

The Next Generation of CALL

It was a typical international conference. Hosted in the beautiful city of Granada, participants came from across Europe, the U.S., Asia, and Australia to enjoy both conference and city. The majority were non-native English speakers, and yet the language of the conference was English. All the non-native participants spoke excellent English. But most of the Anglophones, despite their best intentions, managed only broken phrases of half-remembered Spanish as we struggled to make our way around outside the conference. It is still so hard for native English speakers, even professionals with an interest in language learning, to learn other languages. We must be deeply grateful that international conferences so regularly define English as the language of discourse.

How much longer can we go on like this, and get away with it?

We live in a world that is communicating globally. It will continue to increase the complexity of its networks across language boundaries as communications technologies become ubiquitous. The demand for language learning will surely continue to be a growth area, as we all, even native English speakers, recognize the need to learn other languages. And national education policies are adding to the demand.

There are ambitious targets being created for education now. Within the U.K., the Department for Education and Skills published a strategy for education in 2005 that set its sights on an education system fit for the 21st century — focused on personalized learning, a more flexible and independent system, opening up services to a wider range of providers, staff development, and collaborative partnerships (DfES, 2005a). Around the same time, modern languages were taken out of the compulsory core at secondary level, and introduced for the first time into the primary curriculum. Later in 2005, the Department also published its e-learning strategy. This was premised on the fact that an education system fit for the 21st century was not conceivable without the integration of new technology throughout all phases of education. It argued that the special contribution of new technology was to offer “personalization of learning,” “flexibility of provision,” “inclusion of hard to reach groups,” and “productivity of the time of both teachers and learners” (DfES, 2005b). The same promise can be made to language learning.

This is fortunate, because there are high ambitions for education beyond the U.K. as well. The demand for higher education worldwide is predicted to be 125m by 2020; the demand for international education, crossing national boundaries, is estimated at 5.8m worldwide by 2020 (Larssen, Monii, Vincent-Lancrin, 2004). This increase in itself

presupposes a massive increase in the demand for languages. And globally, the millennium goals for education include the ambition to achieve primary education for all by 2015. Six years into the millennium this seems nothing more than a blithe aspiration for all the progress we have made towards it. To be achievable, it requires a massive teacher training effort, which must surely itself work across language boundaries, adding to the demand for language learning support.

And of all areas of the curriculum, language learning is probably the one where adults make most efforts to achieve through informal learning what we failed to achieve in formal institutions.

The pressure on demand for language learning is therefore increasing on an unprecedented scale. It cannot be met through the efforts of the language teaching community using traditional methods. It can only be met through the use of new technology. That is the claim here: in the 21st century, we have an unprecedented demand for language learning, but we also have the technology to meet it. The question is, do we have the imagination to use it?

Technology is what you make it. There is no magic solution to educational problems to be found in the mere provision of technology. To use it well, in service of learners of any kind, we first have to know what we want from it. What do language learners need? We have to draw on our best understanding, from research on language learning, second language learning, and computer assisted language learning to answer this. We have to build on our best analysis of practitioner knowledge, drawn from the experience of language teachers at all levels. And we probably also need to learn from our own experiences as language learners — the frustrations, the hard work, the disappointments. Technology will only make its best contribution when we describe properly the problem it has to solve. The first part of this article argues that the problem is a huge one. There is no point in diminishing it. To achieve our highest ambitions for education in general, we have to figure out how to enable every learner to achieve their language learning goals.

Now we turn to consider: how could that be feasible?

There are two critical factors that make this grand ambition feasible. One is that we now have the technology. ICT is not just information technology. It is also communications technology. It offers such riches of support for human-to-human communications — synchronous and asynchronous, through sound, text, images, and video, on a range of personal devices, for pairs, groups, and incalculable multitudes. It is not universal, that is the main drawback, but it is increas-

What are we hoping for?

Diana Laurillard expands upon her opening keynote address at last month's European Association for Computer Assisted Language Learning (EuroCALL) Conference at the University of Granada, Spain