

Book reviews

New Perspectives on CALL for Second Language Classrooms, Sanrda Fotos and Charles M. Browne (eds.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004. ISBN: 8058-4405-8.

Summary

“This practical handbook is designed to help language teachers, teacher trainers, and students learn more about their options for using computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and to develop an understanding of the theory and research supporting these options” (back cover). The book consists of a preface; five parts, each of which is introduced separately; two appendices (glossary of CALL terms, list of web sites); and two indices (author, subject).

The editors argue in the preface that, in spite of the book concentrating on the teaching and learning of English, “the principles and activities described are equally useful for other languages” (ix). They also maintain that readers of the book do not require any “prior knowledge of CALL, computers, or software” (x). The book is accompanied by a website (<http://www.erlbaum.com/callforL2classrooms.htm>).

Part I is entitled “Introduction to CALL” and consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 by Fotos and Browne provides a brief history of the field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning, summarizes aspects of the discussion on the effectiveness of CALL, and introduces different CALL activities. Warschauer offers his view on “Technological Change and the Future of CALL” in Chapter 2. After reviewing recent developments in information and communication technologies (ICT), he discusses the impact these technological changes will have, or are already having, on the teaching of English: new contexts, new literacies, new identities, new pedagogies, and agency. “Changes in ICTs can thus enable students to read, write, and rewrite the world in their English classes as never before, but only if we too enable our students to use the full power of these technologies” (p.24). In the last chapter of the first part, Liddell and Garrett sketch the new role of technology in the new language centers: “Within the past decade several institutions have developed a new kind of unit, a center for language study, established by administrators or influential language faculty to strengthen the institution’s language programs across the board through a combination of new resources – political, theoretical, pedagogical, and technological” (p.33f.). These new language centers have the following features in common: (computer) technology, relations with stake holder departments, academic leadership, research into second language acquisition and CALL (pp.36–38).

Perspectives on classroom CALL take center stage in the second part of the book. Consisting of six chapters, this is the most extensive part of this volume. Hubbard starts this part with a practically oriented argument for the training of learners as proficient (computer-assisted) language learners, provides five principles which should guide this training, along with other useful points on the implementation of learner training.

Pennington's Chapter 5 provides the reader with an introduction to word processing and touches upon writing in some other technological contexts such as e-mail, local area networks (LANs) and webpages. The use of LANs in an English classroom is also discussed by Braine in the next chapter. Fotos, in Chapter 7, provides a comprehensive overview of the use of e-mail in language learning and teaching. She concludes with a number of guidelines which ought to be useful for a language instructor who is at the planning stage of a similar project.

Some ideas of how to use the WWW in language teaching are provided by Taylor and Gitsaki in Chapter 8. This part concludes with a project report on the creation of a course-specific CD-ROM by Iwabuchi and Fotos.

Part III contains three chapters on "implementing CALL in institutional settings". The first one (Browne and Gerrity) deals in minute detail with practical hints for setting up and maintaining a language laboratory. O'Connor and Gatton report on how they used multimedia software at their university. In Chapter 12, Opp-Beckman and Kieffer offer theoretical background as well as practical advice on the organization and implementation of successful, international collaborative language learning projects. They conclude with an extensive list of possible pitfalls and how to avoid them on a number of domains: preparation and project planning, instructor role in the project, e-mail, discussion boards, and chat.

Evaluation is the theme of the penultimate part which contains two chapters. Chapter 13 (Reeder, Heift, Roche, Tabyanian, Schlickau, and Gölz) reflects on general issues in the evaluation of CALL software. The other chapter in this part (Susser and Robb) gives a practical overview for the evaluation of websites for language learning purposes. Their discussion of selected research aspects leads them to the compilation of a "Checklist for Evaluating Preposition Study Sites" – an example that could easily be adapted to other study topics, partially because it contains a large number of criteria which are not content specific.

The concluding chapter by Chapelle and Hegelheimer stands on its own in part V. It reflects on the role of and the challenges for the language teacher of the 21st century. This concluding chapter of the book is a useful summary of the main issues touched upon in this edited volume and provides useful, practical hints and guidelines for language teachers, teacher trainers and trainee teachers who are interested in using CALL. They conclude by stating: "the resources offered by today's technologies for learners and teachers provide a valuable opportunity to rethink and perhaps reinvent what constitutes the knowledge base of L2 teachers at the beginning of the 21st century" (p.314).

Critical Evaluation

The individual chapters are of varying quality. The introductory chapter by Fotos and Browne, for example, is a brief and useful introduction to the field of CALL. Warschauer provides some revealing insights into the changing face of English teaching and the role of technology. Hubbard's argument for learner training and his theoretically sound, and practically applicable principles, hints and guidelines will be appreciated by many language teachers. Chapelle and Hegelheimer do an excellent job of bringing together the different traits of the important discussions in the book, the current thinking in second language acquisition research and practical aspects of using technology for language teaching.

