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ICT and Modern Foreign Languages: Learning Opportunities and Training Needs

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ABSTRACT

This article is divided into two main sections. The first section considers why technology has not lived up to its expectations in bringing about improvements in language learning. Many learning opportunities are offered by new technologies but they are not fully exploited, mainly owing to the lack of relevant training offered to teachers. In addition, with the advent of the Web, there is a disturbing trend towards removing the teacher from the learning process — which is simply not acceptable.

The second section of the article looks at a website that offers a considerable volume of ICT training materials for language teachers, namely the ICT4LT website: http://www.ict4lt.org. The author examines the aims behind the site as a whole and the pattern of site visits, discussing the key issues and drawing conclusions based on an analysis of the pattern of visits to different modules of the site. Some important lessons have been learned regarding the type of training that teachers appear to need, for example: the continued interest in multimedia and the high demand for introductory courses. It is also evident that Web traffic is predominantly one-way and confined to certain sectors of the world, indicating that much more has to be done in order to stimulate discussion and to make the Web accessible to underserved regions of the world.

KEYWORDS: Technology, language learning, CALL, teacher training, ICT4LT, online education

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I. THE COMPUTER: PANACEA OR DELUSION?

Language teachers have been using Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the modern languages classroom for over 20 years. The boom period began in the early1980s with the advent of the microcomputer, which opened up an exciting new range of learning opportunities for students of languages. The computer was hailed by enthusiasts as the panacea, but after the initial period of euphoria many teachers became disappointed with what the computer appeared to offer. This is a fairly typical sequence of events whenever a new technology becomes available to teachers. Oppenheimer (1997) writes:

> In 1922 Tliomas Edison predicted that 'the motion picture is destined to revolutionize our educational systein and [...] in a few years it will supplant largely, if not entirely, the use oftextbooks.' Twenty-three years later, in 1945, William Levenson, tlie director ofthe Cleveland public schools' radio station, claimed that 'tlie time inay coiiie wlien a portable radio receiver will be as common in the classroom as is the blackboard.' Forty years after that tlie noted psycliologist B.F. Skinner, referring to the first days of his 'teaching iiiachines,' in the late 1950s and early 1960s, wrote. 'I was soon saying that, with the help of teaching machines and programined instruction, students could learn twice as much in the same time and witli the saine effort as in a standard classroom.' (Oppenheimer 1997:45)

But the situation at the clialkface is another matter:

> The cycle began witli big proiiiises backed by the teclinology developers' research. In the classroom, howevcr. teachers never reallyeinbraced the new tools, and no significant academic improveitient occurred. (Oppcnheimer 1997:45)

The reniainder of Oppenheimer's article, which is significantly entitled "The Computer Delusion", points out that few lessons have been learned from past mistakes — a view that I have expressed myself in an article entitled "Lessons from the past, lessons for the future" (Davies 1997). The key question thatneeds to be asked is: Why do new technologies fail to live up to their expectations? There are a number of factors that Oppenheimer mentions in his article, but one of the main reasons is the failure to allocate a substantial budget for teacher training after the initial purchases of computer hardware and software have been niade. This is rather like buying a car without setting aside a budget for driving lessons. It is not the hardware that is at fault, nor the software that runs on it; it is the failure to train teachers to make the best use of the hardware and software.

Training, unfortunately, is one of the budget areas that administrators perceive as non-essential, and it is therefore often the subject of financia1 cuts in times of economic restraint. Continuing the analogy of the driving test, sonie administrators perceive ICT training as a one-off event: once you have learned to "drive" a computer you don't need any further training. But computer teclinology changes so rapidly that constant and regular training is essential — and this is a major cost implication that is all too frequently overlooked. As for the budget, the crucial question is not tlie size of the budget but how it is divided up. My personal recommendation —

and one that I used to follow as a language centre director is:

- 30% hardware
- 30% software
- 30% staff training and materials development
- 10% contingcncy (unforeseeable costs)

Training may take a variety of different forms, e.g. staff may take time off to follow an intensive course, or they may be funded to attend a conference in order to update their knowledge. Above all, training for language teachers has to address their specific needs. A little and often is recommended.

