facilities to support their language lessons using the computer in class. For teachers of English all around the world the use of computers and the internet to prepare material have become an invaluable resource. Many programmes such as "Exercise Generator" or "Author Plus" both by Clarity give teachers the chance to efficiently prepare classroom material. The internet with Dave Sperling's ESL Café and many other very helpful sites offer teachers the possibility to find authentic material, to do research and to exchange ideas in an inexpensive and quick way.

Using the computer in the classroom still seems somewhat awkward and unusual for many language teachers and students alike. Some teachers fear that the equipment might not work or that their students could know better; others just simply don't have a computer in the classroom let alone access to an EDP-Lab. It is also very difficult to apply research on instructed SLA to CALL.

According to CHAPELLE [1] it is: "essential first to identify the relevant research questions in order to consider research methods for evaluating CALL activities."

The most critical questions about CALL CHAPELLE wants to address are:

"What kind of language does the learner engage in during a CALL activity?" and

"How good is the language experience in CALL for second language learning?" CHAPELLE says that:

"The first question requires a description of the language that learners hear/read and produce during the CALL activity. It is important because the answer provides the instructor a means of deciding the role that the CALL activity should play compared to other assignments. For example, to decide whether or not to assign a regular e-mail pal with whom students are to correspond during the course of a semester, the instructor needs to have an idea of the language that the learners are likely to engage in during the activity. Do learners tend to write a lot to each other, or just a few lines? Do they use the syntax, vocabulary, and pragmatic functions that they need to practise to improve and expand their L2? Do they produce language showing evidence of the planning time they are allowed for composing and correcting, or does the language appear to be rapidly produced with little attention to its formal correctness? The answers to these and other questions about the language resulting from an assigned CALL activity are important for making decisions such as how much time should be spent on an activity." [1, p. 21] She also discusses the second question:

"The second question is evaluative. Evaluating the quality of learner language in an L2 task requires that some assumptions be held concerning the types of language use expected to be beneficial for L2 development." [1, p. 21]

CHAPELLE [1] specifies the observable features of learner language that should be ideal for acquisition. According to her: "Features include signals which focus attention on language, and which may elicit a repetition or an expansion of previous language. In short, the broad perspective of SLA classroom research holds the language of the classroom participants as central for evaluating the quality of learning. The results of such research in L2 classrooms and experimental settings have provided a clearer picture of the nature of language that occurs in classroom activities, in addition to hypotheses about the relative value for SLA of particular linguistic features." [1, p. 21]

The problems language teachers are facing at Fachhochschule are different. It's not the availability of the technical equipment – students have access to computers with internet access; classrooms are very often equipped with a computer – but the attitude towards language acquisition. Students have to learn English and very often a second foreign language and are often not motivated to do the assignments given outside the classroom. Teachers very often recommend certain CALL activities but it is usually up to the students to do or not do them.

At FH JOANNEUM language teachers use the computers mainly to prepare material and only for certain tasks with the students either in the classroom or the EDP-Lab. In the following examples are given of how the computer can be used in the English classroom and how the teacher can control the syntax, vocabulary, and pragmatic functions that they need to practise as well as the time frame.

2   Use of Lecturer Computer with Internet Access in the ELT-Classroom

2.1   Use of Online-Resources during the Lesson

If the classroom is equipped with a computer plus internet access, online dictionaries and databases can be used by students who work on classroom assignments.

A very good and popular resource is the German-English dictionary LEO: http://dict.leo.org/ which enables students to access additional English/English resources.

Another very useful tool that students like to access for writing tasks is the Cobuild Concordancer http://titania.cobuild.collins.co.uk/form.html where they have the possibility to check collocations. Furthermore general search engines can be accessed if students wish to do research on certain topics during project work in class. Two very good search engines are: www.google.com and www.aj.com. The latter can be used to actually ask questions and to receive possible answers.

2.2   Meet ELIZA

Students of different subjects like to meet Weizenbaum's ELIZA – the online therapist. There are a few versions of that programme online. Students can enter a name and a problem and ELIZA "talks them through" the problem. This works well as a classroom activity if controlled by an instructor. One student volunteers to enter questions for their classmates and students have to think about who or what ELIZA can be. Depending on which version the instructor uses, it usually takes the students about 10 minutes to find out that ELIZA is a computer programme. This task sparks of discussion about artificial intelligence and sometimes encourages students to use the programme in their spare time. The problem is that the programme accepts spelling mistakes and the if it is used without the instructor, it may well be good fun for the students but may not increase their language skills.

Examples:

http://www-ai.ijs.si/eliza/eliza.html

http://www.manifestation.com/neurotoys/eliza.php3:

Eliza, computer therapist [2]

"ELIZA emulates a Rogerian psychotherapist.

ELIZA has almost no intelligence whatsoever, only tricks like string substitution and canned responses based on keywords. Yet when the original ELIZA first appeared in the 60's, some people actually mistook her for human. The illusion of intelligence works best, however, if you limit your conversation to talking about yourself and your life.

This javascript version of ELIZA was originally written by Michal Wallace and significantly enhanced by George Dunlop.

Note: Eliza is dumb! This is common knowledge. Please don't write to me telling me she's dumb, or how to fix it. If you don't like the way she works, you can change the code yourself. Just view source on this page to see the javascript, and save it to your hard drive. Then do a search for javascript documenation, and you should be able to make Eliza act any way you want. :)"

Talk to Eliza

> Hello, I am Eliza.

Input:

3   Use of EDP-Lab with and without Internet Access in the ELT Business English Classroom

3.1   EDP-Lab without Internet Access: Running Dictation

Preparation: Choose a (business English) text that you print out and stick to the wall at the back of the EDP-Lab.

In the group everyone has to work with a partner. The group must be seated in the first few rows of the lab or as far away from the text as possible. Then at the instructor's sign one partner has to run to the text, read it, try to remember as much as possible and dictate it to their partner who enters the text into a Word document. After the first paragraph the students swap. They continue until one group has finished.

This exercise practises reading, listening, writing, and typing skills and is usually good fun for the students. After finishing the exercise the students can correct their texts and then discuss the text with the instructor. The instructor has complete control of the (level of) language the students use.

3.2   EDP-Lab with Internet Access: Job Applications

In their Professional English course at FH JOANNEUM students have to learn to write a résumé and a cover letter. After they have learnt about the theory they have to work in the EDP-Lab with their instructor and have to search for a job (preferably a job that would be useful for their internship) using the internet. They then adjust their CVs according to the job profile and they have to write a cover letter matching the company's profile. For their company research they also use the internet. Their cover letter has to be addressed to the personal manager, but is sent to the instructor via email. For the assessment the instructor also takes into account the layout and the format of the CV and cover letter. Here again the instructor can control the language level and the learner's progress.

3.3   EDP-Lab with Internet Access: Research

In order to write a paper on different business cultures students are allowed to do some of their research using the internet. In order to teach them how to go about using the internet for scientific research it is advisable that the instructor does one research session together with their students in the EDP-Lab so that they learn how to avoid unreliable information.

References:

[1]   CHAPELLE, Carol; CALL in the Year 2000: Still in Search of Research Paradigms?; Language Learning & Technology, Vol. 1, No. 1, July 1997, pp. 19-43.

[2]   http://www.manifestation.com/neurotoys/eliza.php3

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