On the other hand, the book would have benefited from the inclusion of some more recent discussions. Some chapters (e.g. Braine; Taylor and Gitsaki) do not consider more recent technological and pedagogic developments to a sufficient extent. Across all chapters,

there was not a single reference to a text published after 2001. Did three years lapse between the writing and publishing? The use of student data in some studies is usually restricted to students' perceptions (e.g., Iwabuchi and Fotos do not provide enough evidence for the success or otherwise of computerized teaching materials). A study of learning outcomes and/or learning processes would have been preferable.

Overall, this book will prove helpful to language teachers who intend to learn more about CALL. The accompanying website which replicates some information from the book and provides a useful link list could be used to provide updates for the chapters where this is needed.

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ICT – Integrating Computers in Teaching: Creating a Computer-based Language Learning Environment, David Barr. Peter Lang, Bern, 2004. ISBN: 3 03910-191-9 (US ISBN; 0-8204-7176-3). 244 Pages. Price £31.00.

The architecture of this book is symmetrical: it is articulated around case studies occupying 3 central chapters, each an account of integrating ICT, from historical, infrastructural, managerial and pedagogical perspectives, at Ulster, Cambridge and Toronto. Framing these are Chapter 1 ("What is a learning environment?"), Chapter 2 ("Towards a computer-based environment") and Chapter 6 (Success or failure: meeting the needs of learners and teachers"). An Introduction, Conclusion and Index complete the structure.

The research questions are:

- What is a computer-based environment?
- What is involved in the creation of one?
- Are such environments necessary, do they work?

The first two chapters set the background for the descriptive work to come in the case studies. Chapter 1 summarizes behaviourist and constructivist notions of learning, then moves on to four elements that make up learning environments ("tools, resources, people and designs", p.21). Chapter 2 moves into more original territory, in that it considers the role of the computer in learning and provides the categories which will structure the case studies: the computer as learning aid (word-processing, CAL and CALL programmes, CMC), as resource (Web), and as part of an infrastructure that needs to meet technical, psychological and organisational imperatives.

Coming to Chapters 3, 4 and 5, the expectation is of accounts of three institutional adventures that will stand systematic comparison with each other. What needs to emerge is a choice of models. Barr certainly provides a systematic review of the situation at each location in terms of history, computer infrastructure, networking infrastructure, impact on teaching (which he calls "computer-based language learning in action"), and institutional planning issues. His evidence is drawn from observation, surveys, interviews and focus groups involving similar numbers of staff and student respondents at each place. However, not only does no single model emerge, there isn't really a choice among three models either. Rather, the author finds that the three situations have bene-

fited from hugely varying degrees of strategic, technical, practical and pedagogical thinking. The result is a trio of organically-grown environments that cannot easily be compared to each other (as Barr acknowledges on page 220), although each can be understood through the history and culture of the institution that has produced it.

Ulster's experience has been one of incremental changes in an attempt to overcome teaching difficulties. Some of the drawbacks listed – lack of institutional focus on interaction – may be sorted out through migration to the proposed VLE (WebCT), but Barr's book was written before this was implemented. In this sense Barr pays the price of the built-in obsolescence in his subject matter. With a publication year of 2004, and an estimated 12 months in press, the research itself cannot have taken place much later than 2002, already a distant past date in our fast-moving field. However, Barr also provides more generic historical observations: speculating about the Ulster staff's lack of knowledge of the potential of the Web, Barr suggests that this may be "the result of a teaching culture that is firmly rooted in a reference library culture and many have seen the Web as a replacement for the old library system" (p.85). Underestimation of the need to reflect on the institution's communication culture also explains the low student take-up of CALL-based learning, as teachers have neither explained nor integrated CALL tools in spite of being actively involved in developing them.

At Cambridge the issue is the low value placed on language learning as against foreign language literature, except at the Cambridge Language Centre (but, inexplicably, this is not the main focus of Barr's attention in this section). Here the context is one of lavish technological provision such as Web-access to students in their rooms – at a time when the Ulster students had to queue for lab access. The result is a culture where email and Web searches are a way of life for staff as well as for students, but again for historical and educational-cultural reasons, the potential of email for teaching/learning (as opposed to information transfer) has not been recognised, much less that of conferencing for collaborative learning. CALL is ignored by students and staff, being perceived as irrelevant or at best too time-consuming to fit into the students' heavy reading schedule.

