

A CALL Project with Low-Level EFL Students

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This presentation reports on a CALL project at Kyoto Sangyo University involving its first-year, low-level, non-English majors using two CALL applications—DynEd and ALC. In addition to explaining the way the project developed and evolved, the pros and cons of the software will be compared. Implementing CALL software in a classroom setting involves adaptation to suit needs of both learners and the institution. In this project these key issues were student motivation, assessment, and adaptation. By examining the challenges of this project the presentation will provide ideas for other CALL projects involving low-level students.

1. Introduction

CALL, or e-Learning, is increasingly being used in Japanese universities for the teaching of English in a variety of ways, from individual teacher projects to larger campus-wide projects such as the one discussed in this paper. Bingham and Larson (2005) attribute this increase to reasons ranging from staff cuts and shrinking budgets in Japanese universities to marketing strategies. They go on to say that many expensive CALL labs are then underused or misused, or simply become self-access centers.

In their study of e-Learning in Japan, Ozkul and Aoki (2006) support this claim and examine its causes citing reasons from lack of teacher training and support, cultural and social issues, lack of pedagogy, as well as managerial issues. Pagel and Reedy (2007) echo some of these points, in their own study of a project similar to the one in this paper and mention that whilst many universities invest in CALL labs and software, there are very few studies in the implementation and success of these projects, with the implementation being left to the individual teachers charged with teaching the classes.

This paper reports on one such course-wide project involving the use of purchased package English learning software in a newly built highly resourced computer lab with lower-level, first-year non-English majors in a compulsory English oral communication course.

2. CALL for Lower Level Students

Literature on teaching CALL with lower level

students is difficult to find, in contrast to the wealth of studies with intermediate and much higher-level students. This lack of balance is often reflected at CALL conferences, including WorldCALL 2008, where more papers and reports on projects with higher-level, highly motivated students are presented. This is particularly surprising in Japan, where the great bulk of students studying English at university are low-level non-English majors in their first and second years of compulsory English study, and who tend to have little motivation for learning English.

A common theme in some of the papers found on teaching English to low-level learners from outside of Japan was an increase in student motivation with the use of CALL. Al Jarf (2005), in her study from Saudi Arabia, reported “heightened motivation”, and Berzosa and Rokowski (2000) found that increased motivation was the most outstanding characteristic of CALL use in their study from Spain. However, studies in Japan with lower-level students similar to those in this project made no mention of motivational benefits. Ito (2006) found that students felt that the CALL course required them to work harder than in traditional face-to-face classes.

Redfield and Campbell (2005), in their study comparing Hybrid and self-access use of CALL, found better results with the self-access students but surmised this could be due to these students being forced to spend more actual time on the computer than the hybrid students. Observation of students in this study found similar results to both Ito and Redfield and Campbell.

3. The KSU Course

In 2006 Kyoto Sangyo University (KSU) implemented a CALL program as part of their first-year non-English-major English Oral Communication course. KSU places these students into five levels on the basis of their own in-house placement test. The lowest two levels were chosen for the CALL course because it was felt that CALL could help improve their most basic English skills. Each year the course consists of about 500-550 students from a total population of around 3000. The students are generally at the false beginner or elementary level and typically have little-to-no interest or motivation for studying English.

The English Oral Communication course at KSU involves students participating in two 90-minute classes per week: one class held in a brand new, specially designed, state-of-the-art computer room, the other a face-to-face (f2f) class in a traditional classroom setting. In most instances, students had the same teacher for both classes. However, the weekly CALL class combined two classes of up to 35 students each simultaneously, while the same teacher taught the f2f classes separately, essentially cutting what would have been a total of four koma in a week to three. Integration of the CALL and f2f classes was not required or fostered in the beginning of the project; however, as the course developed, individual teachers saw the need to do so and began to integrate content and materials from the two classes.

The teachers of the course were native English speakers on contract with KSU and generally with some interest, experience and expertise in teaching CALL. Whilst not involved in the creation of the CALL project, a CALL committee was established for improving and fine tuning the project as it progressed including teacher training and support.

4. The KSU Software—DynEd and ALC

The two primary software applications used in the Oral Communications CALL courses at KSU are DynEd's *New Dynamic English* and ALC's *Basic English Listening Course*. The software was chosen after a search of available software in Japan by full-time faculty of the General Education Committee. Japanese language support was an important factor in the selection process, as it was to be used with low-level students. Indeed, both DynEd and ALC provide Japanese support for students to differing degrees.

DynEd offers a suite of nearly a dozen different courses for schools and universities aimed at a range of ages and proficiency levels. At KSU, students mainly use *New Dynamic English* (NDE) from

DynEd's suite, although the other courses are also available for use. NDE was deemed the most appropriate for the level and interests of the students after a team of teachers evaluated the various courses available.

New Dynamic English is a listening/speaking-based interactive multimedia course that includes colorful graphics, animation, video, and speech-recognition activities. NDE consists of eight units, or Modules, that range in level from beginning to advanced. Students at KSU typically begin with Module 1 or 2 and progress through to Module 3 or 4 by the end of the year. NDE also includes native-language support in the form of audio translations and a Japanese version of the Intelligent Tutor, which tracks and evaluates all study activities and offers specific study recommendations to students.

In a typical NDE study session, students listen to a story or conversation, answer periodic questions about it, and then complete a variety of exercises to further develop their mastery of the grammar, vocabulary, and functions presented. Exercises include reordering words into sentences, fill-ins, dictations, and speech practice using the speech recognition system. Students are also encouraged through the Tutor to use the repeat button to listen to the sentences presented more than once and to record their own voices to compare them with the native-speaker recordings.

