



Classroom Research

CALL and autonomy: Settings and context variables in technology-enhanced language environments

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When we look at the issues of learner autonomy in language learning, mainly three goals spring to mind that we would like to pursue with the learner. The first and maybe the most important is reflection, the ability to detach oneself from current learning processes and monitor and evaluate old and new learning processes. The second goal is interaction, the ability to interact in the target language in as many frameworks as are needed. The third goal is experimentation, the ability to experiment with language and learning strategies in a stress-free or stress-reduced environment. One might argue that any materials or “technologies” that can support the learner in achieving these three goals should be selected according to the probability of playing an important role in this pedagogical process. However, we also sometimes play around with materials or technology or see a feature of software and then use this to develop a pedagogical framework around it, just as we look for technology in the broadest sense that can be used to fulfil a particular pedagogical function. Both these views, from pedagogy to technology and from technology to pedagogy are not necessarily contradictory or mutually exclusive; both have their value.

I will not try to locate computer-assisted language learning (CALL) within the field of applied linguistics or, indeed, any other discipline (this would be opening another can of worms). CALL can probably be most usefully defined as a perspective that looks at language learning by starting off with technology and then moving towards pedagogy. From this perspective, three areas seem to be fruitful when discussing settings and context variables in the framework of technology and learner autonomy.

The first of these aspects has to do with the fact that CALL software has often been researched in isolation and that we can see recent shifts towards a more differentiated analysis of technology-pedagogy combinations. Thus, for a long time it had often been implicitly assumed that learner behaviour in these contexts only needs to be analysed if technology is

involved. In other words, if technology is directly involved, we as researchers will analyse this and it will tell us something about technology and pedagogy. If technology is not directly involved, it does not tell us something about technology and pedagogy. Recently, several researchers and even whole journal issues have begun to look in more detail at this assumption. I will give just three examples. Robert Fischer has recently (Fischer, 2007) emphasised the importance of tracking data by looking at various empirical CALL research papers, and tracking mechanisms are certainly one of the most important research tools in CALL. (User tracking is the process of capturing and maintaining information on how a computer user uses a particular computer program, such as timed sequences of key strokes.) Breffni O’Rourke has worked extensively with MOO environments, text-based chat environments on the Internet. While pioneer researchers of these environments used to analyse the language used within the environments, O’Rourke has recently (O’Rourke, forthcoming) turned towards eye- and similar tracking technology to look at data that is NOT recorded within the software, but nevertheless tells us a great deal about how learners use this software in the context of their whole learning environment. For instance, how often and how intensively do learners read previous input, or how much do they monitor their own output? In this sense, O’Rourke rightly looks at the broader picture of technology in language learning environments. Veronica Morgade, a colleague of mine in Hannover, has been involved in a number of video conferencing projects in our department (Morgade, 2007). With the help of video analysis tools, she has been creating, annotating, and analysing elaborate video transcripts that track, among other factors, non-verbal communication such as gestures and group movements within group-to-group video conferencing from an intercultural perspective. This shows that it is difficult if not impossible to differentiate CALL from the particular language learning environment it is used in, and computers from other “technologies”. In this sense, CALL is just another technology that works together

with other technologies and social networks that assist language learning. More research effort is and should be invested into researching these relationships.

A second issue with CALL software and setting variables is equally important. Just as CALL research needs to look at the broader picture, it also needs to be more specific in its conclusions. There are many research papers claiming “synchronous computer-mediated communication is...”, yet the functionality of these programs varies greatly. Some programs, for instance, have a function to show previous input or record chats, others do not. These differences may well turn out to be immaterial for the chats themselves, or learner behaviour in general, but I think there are good reasons to at least study the differences in more detail, if not even to assume that differences in certain crucial affordances (such as memory aids) should actually influence learner behaviour. In any case, more specific analysis of the presence and/or absence of functional context variables and, in consequence, compensation strategies should be rewarding.

A third issue arises out of the use of self-access centres and the relationship between self-access and learner autonomy. Since the term learner autonomy has been discussed it has been frequently (mis)understood as being synonymous with self-access learning. This, I would argue, is not the case. I can well put my students in front of a computer with plenty of software without supporting them in any way in their autonomy. Similarly, I can well support them in becoming more autonomous without a self-access centre or computers. Learners with a certain degree of autonomy may prefer to work in a self-access centre, but others may not. In this way, I think providing a self-access centre as well as a variety of regular classes is crucial for any language centre. Some language centres have almost exclusively shifted from regular classes to individual language coaching or advising, where trained personnel work with individual learners on their learning agendas, often with some form of language portfolio such as the European Language Portfolio. Indeed, both learner counselling/advising and portfolios have become central issues discussed at recent learner autonomy conferences such as that organized by the Independent Learning Association in Chiba, Japan in 2007. Again, tracking mechanisms and video analysis seem appropriate tools to research the broader picture of self-access learning, apart from tools such as portfolios and counselling sessions.

When we look at learner autonomy and CALL, we sooner or later are confronted with the question: what is CALL and how can we distinguish it from “the rest”? The questions should rather be: how can we relate CALL and its research to the broader learning environment and to our broader pedagogical goals? To what degree can we transfer research results to other forms of technology? This requires multiple angles of research and both a broader and more specific approach to technology.

References:

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