

CALL in Mexico: The Process of Change

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Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has grown in Mexico in the last five years. This report will focus on that development, starting with a brief introduction to CALL history, followed by examples of projects implemented in Mexico, and the importance of teacher training with instances of successful implementation. The paper will also briefly discuss the importance of multinational agreements for CALL development and teacher training, both in full distance or blended modalities.

Introduction to CALL History

Integrating computers into second language learning has developed during the last 40 years at an incredible pace. CALL has undergone stages that can broadly be described as a behaviourist phase, followed by a communicative stage, and finally an integration stage, with the advent and integration of multimedia resources and the Internet (Warschauer, 1996).

Behaviourist Phase

During the first phase of CALL, implemented in some language-learning settings during the 1960s and 1970s, behaviourist-like programs were developed in which the computer acted mainly as a tutor; these programs were fundamentally based on the Pavlovian theories prevalent at the time. The programs were used (and still are in many language labs) to introduce a practice element into language learning, with the computer just providing correction feedback.

In the first years of CALL, the computer was viewed as a tool for practice, to repeat exercises endlessly with impartial and immediate feedback. Often the student had access could choose among different types of exercises, with varying degrees of difficulty, and could design his/her own individual learning path.

Communicative Stage

In the late 1970s and into the 1980s, as a new vision of language learning emerged, CALL became a more communicative, more significant process. CALL programs evolved to incorporate more complex interaction among users and software, and at the same time they included motivational learning items beyond routine practice.

During this stage, language teachers who had access to computers and language labs designed their curricular programs to incorporate, sometimes in trial-and-error- processes, blended instances where the teacher used class time to teach fundamental language aspects and relied on computers to do practice work of varying degrees of communication or just drill practice.

Integrative Stage

With the advance of technology, new opportunities have arisen for incorporation of activities based on problem solving and project work as an alternative to acquiring discrete skills in a mechanical way. Developments in multimedia technology (as in CD-ROMs and DVDs) and the advent of the Internet have turned into reality the possibility of pedagogic integration of language with real-time communication, not only within classroom walls but also with the rest of the world.

Instructional design using hypermedia now allows for a meaningful combination of skills since the student can now see a video, listen to its text, write and record his/her production and at the same time compare it with a pattern or standard. For example, for spoken language skills, the latest voice recognition software is able to discriminate among different accents and detect spots in the student's speech patterns in which phonetic problems are present.

For the first time the student has access to a tool which provides a lesson supplemented and supported by dictionaries, encyclopaedias, glossaries, pronunciation tools and even guidelines and learning tips to help the student reach his/her learning objectives.

The development of programs that incorporate artificial intelligence and simulators has provided greater access to learning and communication tools than ever before.

CALL Stages in Mexico

CALL in Mexico today shows the existence of programs in all three stages of CALL development, from programs that just incorporate simple e-mail as a tool, to the appearance in the market of highly sophisticated products geared specifically to the CALL market. For example, at MEXTESOL 2004, a new interactive magazine for teenagers was presented. The package includes a CD-ROM with recordings of each article and contents and access to a web-page where students can practice exercises, a chat room and an avatar programmed to answer questions and even detect mistakes a Spanish speaker may make while learning English (English2Go, 2004).

A personal example shows the change in CALL awareness in Mexico in the past five years. In 2000, I gave my first CALL presentation at a MEXTESOL conference. The focus was on teacher training and examples of on-line and CD-ROM implementation that I had observed in Brazil and Argentina (Rossetti, 2000). The audience consisted of a handful of people, most of them editors from publishing houses eager to find out what was going on in schools in South America. Five years later, at MEXTESOL 2005, I spoke about technology and language learning to an audience of 200 informed participants with many questions about on-line teaching (Rossetti, 2005).

Over the past five years, Mexico has moved toward the integration of technology and has witnessed the development of diverse projects, not only in language teaching but also in teacher training, using a variety of technological tools, CD-ROMs, e-mail and the World Wide Web. Some of these projects have incorporated distance learning to overcome teachers' constraints regarding time and travel.

CALL Projects in Mexico

I will briefly review some of these projects, including some in which teacher training has been carried out using new methodologies and technology. The projects discussed here are the National Self-Access Project, several projects in public and private schools, and several distance teacher-training projects. (Grounds, 2004)

As part of its National Program of Education, The Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), the top government educational body of Mexico, proposed quality improvement both in teaching and learning in higher education in the country. Specifically, its efforts targeted the use of technology for the development of teacher training programs and programs that would help students become -independent learners and thus improve their command of English.

In November 1993 the SEP, together with the Mexican British Council and rectors from 33 public Mexican universities, signed a two-year agreement to provide Self-Access Centres to these institutions. The primary aim was to offer access to multimedia technology both for teachers and for students.

Two projects were then designed to fulfil these objectives: the Proyecto para la Profesionalización de la Enseñanza de Inglés en las Universidades Estatales Mexicanas and the Proyecto Nacional de Centros de Auto-Acceso (Self-Access Centres, or SACs) The first project was aimed at providing teacher training opportunities for both teachers and supervisors, while the second project was aimed at providing technological resources to public universities in Mexico. Both projects are outstanding instances of technological and curricular innovation in Mexico grounded in a very ambitious vision of what self-access centres can bring to language learning.

