Putting Computers in Their Place

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The use of the computer as an adjunct to effective communication has the potential, and may in time, impact the educational process as few other advances have in our time. However, potentiality to actuality is often not an easy transition.

In the beginning of the computer revolution, the primary concern was simply getting computers into the system. Almost immediately, however, it became obvious that the effective use of the computer would be an even greater challenge. Today, as computers are more widely used in the ESL programs, the same problems seem to emerge again and again. We have heard them before: finding good software with content directly related to an ESL curriculum, getting faculty comfortable with computers, and making computers easily accessible.

Aided by a succession of grants over a four year period, these problems were ultimately resolved by the Institute for Intensive English (IIE), Union County College, Elizabeth, New Jersey.

The program was initiated with a New Jersey State Computers in Curricula Grant, which permitted the establishment of a ten computer Apple IIe lab. However, with a student population at that time of over 400, access to computer use was limited. Also, there was reluctance on the part of some faculty members, who viewed the system as merely another "gimmick." Fortunately, there were those who recognized the merits of CALL as a way to improve student interaction and provide a solid reinforcement for language skills.

A follow-up grant permitted the addition of 25 more computers, a network lab and the enhancement of our software library. More than 50 software packages were available especially to the more adventurous faculty member. For the five networkable programs, the tedious process of booting up each machine for a class of 25 was eliminated. However, to our surprise CALL was still sporadic—a piecemeal approach at best.

This, upon reflection, seemed to be a result of the discontinuity of the individual programs, which were not tied into the curriculum, and the lack of networked software. To improve the effectiveness of the system, it became essential to design CALL lessons which could be integrated directly into the IIE 6-level curriculum. A third grant was applied for: PROJECT ESL AUTHOR.

It was first necessary to search out software, especially mini-authoring
programs, which would be networkable and compatible with our curriculum. The programs were chosen (a) to reinforce a language skill that teachers considered directly relevant, not peripheral, and (b) to have relatively simple authoring systems so teachers have control of the lesson content (See Hubbard, Philip 1988.). Activity types, such as text reconstruction, cloze, sequencing, sentence combining and scrambling sentences were considered in the review (Reading Strategies, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ; Double Up, Rhubarb and Sequitur, Research Design Associates, Inc., Stony Brook, NY; Crossword Magic, Mindscape, Inc., Northbrook, IL; Sentence Maker, American Language Academy, Rockville, MD) have been the major authoring programs for the CALL curriculum, along with several other commercial programs to supplement individual units. Appleworks is utilized as the word processing program.

Many of the Project details were worked out at regular coordinated sessions during the 1988-1989 academic year by the Project ESL Author Staff. Details included the general format to be used for each of the units, reviewing sample lessons, previewing authoring programs, and supplying input on lesson design and implementation. Throughout the development process, the primary focus and objective of lesson design was to make CALL integration facile and accessible for all students and faculty.

At regularly scheduled workshops, the Project Staff became skilled at entering and editing lessons for each level, a time-consuming process due to the presence of authoring bugs in several of the programs. The tedium was kept at a minimum, however, largely because of the developing interest and enthusiasm exhibited by the staff for the Project.

With the selected mini-authoring programs, thematically-based CALL activities were created consistent with the IIE’s communicative approach to second language teaching and learning. Sources for the material were either originally written or adapted from other written works or film. In looking at the existing IIE syllabi, the kinds of computer lessons—such as mini-authored cloze, sequencing and text reconstruction exercises—which could best enhance daily classroom activities had to be identified. In addition to covering the grammar of each level syllabus, traditional and non-traditional themes which would best exploit the various cultural perspectives of the program were chosen. To this end, the thematic CALL lessons were created to focus on tasks which require use of the language for communication.

Typically, a unit contains both CALL and non-CALL activities, all of which are thematically organized. The unit is usually introduced in class by a reading, picture, audio or video tape incorporating the vocabulary, phrases and structure necessary to use a CALL lesson. A class discussion and writing activity may follow. Accordingly, the CALL units do not begin and end with the computer, but rather serve as the central focus of a unit’s integrated thematic activities. All computer and noncomputer activities, including the preparation
and follow-up classroom lessons, have been incorporated into one unified package for any level instructor to implement immediately. And since all the mink-authored CALL lessons have been contextualized, the computer can be integrated into classroom time in a way that nonauthored, commercially available CALL programs often cannot. A total of eight units (2-4 CALL lessons per unit) have been designed for each of the six levels at the IIE.

Training the 45 members ESL faculty (18 F/T and 27 P/T) to integrate CALL into their classroom activity was accomplished through workshops, in-class training and individual tutoring. In-service workshops were given to all interested IIE faculty throughout the academic year. Hands-on workshops consisted of introducing the faculty to the use and implementation of the mini-authored lessons. Informal computer orientation workshops were held to introduce the less experienced faculty to the basic use of the computer, word processing, and the CALL curriculum. Today, the ESL CALL Specialists, Dorothy Burak, Shanta David, Andre DeSandies, John DiFlore, Barbara Foley, Lynn Meng, Elizabeth Neblett, and Howard Pomann, continuously meet with their level faculty in and out of class to provide individual tutoring in the CALL component. Hence, training of incoming faculty and implementing the CALL curriculum is an ongoing endeavor.

Since the integration of Project ESL Author, the use of the computer, once confined solely to structure and word processing, has been expanded and vitalized. CALL activities have become far more varied, allowing the faculty to broaden their teaching and classroom/lesson planning techniques. Overall faculty response to the CALL curriculum has been extremely favorable. Because of the design, approach, and the ease with which CALL can be integrated into classroom activity, faculty have become more comfortable in its application.

Likewise, student response has been equally positive. Class attendance on computer days is outstanding, with a high demand by students for more time and more CALL lessons. Particularly for students without prior experience of computers, there is a tremendous feeling of pride and accomplishment as they learn to use the various computer programs--a meaningful achievement in its own right.

Today, the IIE has a flexible networked system with a separate CALL lab and open language lab allowing the entire IIE student population at the Elizabeth Campus (more than 700 total) to use CALL on a weekly basis. Approximately 80 percent of the classes are incorporating a segment of the curriculum. A computer equipped classroom and portable classroom computers are also used with classes using small group activities. Two large-screen overhead projectors are available to introduce students to the various CALL and writing process lessons in a whole class setting, especially in large classes of 25 students or more. Thus, with this uniquely designed curriculum and laboratory
setup, students are better able to reinforce their language and cognitive skills as well as enhance their knowledge of computer concepts and operations on a regular basis.

With this established program, Union County College's Institute for Intensive English now serves as a model for other ESL programs in New Jersey. Project ESL Author lesson plan units are available to ESL program at large. For further information contact:

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REFERENCES

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