Toronto's distinguishing feature is its size: 50 000 students across seven campuses. As well as the in-room connectivity already seen at Cambridge, the University of Toronto offers wireless networking portals for personal laptops, making it clear to all users that it places a high value upon the use of ICT. "The proliferation of course Websites, some of which are interactive, means that staff and students in this institution are highly dependent on the Web" (p.163). Here, uniquely among the three case studies, "staff see the potential for using the Web as an interactive tool" (p.164), although, as in Ulster, there is a mismatch between the beliefs of the teachers and the values of the students, who "feel that the effort required to complete the Web-based assessment was not reflected in the course marks" (p.166). The same applies to students' neglect of CALL, in spite of encouragement by staff. Finally, Toronto is the only one of the three locations where management has encouraged staff to become involved, via good staff development and through academic rewards. A nice example is provided, that of the Dean of Arts and Science enthusiastically disseminating the good work of his staff in ICT and finding funding to support them.

Missing from Barr's account of these universities is any kind of policy document on strategy for development of ICT for teaching and learning. It is impossible to tell whether there were none in existence at the time of writing (some of Barr's comments

about the lack of evidence of strategic thinking in all three cases lead to this conclusion), or because they were not made available to the author. Also, evidence across the locations highlights a tendency for University-wide thinking to be disconnected from Faculty thinking in the way that these bodies go about integrating ICT. Finally, the under-prioritisation of staff development is a constant finding.

By the time I finished absorbing the case studies I was feeling very much in need of a comparative table, which would have helped the author condense the findings into an easily presentable set of conclusions. Nor did the misalignment between the title of Chapter 6 and its content help me: “Success or failure? Meeting the needs of learners and teachers” promises a evaluation. Disappointingly though, most of Chapter 6 seems to continue with the case study techniques of the preceding chapters, and fails to move the reader on to a conclusive comparative assessment, because, as Barr himself acknowledges “the diverse nature of each university means that it is difficult to establish a common set of steps to be followed” (p.220).

In his Conclusion, the author reminds us of his research questions. A challenge to Barr would be to ask him at this point: did we need the three case studies in order to answer these questions? Specifically (a) do the conclusions arise out of the data presented? and (b) empirically-derived or not, do the findings offer new knowledge? My answer to each of these is ‘only up to a point’. I justify this by scrutinising Barr's concluding sections.

“What is a computer-based environment?” Barr’s treatment of this section amounts to summarizing the extended definition he provided in Chapter 1 before going into the case studies. The penultimate paragraph states that “if technology does not enhance teaching and learning, it does not need to be used” (p.220), a view that has been available for discussion since the early 90ies (see Levy, 1997: 215). A more novel finding is that “a computer-based environment that works well in one institution will not necessarily work in another” (p.220), and it is interesting to follow Barr’s suggestions about the reasons why that might be. “What is involved in creating an environment?” The findings in this section include:

- “Facilities do not need to be outstanding, [as] technical excellence does not necessarily guarantee that the technology will be used to maximal effect” (p.220). The pitfalls of an equipment-led policy are well-known: it is usually associated with disregard for the learning opportunities afforded or inhibited by the particular tool. But it is an original (empirically-based) insight that leads Barr to warn against technical-excellence-led policies too.
- “An integrated infrastructure [...] is needed to ensure a coherent framework for the use of technology in learning and teaching” (p.221). Cambridge and Toronto provide extremes of poor and excellent practice in this respect (or at least they did in 2002). Lessons about integrated approaches were already available well before Barr wrote his book, again see Levy’s literature survey of this issue, (1997: 200), so, again, the contribution of this book is in documenting them.
- It is important to develop “an electronic culture that makes the use of computer technology seem a natural part of university life for both staff and students” (p.221). In identifying this need and singling out Ulster and Toronto as “good models to be followed”, Barr is doing the doubly useful job of helping shape the concept of a culture of e-usage, and, through his in-depth study, of highlighting

practical issues for those interested in replication.

The final section of the book, "Do they work?" presents conclusions about the efficacy of computer-based environments for both non-pedagogical purposes and for language-learning. The pedagogical part boils down to a view from the respondents to his surveys: "[Computer-based environments] are seen as deficient in the area of oral work" (p.224). Since Barr acknowledges the historical limitations of the book by predicting that technological developments "look set to continue [, which] should provide better opportunities for using the computer in oral work" (p.225), we can dismiss his contemporary interviewees' perception as of little relevance to today's more spoilt ICT users. Among the non-language-specific conclusions, some could have easily been shown to be relevant to language. For example, we are told that a computer-based learning environment "improves communication between staff and students" and this is followed by one line adding that it is "especially important for linguists, who need to communicate across different countries" (p.225). Possibly the trio of institutions under the microscope in this book have not thought of taking advantage of this affordance in any way other than communicating across different countries (which in itself is no guarantee of good learning), but what about emailing and conferencing in the target language as part of collaborative learning activities whether 'abroad' or not, whether on-site or not, whether among learners or with L2 speakers?

