Chapter XXVIII
The CALL Lab as a Facilitator for Autonomous Learning

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ABSTRACT

Unlike most CALL labs that are purchased from a vendor and employ either generic or commercial CALL software and technologically untrained teachers, the CALL lab at Akita Prefectural University was specifically designed by trained CALL professionals, who then wrote browser-based software custom-tailored to the textbooks and needs of the technology students who use it. This chapter delineates a project conducted to further improve the multimedia CALL lab as it prepared for a state-of-the-art update in the fall semester of 2006. Since this particular lab is utilized to facilitate the student-centered program, as opposed to the traditional, teacher-centered CALL lab that often functions as no more than a digital blackboard, the results of this project provided important feedback to allow for the instigation of cutting edge Web 2.0 innovations, specifically the open-source VLE called MOODLE.

INTRODUCTION

Moore’s Law (Moore, 1965) roughly states that computing power will double every 18 months. Thus the state-of-the-art hardware installed at the Akita Prefectural University CALL lab in 1999 was sadly outdated by the spring of 2006. Luckily, CALL methodology has not been advanc-
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ing with such exponential growth. By utilizing cutting edge software and textbooks based on the most sophisticated techniques and theories in applied linguistics, we have managed to keep the English language program functioning at an optimum level, though no longer at the bleeding edge of technological advancement. All that was set to change was the introduction, in the fall of 2006, of an extensive upgrade to the existing system hardware bringing it in line with the most ultra-modern of the CALL labs currently available. In preparation for such a radical update, we undertook an in-depth appraisal of the current research in the field to identify the advances that were most applicable to our current situation. In order to precisely ascertain the specific needs of our particular students we also conducted research on their learning modalities and academic goals. Then we endeavored to evaluate the status of our current program in order to pinpoint those facets that need to be adjusted to provide the optimum situation to facilitate second language acquisition. Finally, we attempted to identify those future trends in the field that will need to be incorporated in the further evolution and iterations of our complex adaptive learning environment. This chapter will present the results of our multidisciplinary efforts.

BACKGROUND

Akita Prefectural University is located on the northwestern coast of Honshu, the main island in the Japanese archipelago. The technology university has no English language department, thus the CALL lab serves as the basis for the first year language requirement of all the students attending the university. As is the norm in 21st century Japan, these students tend to avoid face-to-face communication. Instead, they prefer communication through the media of computers or cellular phones. Since English is a required subject at the university all of the students are given a proficiency test upon entry, and we used that as a baseline for our study.

The Japanese public school system starts mandatory English lessons in the seventh grade. Unfortunately the quality of this education is sorely lacking. Many of the teachers have little, if any, communicative ability and merely teach by rote from standardized textbooks. The motivational factor for these students is to pass multiple-choice English exam that is a part of nearly all college entrance exams, thus there is little incentive to use the language communicatively. Rote memorization of discrete vocabulary and obscure grammatical points thus becomes common. The educational tactic most commonly employed is the grammar-translation method. At best, a school might employ the audio-lingual method that is based on the theory of learning called behaviorism.

Modern theories of language learning started late 1950s with Noam Chomsky’s *Transformational-Generative Grammar*, and his concepts of *competence* and *performance*. He was the first to define linguistic competence, “...which is confined to internalized rules of syntax and abstracts from the social rules of language use.” (Stern, 1983, p.229). Later this was refined by Dell Hymes (1972) and called ‘Communicative Competence’; hence the general term for this methodology is “communicative language learning.” Hymes (1972) defines “communicative competence” as “...competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner” (p. 277).

At the same time that the concept of communicative competence was catalyzing what came to be known as communicative language teaching, autonomous learning was entering the field of language teaching through the Council of Europe’s 1971 Modern Languages Project (Benson, 2001). Autonomous learning can be defined thusly:

“Autonomy, or the capacity to take charge of one’s own learning, is seen as a natural product of the
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