Collaborative CALL Strategy Training for Teachers and Learners

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This paper reports on a five-year project at a US community college involving a collaborative CALL training model for ESL teachers and students aimed at implementing strategies to assist students in becoming more independent learners when using networked and online language learning software. Throughout the project, the primary issue for both faculty and students has been to move from the traditional approach of completing all activities of the software with a specific theme in mind to setting a language learning goal with specific strategies in mind. The five-year process for developing learner training included analyzing existing instructional software, designing reflective self-evaluation activities for students, and raising teacher awareness through training workshops and working with CALL materials on foreign languages. The paper describes the various stages and challenges in the training process as well as comments from faculty training workshops and discussion board postings from teachers’ own experiences as CALL learners.

1. Introduction

For the past five years the Institute for Intensive English at Union County College (UCC) in New Jersey has been engaged in a project to develop learning training strategies and materials. The project stemmed from longstanding observations that the roughly 1700 students and 75 faculty in the six-level ESL program were not making most effective use of the instructional software used in their classes. Specifically, students did not know how to pace themselves, often racing to complete an assignment without reflecting on its value, and did not follow through on lab assignments. Some teachers used lab time for class preparation and grading rather than engaging with the students. Teachers and students did not consistently recognize the value of consciously connecting student software interaction with the learning objectives.

2. Learner Training Overview

With a grant from the college, a small group of instructors and an outside consultant began collaborating on developing learner training strategies and materials to improve the effectiveness of CALL in the program. They drew on a learner training model by Hubbard (2004) centered on five principles:

- Experience CALL yourself
- Give learners teacher training
- Use a cyclical approach
- Use collaborative debriefings
- Teach general exploitation strategies

During the first two years of the project (see Kolaitis et al. (2006) for details), the team met regularly, sometimes through conference calls with the consultant, to analyze features and exercises of the instructional software used at UCC and develop strategies for using CALL listening, grammar, and vocabulary software. They implemented learner training in their classes, created “CALL journals” in which students documented their reflective learning, and engaged in collaborative debriefings both with their students and among themselves.

An important focus during this period was the identification of learning goals for listening, grammar, and vocabulary that included an understanding of why particular activities or exercises were used to support learning targets. Once these goals were identified, sets of strategies to meet them were created. For listening, for example, this included pre-listening strategies, techniques for playing the audio and video clips, interaction between audio and video and the transcripts, strategies for using comprehension questions (such as hiding the set of answers for multiple choice ques-
tions initially), and doing dictations to highlight the form-meaning link.

3. Classroom Implementation

Following the principles noted above, project faculty have implemented learner training with their students for the past five years. One hour weekly, students utilize networked software and web-based sites to improve listening, grammar and vocabulary skills. A major component of the training is the use of reflection/debriefing journals for listening, grammar, and vocabulary. The purpose of these journals is to focus student learning, provide instruction in language learning principles, develop an awareness of student language learning goals and strategies to meet these goals, and provide an opportunity for collaborative reflective learning. Throughout a semester, students share journals in small groups and in class discussion.

As a result of this learner training, we have observed some changes in student use of computers in the labs. Students use programs more slowly, are more engaged in utilizing hints/help, are more engaged in reflection/journaling, and have begun to think about their language learning goals. Student reflection responses have also indicated that students have recognized these changes. Several ESL students referred to their use of exploitation strategies and note-taking. “My suggestion for other students are they need use computer programs slowly, and they need more practice in home.” “I think they should write down everything to notebook and later repeat and practice.”

4. Using CALL on Our Own

In training faculty, the major shift during the past three years has been from conducting a series of individual workshops to a six-week Collaborative Group Training Model of “Experiencing CALL On Your Own,” in which faculty learn a language on-line. The goals of this training are to develop a first hand awareness of valuable CALL strategies and to consider how one might enhance his/her teaching approaches in and out of the lab to maximize student learning and retention.

In the implementation, faculty individually studied a chosen language with free online programs for one to two hours a week at home. The group met once a week for six weeks and used CALL in the lab and discussed experiences, focusing on the language learning goals and strategies utilized. Each week participants blogged about their experience and at the end of the training process, they gave a reflective presentation in a final roundtable discussion that was open to all faculty.

In order to facilitate a balance between faculty discovering strategies that met their learning goals and learning style and more directly moving the discussion toward why they are using particular strategies in relation to their language goal, they blogged weekly on the following directed prompts.

In the first week, faculty blogged on a learning styles survey that they had taken in the first meeting. For the second week, the focus was on describing the strategies used, “First I..., Next, I..., Then, I....” During the third weekly session, they blogged about language learning goals in relation to listening, grammar, vocabulary and speaking. The group explicitly discussed how various strategies might meet language goals and then explored what individual strategies they chose and why they chose them. Discussions continued with the third blog: “What have our language goals been? Describe the strategies you have used to achieve your language goals and why have you used those strategies?” Finally, the group blogged on how the level of difficulty of the language and content impacted on their strategies and how their teaching changed.

In general, we found that these prompts, along with more directed discussion of the connection between language goal and strategies, seemed to facilitate participants moving through a goal awareness process:

1) A lack of awareness of language goals while using software.
2) Use of programs and various strategies without thinking about why.
3) Through discussion of specific language learning goals, more awareness of goal setting.
4) Better ability to make conscious decisions on effective strategies to meet goals.

The recognition of movement through these stages was reflected in several faculty blogs. For example, one described her learning changing as a result of attention to goals and connecting them to strategies:

When I first started the program, I didn't really pay much attention to articulating specific 'goals' –other than that I wanted just more exposure to the target language. A very broad goal in itself. However, then I started to refine my goal setting and decided that I wanted to improve some specific skills – listening, vocabulary and pronunciation. This helped me to tailor my study to improve those areas. I decided to employ strategies such as turning off or covering up
transcripts, repeated listenings, turning up the volume, repeating expressions aloud and writing them down to hopefully cement them in my mind.

In the final presentations, faculty expressed insights that can be summarized in three main areas, goal setting, motivation and language acquisition.

- **Goal Setting:** Faculty stated that the experience reinforced the idea that students are the teachers when independently using CALL and that the role of the instructor in the lab is to assist students in learning—to make strategic choices based on their goals.

- **Motivation:** Faculty recognized the importance of materials that meet student interests, level and goals. Students do not invest time to use software effectively when the content is uninteresting or too difficult/easy for them.

- **Language acquisition:** Faculty were surprised how much repetition they needed in order to remember items. They found taking notes and repetition were essential, thus making them question what students were learning if they weren’t taking notes and repeating sections.

In general, faculty found the training to be an eye-opening experience. They had not been students in language classes recently, and they had never used software to learn a new language. Faculty found it very useful to be in the “students’ shoes” and realized that they don’t always consider students’ differing needs or appreciate the difficulty of tasks.

5. **What We Have Learned**

Through this five year project, we have learned the importance of setting language goals, giving more priority to collaborative reflection and debriefings, and incorporating learner strategy training into our regular classrooms on an ongoing basis. This coming year, based on the success of blogging with the faculty, we plan to incorporate blogging into student reflections. To better match the level and language goals of the faculty experiencing CALL, we plan to incorporate more targeted software.

**References**