Editorially, there is evidence of negligence in this book, the most damaging examples of which are the incoherencies of the quotation system (in particular on pages 18 and 19), the appearance within Chapter 2 of two sub-sections identically entitled "The computer as a resource" (on pages 38 and 45), and the circular reference to "Dalton and Winnetka" (on page 18), a pair of names which does not feature in the bibliography but when tracked down to a listing in the Index, send the reader right back to page 18 with no further explanation.

Overall, the book suffers from decisions made at the design stage. The three institutions are core to the argument of the book, and its conclusions are meant to derive from lessons learnt through comparison across this trio. But this is a risky strategy on the part of the author, because it requires him to take his reader through accounts of local conditions that, by the publication date of 2004, were already obsolete, let alone by this reviewer's reading date of June 2005. The front-loaded descriptive approach also obliges the reader to absorb quantities of facts without knowing which are going to be relevant to the comparison. Another problem is that this approach produces much detail of parochial interest to members of these particular universities only. What is required for wider readership appeal is a set of findings that are transferable to other institutional contexts and, we hope, to future historical junctures as well. This book only partially achieves this. With hindsight a heuristic approach, structured around particular problems and revealing evidence that may answer these would have made more exciting reading. However, the book does come alive when it talks about educational and management cultures, and providing one is happy to dip in and out, it offers food for thought.

References

- Levy, M. (1997) *Computer-Assisted Language Learning. Context and Conceptualisation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Colloquial Spanish 2: The Next Step in Language Learning, Untza Otaola Alday. Routledge, London/New York, 2004. ISBN: 0-415-27339-0. xxi-273 Pages. Price £23.61 /€35.00. (pack)

Intended Use

Colloquial Spanish 2: The Next Step in Language Learning is one of a four part series of advanced language learning packages published by Routledge; other languages include French, Italian and Russian. The *Colloquial Spanish 2* package contains a textbook and two 60-minute audio accompaniments, available both in cassette and CD form. *Colloquial Spanish 2* is aimed primarily at native English speaking learners of Spanish, particularly at those who have completed Alday's first self-access learning package *Colloquial Spanish 1*. The package is also beneficial to those who wish to refresh their knowledge of the Spanish language. There are 14 units in total within the package that cover practical everyday situations (e.g. Unit 10 employment and banking), as well as providing the reader with some interesting information on Spanish culture (e.g. Unit 3 Festivals and Fiestas).

Pedagogical Content

There are 14 units that form the basis of the package, with the appendices being made up of a key to each section and a detailed grammar section. The tutor who guides the learner throughout the package gives the instructions and objectives for each section. Each lesson is introduced in a contextualised way, but the textbook would benefit from the inclusion of more illustrations.

Each unit is made up of a variety of grammar, oral and aural exercise. The learner is introduced to each unit through an aural exercise; grammar and oral exercises are then used to reinforce the points raised in the dialogue. The dialogues used are always between native speakers and move at a pace which is beneficial for the learner. The dialogues are well recorded, which is vital to language packages of this kind. The inclusion of the dialogue script and the English translation of the vocabulary in the textbook also benefits the learner by enabling him/her to concentrate on pronunciation while following the conversation. There are a number of role-plays included within the aural exercises dealing with practical everyday situations. The oral work is mainly aimed at enhancing the students' pronunciation skills. The grammatical exercises used include fill the gap, matching, true or false, as well as other less common types of exercises. The final exercise at the end of some of the units provides the reader with some useful knowledge about Spanish culture, for example at the end of Unit 2 the Spanish custom of 'puentes' is explained.

The grammar reference section is a good addition and is well presented. Spanish grammar is presented in a concise manner with the section on the subjunctive being of a particularly high standard. It is clear that Alday recognises that the subjunctive is a difficult mood for native English speakers to learn and she presents it in a way that makes it easier to grasp. The package would have been enhanced by the inclusion of a bibliography of Spanish grammatical books.

One of the major advantages of *Colloquial Spanish 2* is that the learner can choose the

pace at which to advance through the package, and proceed to learn the language autonomously. The package does not, however, lend itself to anything other than a linear pattern of learning. One of the disadvantages is the way in which feedback is presented. The feedback given simply tells students whether they were right or wrong; consequently, they have to consult the grammar section or grammar books to understand the reason for their error.

In summary, the pedagogical content is sound with the Spanish language being taught in a very real authentic way. Through the use of real life situations and colloquial language throughout the course, the learner becomes familiar with the grammar rules, as well as being taught how to apply these rules in everyday situations and conversations. It is felt that providing the option of a video accompaniment would also enhance the course.

My overall impression of the package is a positive one. The strength of the programme lies above all in the variety of exercises that it contains. Other strong points include the well-developed listening exercises, the grammar reference section, as well as the colloquial information that the course provides. I strongly recommend it to those who wish to enhance their knowledge of the Spanish language. It would also be a welcome addition to a self-access section of a language library within a university language department.

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