One of the most useful features of NDE is the Records Manager, which allows teachers (and students) to track student progress, including time spent, percentage complete, and scores on the exercises and tests. The Records Manager is not only useful as an assessment tool, but it also helps to motivate students since they are able to follow their own progress as well.

ALC's *Basic English Listening Course* is part of a suite of applications called NetAcademy produced by a Japanese publishing company. ALC was initially chosen mainly because of its Japanese language support, which is integral to the lessons and appreciated by many of the students. However, ALC offers little English support beyond the content of the lessons themselves. The listening course was chosen for the Oral Communications course because it seemed to fit best with the theme of the course.

The course consists of 30 listening units on various themes, from telephone calls and conversations to speeches. In each unit, students listen to a short passage, answer three comprehension questions about it, and then review the passage with the English transcript and a Japanese translation. In addition, the program offers

a personal glossary and usage notes in Japanese to help with studying the vocabulary and grammar. The software also allows students to replay the recordings at various speeds for “speed listening” training.

ALC also provides a records management system, but it is not nearly as extensive or useful as DynEd’s. The main information provided is the time spent on each unit and the student’s score on the three-question comprehension quiz.

5. Motivation

Cultivating and maintaining student interest in the CALL classroom has been a constant challenge for KSU teachers each semester. The presence of cell phones, the internet, email, Mixi, and YouTube provided constant distractions for some students, while others found the whirr of 70 computer fans conducive to a much needed nap. It is difficult enough for anyone to concentrate on a given task for 90 minutes, particularly on a compulsory subject of little interest for these students, like English. For this reason teachers discovered that giving students a variety of tasks in combination with quantifiable target learning goals for the semester, helped many students maintain focus. Roaming around the room and interacting personally with the students also helped teachers stem potential distractions and give help and advice to students as needed.

6. Assessment

How to best assess student work in the CALL room was another major issue to contend with. DynEd provides teachers with a flood of data, including mastery test scores and completion percentages, while ALC generates almost nothing useful. This prompted teachers to discuss which of the DynEd data was most useful for assessment purposes, and led the CALL committee to develop a series of ALC mastery tests to compensate for the assessment deficiencies of ALC, all of which were administered via Moodle.

It was initially decided that time of study, completion percentage (for DynEd only), and mastery test scores would be the main assessment factors. The CALL committee then generated a set of student learning goals for the semester based on these criteria, which were then recommended to CALL teachers, who were given the option of altering these for their respective classes.

It soon became apparent that time of study was an inappropriate assessment factor, as students simply opened up both applications simultaneously and let them run freely whether the students were actually paying attention or not. In subsequent semesters,

only completion percentage (for DynEd) and mastery tests were the official assessment factors, thus rendering ‘time of study’ valid again as a reflection of student effort.

At the end of each semester, a grading spreadsheet was sent out to all CALL teachers that allowed them to calculate grades for their students by entering the appropriate values from the DynEd records manager and ALC mastery test scores from the course Moodle.

7. Adaptation

Being an upstart CALL program, both the software and the teaching situation was new to all teachers involved. Thus the process of constant adaptation to arising challenges in the classroom was the third key issue in this project. As was previously mentioned, mastery tests for ALC had to be created, as well as time of study being dropped from assessment criteria.

Another adaptation made was a move away from attempting to work with data exported from each application to Excel spreadsheets, massaging it, and using complicated formulas to render it meaningful for assessment. Teachers found it easier to simply eyeball the data in the records manager and input it all into the grading worksheet by hand. This unfortunate time consuming step is one of the current challenges still facing CALL teachers in the program.

In addition to assessment and software related adaptations, there were also technical difficulties to overcome, such as malfunctioning hardware and software, as well as a rapidly decreasing supply of headphones from the university-provided stock. A paper-based system of identifying problematic computers and reporting them to administration was developed, while headphones were eventually secured firmly to each computer with plastic straps, thus stemming the tide of their mysterious disappearance.

Finally, once the adaptations described above were made, teachers began to address one of the obvious weaknesses of the CALL program: a total separation in both content and practice between what happens in the f2f classroom and what is being done in the CALL classroom. Therefore, a move toward better integration between classes was called for, especially in light of the motivational issues discussed earlier. It was thought that since f2f classes contained much more student-centered topics of discussion, that finding a way to integrate what goes on there into the CALL classroom would be more stimulating for students and lead to a better overall quality learning experience. The initial

attempts at better integration included Moodle-based discussion and chat activities, the incorporation of digital materials from the textbook, web-based research and discussion activities, and the delivery of quizzes via Moodle related to f2f class material.

8. Student Surveys

Three separate intakes of students—from January 2007 to July 2008—were surveyed to shed light on their perceptions of the software and their experiences with the CALL program at KSU. Overall students felt that the use of the CALL software was significantly improving their listening ability, and to a lesser extent their pronunciation (thanks to voice recognition technology of DynEd), while they deemed their grammar and vocabulary to see only slight improvements, to no improvements at all. Students far preferred the use of DynEd's *New Dynamic English* over ALC's listening course.

Perhaps the most salient trend noticed in the results of the three surveys over time was a steadily increasing level of overall satisfaction with the CALL program in terms of student perception of both how enjoyable and how educational the use of the software was. We attribute this increase in satisfaction to the adaptations described above, along with the recent attempts at better integration between f2f and CALL classes.

9. Conclusion

As with the implementation of any new CALL program in a university setting, a variety of challenges will arise, necessitating adaptations along the way, both in terms of how software is put to use and how assessment is carried out. With lower level students, cultivating and maintaining motivation is particularly important. We hope that this paper has shed some light on the challenges faced when starting a new CALL program with lower level students, as well as providing some feedback on the pros and cons of the software used, from DynEd and ALC.

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