Computer-assisted Language Learning —
The Times They Are A-Changin’

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EDITORIAL

EuroCALL 2013 in Évora, Portugal, which took place this month, had the conference theme “Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future;” the fourth WorldCALL conference in Glasgow, Scotland, this summer was entitled “Sustainability and CALL;” “Navigating the Complexities of Language Learning in the Digital Age” was the conference title of CALICO 2013 in Honolulu, Hawaii. Looking ahead to 2014 we find CALICO’s theme of “Open, Online, Massive: The Future of Language Learning?” and the International CALL Research Conference (at the University of Antwerp) theme “Research Challenges in CALL” to share certain temporal references, metaphors, and entailments. Likewise, we note that CALL representation in major mainstream conferences such as the annual meeting of the American Association for Applied Linguistics to be quite strong as witnessed by the many quality papers submitted to the ‘Language and Technology’ strand.

Is all of this a reflection of CALL research, development, and pedagogic innovation having come of age? As the CALICO Journal completes it’s third decade of publication, we are more established as a field and, therefore, can afford (indeed, are obliged) to be more reflective. Yes, the times they are a-changin’ and CALL research is changing — for the better! Over recent years, we have noticed an increasing number of journal submissions of higher quality. These papers are increasingly based on sound theoretical frameworks or commensurate theories, follow standard and established methods of investigation, and produce results that help to further discourses not only in CALL but also in applied linguistics more broadly. The theories and methods employed in CALL research are regularly borrowed and adapted in innovative ways from areas such as Applied Linguistics, Learning Psychology, and Human Computer Interaction. Thus, these papers stay their ground not only in a CALL context but also in publications and at conferences in the parent disciplines more and more often. Conference presentations clearly reflect more sophistication among CALL researchers, as they keep up with the rapid developments in digital technologies, the emerging discourses in applied linguistics and language pedagogy, and transformed and transforming educational contexts.

Recent CALL conferences also have something else in common: attendance and participation rates have been markedly lower than at comparable conferences in the past. One can only speculate about the reasons, but cuts in funding for higher education in many countries around the world, diminishing interest in foreign language instruction at universities, and the reduction of research resources clearly lead to fewer colleagues and graduate students being able to conduct funded research and hence to travel to disseminate their findings and engage in an academic exchange with their peers.
However, as resources are squeezed, interest in publishing in CALL academic journals appears to be increasing. This is evidenced by publication workshops at EuroCALL 2012 in Göteborg, Sweden, and at CALICO 2013, to which editors and associate editors of ALSIC, CALICO Journal, CALL-EJ, CALL Journal, IJCALLT, JALT, LL&T, ReCALL, and System contributed. Likewise, the number of publication venues in our area has increased and editorial teams of the various journals cooperate successfully with one another. On the other hand, economic pressures on academic journals — including those in our field — is at least partially responsible for authors, subscribers, publishers, and editorial teams paying much more attention to international journal rankings, citation indexes, and impact factors. One of the consequences of such quantification of an academic journal’s quality is an increase on the pressure on scholars to publish in certain journals, regardless of whether that journal is the “right” venue for their work. This undermines our field as in order to make a true “impact” our work must appear in journals that will best reach our target audience.

At the same time academic publishing itself is witnessing radical, economic, social, and technological change to which CALL journals are not immune. For example, there is a strong renewed interest in open-access publishing. While we grapple with competing models to accommodate this shift, some journals are moving in the direction of off-loading production costs to authors in the form of publication fees. The CALICO Journal charges no author fees, nor do we have any plans at this stage to do so. This year, we have reduced the subscription-only embargo to twelve months, which provides more timely albeit delayed open access to all CJ articles. Invited review articles, the editors’ introduction, Spotlight articles, and book and software reviews are all open access immediately upon publication.