This plan was extended to five years, and its implementation had to overcome a number of obstacles mainly due to the diverse institutional organizations and differing visions of their supervisors. Project reports indicate that ingenuity and negotiation were necessary throughout the project while dealing with each different university. In its original draft, this project included standardized study and work material, the design of study guides, and a nation-wide tutoring system. However, the marked diversity and individualism prevalent in public institutions, together with local politics, prevented this ambitious goal from becoming reality for all the institutions involved. As a result, today some institutions have expanded their number of SACs to provide service to their ever -increasing populations while other SACs have closed.

Now that the National Self-Access Project is officially over, its impact can be seen in the adoption of SACs in many parts of the country, national conferences dealing exclusively with SAC-related issues, and research being conducted in this area.

CALL Projects in Mexican schools—several examples

Schools in Mexico (both private and public) have been incorporating technology into their language classrooms at different rates depending on their particular scenario. Even many who have not actually implemented such programs have included technology and language labs into their planning for future implementation. In its Plan Educativo 2000-2006, the Secretaria de Educación Pública

(SEP) stated its goal that by 2006, public schools all over the country would be equipped with basic pedagogic infrastructure that included language centres. Mexican states have made progress toward this goal, some more and some less, depending on different political and educational visions of leaders and different situations.

One successful effort has been SEPAInglés (2004), a joint venture of the SEP with private parties to provide open and distance English language courses all over Mexico by means of video through the educational satellite EDUSAT and computers. In this program students are provided with the book *Look Ahead* (Hopkins & Potter, 1996), cassette tapes and a teacher providing tutoring both face-to-face and at a distance using e-mail and telephone. Students have access to SEPAInglés web page support, and the Centro de Asesoría y Auto Estudio (CASA) in different states of the Republic, and their successful work is certified by the SEP which, in the case of English teachers, also means they get credits for their official portfolio in public schools.

States in which English has been made compulsory in public primary schools have also made progress towards the incorporation of technology in their classrooms. One example is the Programa de Inglés en Primaria in the State of Coahuila, which has implemented the Programa de Apoyo y Actualización Docente and the Programa de Instalación y Equipamiento de los Centros de Autoaprendizaje y Desarrollo de Material Didáctico. These programs operate in language centres equipped with sixteen computers each, where both teachers and students work with specially designed software, vocabulary programs, songs, and other resources. (Programa de Inglés en Primaria, 2002)

At the same time that these advancements have been taking place in the public sector, many private schools have implemented their own language labs, where students learn English one or two periods per week. These labs are used mainly for self-access in self-paced programs, preparation for the TOEFL exam and, if there is an internet connection, for collaboration in national and international projects.

In addition, key private institutions such as Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM) use Blackboard (2002) as their main Learning Management System at all levels. Teachers upload exercises, and Blackboard serves as a tool for out-of-class practice.

Teachers report common concerns regarding CALL in their classrooms. For example, many teachers have expressed concerns about using various platforms, either commercial or open-source. They also report common issues regarding support in their institutions, for example, cases where technological innovations have been implemented and not enough support or training has been given to its teaching staff. Other teachers have mentioned situations in which they have had to find their own solutions based on their ingenuity and will to carry out projects, sometimes with little or no institutional or technical support.

Teacher training at a distance—four examples

CALL implementation and distance learning cannot be envisioned without adequate teacher training. With or without government support, institutions and

teachers have slowly incorporated teacher training into their development plans with varying results. Four sample programs are briefly discussed here.

PROMEP

The Programa de Mejoramiento del Profesorado (PROMEP, 2005), active since 1996, has been offering grants and scholarships for post graduate work in foreign universities that offer both their MA and Doctorate degrees at a distance. Examples are the University of Manchester and Aston in the UK and the University of Alberta in Canada, among others.

UNAM Diplomado

The Centro de Lenguas Extranjeras from the Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM) has been conferring its Diplomado de Actualización en Lingüística Aplicada a Distancia para Profesores de Lenguas since 1999. The Diplomado introduces teachers to the use of technology and distance learning and provides theoretical background on language learning and linguistics. Participants can take part in forums, and a tutor is available for consultation. (UNAM, October, 2204)

UGTO Teacher Training Program

Another instance of teacher training using technology can be found at the Universidad Autónoma de Guanajuato (UGTO, October, 2004) where CALL is already part of its curriculum design. This innovative design has led to the provision of forums, CALL materials design courses and visits from international consultants to work together with University teachers with different kinds of software for their classes.

UDG Distance Teacher Training Program

A distance teacher training program that began with print materials and now combines print materials with technology is the Licenciatura Semi-Escolarizada a Distancia offered by the Universidad de Guadalajara. The program opened in 1996 with only 18 students. Originally based on print materials delivered by surface mail, with the support of e-mail for submitting assignments, the project now includes a web site and reaches 200 students in all states in Mexico (UDG, October, 2004)

Conclusion

CALL development in Mexico has varied; sometimes it has been slow, sometimes fast. As the examples here show, programs range from those with basic resources and plans, with little or no support, to highly-developed integrative programs with strong support. In the future, leaders will need to develop powerful educational visions that include a global strategy and a coherent nationwide plan that incorporates technology at all levels of public education and supports teacher training.

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