II. THE DREAM — OR NIGHTMARE?

lCT offers a wealth of learning opportunities for students of languages, and the discrete use of coniputers in the classroom can undoubtedly enhance a language teacher's performance, but cducational adniinistrators and business training nianagers often have a blinkered view of computer teclinology. perceiving it as a way of automating the learning process and saving money on staffing. I wrote the following description of an imaginary scenario as an illustration of how business training managers pereeivcd computer assisted language learning (CALL) in the early 1990s. To some people this is a dream; to others it is a nightmare:

> A business traincc is sitting at a coinputer following a language course. Step-by-step, the computer presents tlie essential vocabulary and structures. These are accoinpanied, where appropriate, by still and animated grapliic images, photographs and video recordings. As new words and plirases are introduced, authentic male and fciiiale voices proiiouiicc them and tlie learner repeats them. Tlie learner's voice is recorded by tlic coiiiputer aiid played back. Any errors in proiiunciation are indicated graphically on screen. Offending syllablcs are highlighted and additional practice is offered on sounds which the learner tinds difficult. At tlie eiid of cacli presentation sequcnce, the coinputer tests tlie learner's grasp of the new vocabulary and structurcs. inarking and recording those words and plirases wliich have been imperfectly recalled and offering feedback oii points of grammar tliat tlie learner appears to have inisunderstood. The learner has access at all times to aii online dictionary. a reference graininar and verb conjugation tables. At the end of tlie woi-k session tlie learner's progress is recorded by tlie coinputer, which enables the thread to be picked up at tlie iicxt scssion. In addition, the learner's progress records — along with those of all the other trainees following tlic saine course — can be accessed at any time by the training manager. (Davies 1992: 113)

This fully-automatcd, programmed-learning approach was in vogue for a number of years. It derivcd to a large estent from tlic dreaded three-phase language lab drills:

1. Stimulus
2. Response
3. Feedback

The main difference between early computer programs and language lab drills was that *response analysis* and *branching* were introduced into the above sequence, thus making it possible for *interaction* to take place between the learner and machine without the intervention of the teacher. The novelty value of the interaction soon wore off, however, and software designers began to look around for more interesting ways of using the computer. The considerable learning opportunities that computers offer were not fully exploited in the early days. It was therefore easy to dismiss computers as "drill-and-kill" machines.

But new ideas were forthcoming. Seminal works by Davies & Higgins (1982, 1985), Higgins & Johns (1986), Jones & Fortescue (1987), Hardisty & Windeatt (1989) listed a growing variety of CALL programs. Computers could do more than offer automated gap-filling and multiple-choices exercises. The following list is by no means exhaustive:

1. Reordering exercises — e.g. line and paragraph reordering
2. Text manipulation — including the innovative *total deletion* exercise
3. Word games
4. Action mazes
5. Simulations
6. Adventures
7. Discovery and exploratory programs
8. Guided writing programs
9. Reading comprehension exercises — including timed reading
10. Listening exercises
11. Building a personal database, e.g. vocabulary, grammar
12. Email activities

In addition, there was a move away from the behaviouristic, teacher-independent learning scenario that I describe above. As long ago as 1986, Chris Jones wrote an article with a title that says it all: "It's not so much the program: more what you do with it: the importance of niethodology in CALL" (Jones 1986). Computer programs, he pointed out, have to be integrated into the classroom in just the same way as other materials. His message is clear: Don't try to remove the teacher from the language learning process. Jones's advice is just as valid today as it was in the mid-1980s:

1. Try it and see what happens. Don't pre-judge.
2. Don't expect the program to do all the work.
3. If things don't work out, don't automatically blame the program. The problem may lie elsewhere.
4. Above all, use your imagination. (Jones 1986:178)

III. THE DKEAM KEVISITED

Warschauer (1996) distinguishes three main phases of CALL:

- Behaviouristic
- Communicative
- Integrative:
  - Multiniedia
  - Internet

At the time of writing this article, we are well into phase three. We have progressed beyond tlie bchaviouristic phase, wliich began with the first CALL programs in the 1960s and extended into the early 1980s. Since the late 1970s we have dabbled in various ways with the communicativc approach — and will probably continue to do so for some tinie.

III.1. Multiniedia

Multiniedia CALL, which became widely available towards the end of the 1980s, was a breakthrough insofar as it offered high-quality sound and video that could be integrated with the well-established conibinations of text and graphics. Initially, multimedia was only made possible via intcractive videodiscs, whicli required expensive and cumbersome equipment. Some interesting interactive videodisc products emerged: *Montevidisco* (Schneider & Bennion 1984), *Expodisc* (Davies 1991). *A la rencontre de Philippe* (Fuerstenberg 1993). All of these fall into the category of *simulations*.

Interactive videodiscs wcre supplanted by CD-ROMs, which ran on much less expensive and morc compact equipment, but the video quality they offered was pitiful compared to that offercd by thc carlicr 12-inch vidcodiscs. This forced CALL software developers to take a major leap backwards. Pcdagogy was sacriticed at the expense of technology, and few imaginative, language-oriented simulations were produced for many years — LPI's *Oscar Lake* series being a notable exception: littp://www.languagepub.com. It is only recently, with the advent of DVDs, that video quality has caught up with that offered by older technology.