We’ve obviously borrowed the title of this editor’s introduction from Bob Dylan’s third album released almost fifty years ago, which was an anthem of sorts for the political and social upheaval that was sweeping North America and much of the world. At some level, the maturation of our field coupled with the far-reaching changes underway in academic publishing mirror the turbulent and uncertain future expressed in the song. We choose to be optimistic about these inevitable changes. It is clear that “the waters around us have grown” but this is an opportunity for innovation and creativity lest we “sink like a stone.”

One fine example of such forward-thinking optimism is this issue’s review article by Greg Kessler, CALICO’s current past president. We invited him to expand on his keynote presentation “Collaborative language learning in co-constructed participatory culture” from CALICO 2012, which was held at the University of Notre Dame. Kessler argues that the collaborative culture of the Internet has changed the way we communicate with one another and increased the frequency of communication. This global and ubiquitous phenomenon affords new opportunities for language learning, if we manage to avoid a number of threats. Collaborative tasks such as group digital storytelling and course wikis can help students to develop their learning autonomy, if their group work is facilitated adequately and if both instructors and students possess a certain flexibility that enables them to deal with various degrees of uncertainty that arises from the rapid (technological) change.

The first of six research articles in this issue is by Jesse Gleason, who also addresses the rapid development of new technologies by focusing on the hybridity of online and classroom language learning. Based on a multiple case study, she highlights four themes that give rise to some (productive) tension in blended learning environments: time commitment, relationships in the course, oral foreign-language production, and student understanding. Still in the realm of online learning, Regine Hampel and Christine Pleines investigate a four-year cycle of the design and implementation of language learning activities in an online distance education course. From their comprehensive case study, they conclude that more
instructor involvement and a simpler structure with fewer tasks and tools had a positive impact on learner engagement. Satomi Suzuki uses online language learning as the backdrop of her study. Employing a multi-modal approach to data collection, she analyzes the off-screen behavior of one student while participating in a synchronous Japanese class. Suzuki argues that her data show that this student gained important affordances through the online course format and concludes that CALL can promote learner agency and autonomy.

Ilona Vandergriff starts off a series of articles that focuses on aspects of pragmatics in CALL scenarios. Her investigation of language learners’ participant orientation in text chats with L1 speakers shows that learners often position themselves as relative novices. This does not only happen — as assumed previously — in repair situations, but is a process that helps learners to (re-)index their L2 social self, build and maintain social rapport with the L1 speaker, and cultivate social presence in the chat. James R. Garner employs a similar pragmatics lens; he analyzes the use of linking adverbials by L2 English students during writing. The study investigated the use of two data-driven learning techniques: concordance line and short context reading and direct corpus consultation. Both techniques had a positive impact on students’ learning. In the third paper, Zsuzsanna Abrams examines whether and how learners of German develop sociopragmatic competence by participating in computer-mediated communication (CMC). Her results suggest that learner-to-learner CMC provides a venue in which learners can practice and develop their sociopragmatic skills in a “safe” L2 context.

This issue — the third and final of our thirtieth anniversary volume — is rounded out by two book reviews and three software reviews. We are very grateful to Lara Lomicka, our software review editor, and Shannon Sauro, our book review editor, for providing us with a continuous stream of quality reviews. The book Multilingual Corpora and Multilingual Corpus Analysis, edited by Thomas Schmidt and Kai Wörner, is reviewed by Richard Bale, while Theresa Schenker presents her assessment of Contemporary Computer-Assisted Language Learning edited by Michael Thomas, Hayo Reinders, and Mark Warschauer. Last but not least, we offer the following language learning software reviews: Read Live (Charlotte Remmel and Kevin Myers), WeSpeke (Janel Pettes Guikema), and Rocket Spanish Premium (Carol Tripp).

Finally, we are thrilled to welcome to our editorial team Ana Oskoz (UMBC), who begins a three-year term as associate editor and Jeong-bin Hannah Park (UT-Austin), who joins us as an editorial assistant. We hope you will find this issue of the CALICO Journal a stimulating and informative read and we welcome your comments on Facebook and Twitter!