A. M. M. Navaz[1] and M. A. M. Sameem[1]

Computer Assisted Language Learning: Perception and Practice of Undergraduate Students of South Eastern University of Sri Lanka

(1) ELT Unit, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Oluvil, Sri Lanka.

Abstract: Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), a concept yet to be familiarized in Sri Lanka, has been introduced at the Self Access Centre of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka by the English Language Teaching Unit. At the beginning a few standalone CDs were used and later this was shifted to commercially available online learning resources. Nevertheless, due to various reasons, the benefits of CALL have been a question. This paper analyses the perception and practice of students with regard to the use of CALL at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka.

Introduction

Even though CALL is a new term for Sri Lankan ESL sector, the technology has been used for over three decades in Western contexts (Bax, 2003). The basic principle of CALL is to use computers for language learning purposes. Nevertheless, in Sri Lanka, this field has not been established yet, despite its prominent benefits for language learning. CALL materials are produced in greater quantities but their suitability has always been a question (Levy, 1997), more than the accessibility issues.

CALL programmes include software of both specific and generic, web based learning materials and computer mediated communication programmes (e.g. online chat). Warschauer (1996) identified three phases of CALL. They are (i) Behaviouristic CALL (computer is used as a tutor); (ii) Communicative CALL (same as the behaviouristic but students are given more choice with regard to the learning materials and (iii) Integrative CALL (learning of different skills are integrated. The behaviouristic CALL is later known as Structural CALL (Bax, 2003).

This paper investigates students' perceptions and problems with regard to the use of CALL for language learning purposes. For this study over 200 internal students of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka were selected and interviewed as described below.

Methodology

This research adopts the epistemological position associated with the mix method (qualitative and quantitative methods) approach. The researchers hold Atkinson's (1995:20) view that it is not wrong in principle to draw on different strategies methods and perspective while recognizing the concerns about crossing or integrating epistemologies. In order to make this research reliable and valid the researchers have applied mix method (Questionnaires, informal interviews). A well structure questionnaire has been administrated among 212 undergraduates from all three faculties (FAC, FMC, FIA) at South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. A brief semi structured interview guide was also prepared to conduct informal interviews / discussions among 30 undergraduates from all three faculties. All the collected data from the questionnaire were processed using SPSS. The data collected from the discussions were also tabulated and triangulated.

On the other hand, there are some limitations of the adopted methodology. Through self-completion questionnaire it may not be possible to look into the research topic thoroughly, since most of the

respondent gave only brief answers to the qualitative questions in the questionnaires. This shortcoming however was compensated through the informal discussions with the students.

Findings and Discussions

Students' preference for CALL

More than 80% of the respondents stated that they prefer learning through CALL technology. Two-thirds of the students claimed that they use mobile for learning English. However, their frequency of use was different from everyday to once a month, while the majority use several times a week.

Similarly around 200 of the respondents said that they use internet for learning English and their pattern of usage was also similar to the use of mobile phones. Interestingly nearly half of the students use the internet facilities at home, whereas only one-fourth of them use the university facilities.

Students' ability to handle CALL

Nearly 90% of the respondents stated that they did not have any difficulties in using CALL technology and asserted that they have sufficient knowledge for such usage. On the other hand, they prefer to use CDs over online materials.

The reasons for their preference to use CDs were also found. The important reason as stated by many of them was that materials in the CDs can be used again and again. The availability of network and connectivity issues do not affect them. Students also feel that CDs are cheaper.

Using university CALL facilities

80% of the respondents claimed that they have used the CALL facilities available at the ELT Unit of the university. Of those users more than half of them declared that the CALL materials are very useful for them, while the rest maintained that it is useful. Of the three popular materials used by the ELTU, namely DynEd, Trek and English Town, the majority favoured the TreK programme, which involves teaching basic grammar lessons as individual units.

The reason for their preference was that this material is suitable for beginner level students and they can undertake repeated learning.

Every CALL software has its own advantages as well as disadvantages. The opinion of the students obtained revealed different preference patterns towards CALL software. Even though students whose language proficiency is lower prefer TreK, others felt that it was not useful for them. On the other hand, these lower language proficiency students consider other CALL materials such as DynEd and English Town difficult for them.

Moreover, the findings indicate that though students have a preference to use this technology for learning several other factors hamper their likeliness. These factors include the suitability of packages, quality of the free materials available and the suitability of commercially available materials. In addition, the technical aspects also affect students' use of these materials such as lower connectivity, network errors, power failure, etc.

Even though respondents claim that they could develop their language proficiency using CALL materials, which gives them autonomy to learn the language at their own pace, Bin (2004) points out that this particular advantage of self autonomy has not been established yet.

As Kim (2009) claims digital technology has become an integral part of the educational profession in the 21st century. Hence, different multimedia applications can make a great impact on foreign language learning and therefore the CALL should be developed further to be an integral part of a learning system. In addition, CALL training should focus on pedagogical issues more than the technical information, viz. how to surf the web (Johnson, 1999). A further study is needed at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka to investigate how the use of CALL develops students' language proficiency.

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