Morc recently, we have secn progranis incorporating speech technology — formerly the prcservc of institutions with huge R&D budgets — and it is now possible to interact with a computer using one's voice as wcll as the keyboard and mouse. Popular progranis such as Syracuse's *TriplePlay Plus* (now known as *Smart Start*) and Auralog's *Tell Me More Pro* have brought speech technology to the masses. My latest mobile phone incorporates speech technology, so that now when I am away froni home I don't have to dial tlie number but siniply press a button and say "phone home" clearly — and it works!

111.2. The Internet

There is no doubt that tlie Internet — especially the World Wide Web, which is a subset of the Internet — has made an enormous impact on niany pcoplc's lives. The Web dates back to 1989, when Tim Bcrncrs-Lec's brilliant flash of insight spawned HTML (Berners-Lee 1998). Berners-Lee canie up with tlic idea of tlie Web as a solution to the problem of inforniation continually getting lost while he was working at CERN, thc European Particle Physics Laboratory in Geneva. As a newconier to CERN. he found it difficult to find out what was going on, and the Web — initially continccl to CERN — was born. When thc first Web browser was released in 1993 it becanic possiblc for tlie layperson to access information that previously only computer scientists liad been able to rctrieve using more complex tools.

It did not take long for teachers to realise what a valuable source of information they now had at their fingertips — information that they could download and exploit in the classroom. Later on. tlic Web bcgan was uscd to store and present interactive exercises. But then pedagogy took another lcap backwards. as niost of the earlicr Web-based exercises were just scts of multiple-choice or gap-filling drills of the "point-and-click-let's-niove-on-quick" variety. Web-based interactive materials have undoubtedly improved but they have a long way to go before they catch up with tlic pcdagogy and functionality offered by CALL programs delivered on CD-ROM or DVD. Only tlic dclivcry nicdiuni has improved, as Web-based activitics can be accessed anytime and anywhere — at least in theory.

Thc Wcb has initiated a veritable revolution in education, especially in the areas in distancc lcarning and *New Learning Environments (NLE)*. NLE has beconie closely associated with tlic Web. I say "associated with" because NLE is a difficult term to define precisely. Originally, NLE was associatcd with a wide range of technologies and their applications to lcarning. It cmbraces a vision of lcarning that encourages learner independence (learner autononiy). and offers opportunities for distance learning and life-long learning. with the teacher becoming morc of a facilitator tlian instructor. In recent years, however. the focus in NLE appears to be on tlie Wcb as tlic iiiain delivery medium. My personal view is that this focus is far too narrow. as it ovcrlooks the bcnefits of other tricd and testcd technologics. But educational insiiiutions arc rushing hcadlong into putting all their learning materials on the Web, in spite of the fact tliat there are niany aspects of CALL that cannot (yet) be executed properly on the Web. CD-ROMs and DVDs — and cven the interactive videodiscs of the 1980s — are far superior at handling sound and video, for exaniple, which is why a hybrid approach is necessary. Furthermore, tlic rolc of the teacher in the language learning process is crucial to success.

The Wcb is undoubtedly a remarkable invention. My home telephone bill bears testimony to the many hours that I spend "surfing the Web" and managing thrcc different websites. Thanks to thc Web I am now able to carry out researcli that would not have been possible in pre-Web timcs. But there is. as Clairc Bradin puts it, a "Dark Side of the Web" (Bradin 1997). In spite of

tliis ncgativc sounding titlc, Bradin prcscnts a realistic and balanced view of the pros and cons of thc Web in languagc lcarning and teaching. Felix (2001) presents a comprehensive survey: a wcaltli oí'inforniation on websitcs that learncrs and tcachers of languages may find useful, as well as a number of detailcd case studies and rcports on research into students' and teachers' attitudes to Icarning languagcs via thc Web. At thc beginning of her work Felix makes the following stateiiicnt — which should be heedcd by all Web enthusiasts: "... it takes a very special person to lcarn and, cspecially, spcak a languagc without face-to-face coinmunication" (Felix 2001:8).

In her survcy of available Wcb materials, it becomes clear (thankfully) that relatively few websitcs attcmpt to takc tlic tcacher out of the language learning process:

> ...what is frccly acccssible on tlie Web is often only part o f a larger package that also invariably includes facc-to-facc tcaching. It is likely tliat tlie most cxciting lcarning takes place off-line in the creative processes iiegotiatcd between teacliers and lcarners. soinctiines across continents. in which the Web features as a tool ratlicr than instructor. (Felix 2001: 190-191)

The book concludes on a notc which is both positive and realistic:

> Finally, liowcvcr highly one ratcs tlic potcntial oftlic Web, it is difficult to imagine tliat any of this will ever rcplace bcst practicc face-to-facc teaching. What is becoining more and more obvious with emerging rcscarcli. is tliat tlic iicw technologies offer excellent potential for adding value to classroom teaching in a large varicty o f ways. (Fclix 2001:358).

The potcntial is there, thc lcarning opportunities arc there, but are the "customers" there? It was intcresting to read the report in *The Times* (29 November 2000, p. 9) headed "King leaves Internet rcaders in suspcnsc". Steplicn King has decided not to complete his Web novel *The Plant* because -– according to King — "it failcd to grab the attention of readers on the Web". King found that a surprisingly high proportion of the readers accessing his site (75%-80%) made the "honesty paymcnt" for bcing allowed to download chapters. "But", he said. "there are a lot fewer of them coming. Onlinc peoplc have the attention span of a grasshopper."

Critics of thc Wcb lament tlie disappearance of traditional educational environments, citing tlic dubious ethics oí'tliose who wish to turn our univcrsities into "Digital Diploma Mills" —the titlc of a five-part series of articles by David Noble (Noble 1997-2001):

> In his classic 1959 study o f diploina mills for tlie Ainerican Council on Education, Robert Reid described tlic typical diploma mill as having tlie following cliaracteristics: "no classrooms," "faculties are often untrained or nonexistent," and "the officers are unethical self-seekers whosequalificationsare no betterthan their offcriiigs." It is an apt dcscription o f tlie digital diploina mills now in tlie making. Quality higher education will not disappcar entirely, but it will soon becorne the exclusive preserve ofthe privileged, available only to children o f tlic rich and tlic powcrful. For tlic rest o f us a dismal new era o f higher cdiicatioii has dawncd. In ten ycars. wc will look upon the wircd remains o f our once great deniocratic higher cducation system and wondcr liow we lct it happen. That is, unless we decide now not to let it linppcii. (Noble: op. cit. Part I)

Other critics includc Press & Washburn. The prcanible to their article entitled "Digital Diplomas" says it all:

> Weleoiiie to tlie brave new world ofhigher edueation, where professors are "eontent experts," classes are "courseware." and students are custoiiiers. But just wliat is a dot-com degree worth?" (Press & Washburn 2001)

Harsh words, but tlie above authors make some very iniportant points that should not be overlooked in these times of technohype. The Web certainly has its "Dark Side", and evidence is already emerging from North Anierica that online learning may go the same way as some of the early Web businesses that have crashed so spectacularly. Evidence coniing out of North America suggests that e-learning courses do not recruit well:

> In 1997. facing a projeeted 50 percent increase in tlie state's student population over the next deeade, Utah governor Mike Leavitt announecd the formation o f Western Governors University, a cyber-college backed by goveriiors froiii 19 states tliat now offers online courses from 40 schools. "We are turning around the old iiotion tliat to be edueated oiie liad to go soinewliere," Leavitt declared in a speech before tlie U.S. Senate's Coiiiiiieree. Scieiice, aiid Traiisportation Coininittee. "We are going to bring the knowledge and information to tlie learner," providing students witli a high-quality education "while holding costs in check." By January 2000. Western Goveriiors University liad enrolled a iiiere 200 degree-seeking studeiits. (Press & Wasliburn 2001)

There is no question that the Web is impressive as a collection of reference materials and as a delivery niedium. lt's a huge library that is accessible from your home, and it contains an increasing wealth of resources for language teachers. But do wc really want to deliver *whole courses* via thc Web? Do we really want to deprive young people of the valuable experience of leaving hoinc. studying and socialising with their peers, joining societies, going to clubs and partics, travelling, and falling in love? Do we really want to breed a generation of screen-gazing zonibics? 1 fear that as e-lcarning expands wc are losing sight of the essential difference between *education*, thc growth of tlie self for onc's own lifelong purposes, and *training*, the shaping of an individual for others' sliort-tcrm purposcs. E-learning is more suited to training rather than cducation. And who is going to employ someone who has obtained an c-languages degree? Most employers cxpect a languages graduate to have liad many hours of face-to-face contact with native speakers and, prcfcrably, to have spent a substantial period of residence abroad. Assessment is another issuc: 1 would expect a languages graduate to have passed written and oral exaniinations tliat had taken place in a properly controlled environment.

Lcarning languages via tlie Web is a controversia1 matter, but there is no question that the Web does offer considerablc opportunities for the delivery of training materials. In the following sections I focus on the ICT4LT website as an example of a collection of ICT training materials for language teachers. I examine the aims behind the site as a whole and the pattern of visits to the sitc. discussing the key issues and drawing conclusions based on an analysis of tlie pattern of visits.

IV. ICT4LT

IV.1. Background

The ICT4LT website is tlie outcome of a projeet funded under the Socrates Programme of the European Commission and is located at http://www.ict4lt.org. It is the result of over two years' inteiisive work by an international teain of experts during the period September 1998 to December 2000. The website offers15 training modules in ICT for language teachers at three different levels in English, Italian, Swedish and Finnish, and it is continually updated.

The original aim of the ICT4LT project was to design a syllabus and to deliver a Web-based training coursc in ICT for teachers of modern foreign languages (MFL), but as the project progressed it becanie obvious tliat turning the niaterials into a full-blown course and getting the coursc accreditcd was much more difficult than anticipated. There were enormous administrative hurdlcs to ovcrconie. and it was quickly realised tliat a considerable amount of online tutoring would bc ncccssary — and costly. So at present the ICT4LT materials are mainly used as an onlinc reference library. ICT4LT does. Iiowever, forni the basis of ICT awareness and training courses dclivcred in tlie traditional way in niany educational institutions, and also in connection with regular in-service training courses for teachers. The ICT4LT niaterials consist of 15 modules at three different levels:

- Basic Level
  Module 1.1: Introduction to new technologies
  Module 1.2: Introduction to coniputer hardware and software
  Module 1.3: Using tcxt tools in thc MFL classroom
  Modulc 1.4: Introduction to CALL
  Module 1.5: Introduction to the Internet
- Intermediate Lcvel
  Modulc 2.1: CALI. nicthodology: integrating CALL into study progranis
  Modulc 2.2: Introduction to niultiniedia CALL
  Module 2.3: Exploiting WWW resourccs on-line and off-line
  Module 3.4: Using concordance progranis in thc MFL classroom
  Modulc 2.5: Introduction lo CALL authoring programs
- Advanced Lcvel
  Modulc 3.1: Managing a multimedia language centre
  Module 3.2: CALL software dcsign and iniplementation
  Module 3.3: Creating a WWW site
  Modulc 3.4: Corpus linguistics
  Modulc 3.5: Human Language Tcchnologies

IV.2. ICT4LT: Analysis

IV.2.I Is the Wrb really interactive?

A key question that has arisen as a result of piloting ICT4LT is: To what extent do people pcrccivc the Web as an interactive learning environnient? The evidence froni the ICT4LT statistics is revcaling. The ICT4LT website receivcd around 40 000 "hits" in thc three-month pcriod Scptcmbcr to Noveniber 2001. This is an impressive indication that the site is regarded as a valuable bank of materials. In tlie same threc months, feedback from visitors to the ICT4LT discussion list was *zero*. No one, apart from niyself and one other member of the ICT4LT management teain. contributed a single email to the discussion list, and I received no more than six personal emails from visitors to the site, all of which *requested* rather than *offered* inforiiiation. This is in spitc of the fact that the ICT4LT sitc contains numerous discussion topics to which site visitors arc invited to *contribute*. This trend appears to be typical of the Web as a whole, i.e.:

- Web people are habitual "lurkers".
- Web traffic is predoniinantly one-way, i.e. from the Web to the user.

Some iiicaiis must therefore be Sound to stiniulate feedback and debate among Web users. It is likely that this will rcquirc more intensivc online tutoring.

IV.2.2. Where do visitors to ICT4LT come froni?

A high proportion of visitors arc based in cducational institutions. Exact figures are difficult to come by, as often tlie visiíor only leaves a numerical trace. The geographical pattern of visits to the ICT4LT sitc as a wliole in the six-nionth period June-Novcniber 2001 is, however, revealing:

- Ncarly 82% of ICT4LT sitc visits originated in Western Europe. This was to bc expected, as tlie sitc is thc outconic of a project initiatcd in the European Union.
- Visits Sroni tlic three geographical areas of (i) North America, (ii) Central/Eastern Europe and (iii) "wired-up" Asia (Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand) were in roughly equal numbers, witli around 4% each of the total.
- The next two main areas rcpreseníed were (a) Australia/New Zealand and (b) Central/South America, with around 2.5% each. Significantly, Brazil led the field in Central/South America, with around 40% of thc total nuniber of visits from that area.
- A iiicrc 1% of thc total number of visits to thc ICT4LT site originated in *the rest of the world* — which includes Africa, China. tlie Indian Subcontinent and the Middle East. 98% of the

visitors froni Africa came from the Republic of South Africa and Namibia (a total of 119), while only 13 canie froni other African countries. Only 27 visits originated in the whole of tlic Indian Subcontinent, and only 4 in tlie most populous country in the world, namely China.

These figures come as no surprise. They reflect what is already known about the Web in general:

- The Wcb is *not* World Widc.
- Acccss to tlic Wcb is rcstrictcd to thc richer, liberal countries of the world, i.c. (i) those that can afford connectivity, and (ii) those tliat allow peoplc free access to information.

Wc have a long way to go beforc tlie dreani of access to information anytime and anywhere on tlie Wcb is realised.

IV.2.3. So What Do ICT4LT Visitors Want?

Basically, they want inforniation. An overwhelming number of visitors enter the ICT4LT site via thc *Index* page and tlic language-specific *Homepage*. They start with an ovcrview of what the site is all about. Thcy then progress to the *Contents* page, which contains a list of the 15 ICT4LT niodulcs. At this point tlic paitcrn of visits bcconies interesting. The inforniation that follows refers only to tlic English languagc section of tlie site.

The *Glossary of Terminology* and the *Resource Centre* are visited more than any of the ICT4LT modules, cxccpt Module 2.2 (*Introduction /o multimedia CALL),* which is marginally ahead of the *Glossary* in terms of numbers of visits. This seems to indicate that a high proportion of visitors are just looking up information. In addition, peoplc regularly navigatc from links in tlic main niodulcs to tlic *Glossary* and tlic *Resource Centre*.

At tlic time of writing (Decembcr 2001), tlie order of popularity of tlie 15 modules is as follows. In tlic sections tliat follow I shall highlight tlie changes that have taken place in recent months and attempt to explain the pattern of visits.

1. Module 2.2: lntroduction to niultiniedia CALL
2. Modulc 1.4: Introduction to CALL
3. Modulc 3.1: Managing a niultimcdia language centre
4. Modulc 1.1: lntroduction to new technologies
5. Modulc 2.4: Using concordancc programs in the MFL classroom
6. Modiilc 1.5: Introduction to tlic lntcrnet
7. Modulc 1.3: Using text tools in the MFL classroom
8. Module 3.3: Crcating a WWW sitc
9. Module 3.2: CALL soltware dcsign and implementation

10. Module 1.2: Introduction to computer hardware and software
11. Module 3.5: Human Language Technologies
12. Module 2.3: Exploiting WWW resources on-line and off-line
13. Module 2.5: Introduction to CALL authoring programs
14. Module 2.1: CALL methodology: integrating CALL into study programs
15. Module 3.4: Corpus linguistics

IV.2.3.a. Basic Level Modules

A high proportion of visitors to the ICT4LT site appear to be novices. The two modules that offer a general introduction to new technologies and language learning and teaching have remained for a long time near the top of the list of the most visited modules, and they are also the most popular Basic Level modules: namely Module 1.1 and Module 1.4. Does this indicate that there are still a lot of newcomers to CALL out there? The answer is probably "Yes, there will always be beginners". Evidence suggests that these two modules are used by a number of universities and teacher training colleges as the basis of introductory courses in ICT and language learning and teaching.

Module 1.5, *Introduction to the Internet*, maintains a high position, but it has fallen from a higher slot. Does this indicate that teachers are becoming more knowledgeable about the Internet, or is there now a more realistic appreciation of what the Internet can offer in comparison, for example, with multimedia, which is dealt with in Module 2.2 (*Introduction to multimedia CALL*) and has shot to the top of the list of all 15 modules?

Module 1.3, which focuses on the use of generic text tools in the languages classroom, declined sharply in popularity a few months ago, but it is now creeping up the list again, possibly as a result of the new information we have provided on *PowerPoint* and how to incorporate sound and pictures into word-processed documents and *PowerPoint* presentations. Language teachers in the UK are strongly encouraged to make use of generic software tools, including word-processors, database software, desk-top publishing packages, and even spreadsheets. This makes sense, as the tools are available in most educational institutions, so additional software purchases are not necessary. On the other hand, the preparation time that is required to make good use of such tools is often discounted. Furthermore, some educational administrators simply wish to avoid setting aside a reasonable budget for the purchase of dedicated CALL materials, so there may be an ulterior motive in encouraging the use of generic packages: i.e. save money on software and make the teachers work harder.

The introductory module on hardware and software, Module 1.2, has fallen from a higher position and now occupies the lowest slot out of all the Basic Level modules. It is the only "technical" module at the ICT4LT site — although it attempts to explain computer hardware and software in terms that the language teacher can understand. Most educational institutions have

a resident ICT specialist these days, so there is probably less of a need for the layperson to be familiar witli tlie technical aspects.

IV.2.3.b. Intermediate Level Modules

Modulc 2.2, *Introduction to multimedia CALL*, has remained consistently the most popular niodulc for many months. Tlie module begins by defining multimedia and looking back at earlier developmcnts in interactive video. Technical aspects are briefly covered, and a representative selection of CD-ROMs/DVD-ROMs is described, giving the reader an overview of the wide rangc of lcarning opportunities tlie medium offers.

The rcncwcd interest in multimedia is curious, because multimedia CALL is not a new phenomenon. having niade its first appearance in the 1980s. But as soon as educational institutions began to buy niultiniedia CD-ROMs in reasonable quantities in around 1993-94, the Web madc its public appcarance, apparently offering learning materials free of charge. This appcalcd to budget nianagcrs who were put off by the high prices of the early CD-ROMs. CD-ROM prices then began to fall rapidly froni figures such as 500 euros to more realistic figures of 60-70 euros. It was not casy to network the early CD-ROMs — and it can still be problematic — and language centre managers werc not happy witli the idea of buying lots of single-user copies and issuing them on dcniand to students. Finally, coniputer magazines started to give away CD-ROMs frec, and tlie largc coniputer stores began to offer "budget" CD-ROMs containing poor-quality matcrials. Tlie overall result was that multimedia got a bad name. It is only now that CD-ROMs are bcginning to make a conieback, and at last we have the high-quality video we require on DVD. Tliis may explain tlic high level ofinterest in Module 2.2.

In addition, ICT coordinators in educational institutions are becoming more aware of the varicty of multimedia hardware and software that language teachers need. In the past it was not at all unusual for school network managers to have a very poor appreciation of the learning opportunities offcred by multimedia to language students. I have been invited on several occasions to run workshops for language teachers on school computer networks that lacked one or all or the following: soundcards. hcadphones and microphones! The situation is changing, but perhaps not rapidly enough.

Modulc 2.4. whicli deals witli the usc of concordance programs in the languages classroom, has climbed steadily froni a vcry low position and has maintained its present position at No.5 for scveral months. Tliis scenis to indicate a shift in niethodology. Concordancers are useful in tlie following ways:

- The teacher can usc a concordancer to find examples of authentic usage to demonstrate a point of grammar, typical collocations, etc.
- The tcaclicr can gencratc exercisc based on examples drawn from a variety of corpora.

- Students can work out rules of grammar and usage for theniselves by searching for key words in context.
- Students are cncouragcd to be sceptical about explicit rules by drawing on the data provided by authentic tcxts.

Concordancers are not new. of course. The concept goes back hundreds of years, but it is only since tlie advent of the computer age that concordancer became conimonplace tools for linguistic and literary researcliers. Since the 1980s, concordancers have been available to the language teacher for classroom use — thanks to the pioneering work carried out by Tim Johns: http://web.bham.ac.uk/johnstf. Johns wrote one of the first commercially available classroom concordancers: *MicroConcord.*

Using a concordancer, teachers can quickly produce handouts and exercises based on authentic materials but, more importantly, a concordancer turns the student into a *reseurcher* who can establish rules of grammar and usage for him/herself. In other words. concordancers have a key role to play in autonomous learning — or in *Data-Driven Learning* as Johns describes it. It is in tlie EFL world tliat concordancers have made their biggest impact, but it is clear from visits to tlie lCT4LT sitc tliat MFL teachers are also beginning to see their value.

Module 2.3, *Exploiting WWW resources offline*, has fallen from a high position to No. 12 on the list. I find this difficult to explain. as it would seem logical to progress from an introduction to the Intcrnct (Module 1.5), which is still quite high in tlie list, to this module. One would thcrefore expect a higher proportion of visitors, but there is a fall-off of nearly 50%. Have tlic visitors had negative experiences with the Web and do not wish to find out more, or does the introductory module tell them all they need to know? Or, having looked at the otlier modules, do they lind other things tliat are more intercsting?

Felix (2001) is cnthusiastic about the usefulness of the Web in language learning and teaching, but she is also realistic and does not hesitate to mention its shortcomings compared to other dclivcry media, e.g. the problcnis associated with bandwidth and plug-ins, and the lack of universal standards for acccssing tlie Web. CD-ROMs are still more reliable in delivering grapliics, sound and video:

> While iiiiproveiiiciits liavc iiot beeii uiiiforiii. they liavc been achicved largcly by way o fbctter teclinologies tliat liavc lcd. among otlicr things, to bcner prcseiitatioii. This is notable in tlic case o f grapliics and sourid, cvcii if tlie Wcb still caiiiiot iiiatcli tlie reliablc quality offered by CD-ROM. [...] Teclinological advarice. liowcvcr. is riot always ari uiiiiiiixcd blessing; wliilc we are still waiting for the long promised broadband scrviccs to bccoiiic widcly availablc. sites using tlie latest devclopiiieiits in grapliics can tnke a wearying time to dowiiload over a 56K modem. Tliere are otlier problcins onlinc, too — sorne plug-ins do not work in cvcry context, aiid soiiie sites are availablc oiily to liiternct Explorer or Nctscape, while others cater for Wiiidows but not Macintosli. Tlie Wcb's ideal o f universal standards is riot always acliicved." (Felix 2001:189)

This is why the designcr of online language learning niatcrials is advised to adopt

> ... hybrid approaclics dcsigiicd to avoid potential technical probleiiis, sucli as downloading activities froin tlic Wcb oii to a self-contained Intranet, iiitegratiiig CD-ROMs and the Web, or ruiining audio conferencing or vidcocoiifcreiiciiig witli Wcb activitics." (Felix 2001:190)

Perhaps ICT4LT visitors are beginning to appreciate that one needs a variety of approaclics to CALL.

Module 2.5, which deals with authoring programs, has slipped down the list to position No. 13. This is thc lowcst position of the three modules that provide inforniation for teachers intercstcd in authoring thcir own materials. 'fhe other two modules in this category — 3.3 (*Creating a WWW site*) and 3.2 *(CALL software design and implementation*) — have dropped rcspcctivcly to positions No. 8 and No. 9.

Why has the do-it-yourselfapproach to CALL declined in popularity? Perhaps I was right when I madc tlie following statenient in an article written five years ago:

> Tlic do-it-yourself approach to CALL software creation has rarely worked. Only those with hours of dcdicatioii at their disposal liave iiiadc a succcss ot'it. Tlie past is littered witli dead authoring packages. (Davics 1997:41)

It's a question of tinic — which most language teachers do not have. Teacliers are mainly intcrcstcd in buying olf-the-shelf materials or a simple autlioring tool, e.g. Camsoft's *Fun with Texts* or Wida Soltwarc's *Storyboard*, which generate a lot of work for the student with the minimum clfort on tlic part of tlic tcaclicr. Both of these packages continue to be bestsellers. It is signilicant that Modulc 3.3, *Creating a WWW site*, occupies the highest position of the do-it-yourscll modulcs. This may bc duc to the availability of easy-to-use HTML authoring tools such as *Front Page* atid *Dreamweaver*, and exercise generators such as *Hot Potatoes*. Or perhaps it has more to do witli tlic Wcb as a convcnicnt delivery niedium — or an Intranet, which is becoming more common iti educational institutions.

Modulc 2.1 of ICT4LT is concerned with CALL methodology and ways of integrating CALL into study programmes. Bearing in mind tlic article by Jones cited earlier on in this article (Joncs 1986), onc would have cxpcctcd this module to be a popular choice. Curiously, however, it has rcniaiticd consistcntly thc sccond lcast popular module for a period of many nionths. The module challenges views cxpressed by sceptics such as Oppenheimer (1997), to whom I refer at tlic bcginning of this articlc. Thc author of Modulc 2.1 cncourages the teacher to consider how studcnts rcact to a piece of software and suggests a range classroom activities that the teacher might introduce in order to enhance the impact of ICT. Module 2.1, in other words, addresses both learner's and teacher's necds, but for some reason or othcr this docs not have much appeal. Could it bc that teachers are not intcrested in integration and that they would rather let the computer do all tlie work'?

IV.2.3.c. Advanced Level Modules

One would expect advanced level modules in any set of learning/training materials to be lower in popularity than the earlier modules. There is a natural fall-off as learners/trainees progress — which is well known to publishers of language learning materials: courses for beginners bring in the money.

It is no surprise therefore that the more academic modules, especially 3.4 (*Corpus linguistics*) and 3.5 (*Human Language Technologies*), are low down the list, respectively position No. 15 (bottom of the list) and position No. 9. Corpus linguistics is mainly of interest to university researchers, and Human Language Technologies appeal mainly to people who bridge the disciplines of human languages and computer science. Nevertheless, one cannot say that the number of visits to the pages of these two modules is insignificant. The most popular module, *Introduction to multimedia CALL*, receives three times as many visits as the least popular module, so the gap is not that wide.

As indicated above, the do-it-yourself approach to CALL, which is covered in Module 3.2, appears to be waning in popularity, apart from writing materials for the Web, which is covered in Module 3.3.

Module 3.1, *Managing a multimedia language centre*, was conceived as a module for the advanced trainee. Its popularity at position No. 3 seems to indicate that everyone wants to manage a multimedia centre rather than teach! The module contains a number of case studies, which probably accounts for its appeal, and there is a strong emphasis on management of the learning environment, especially ways of encouraging learner autonomy.

IV.3. ICT4LT: The Future

At present access to the ICT4LT website is free of charge. For the time being the site will consist of a bank of materials that can be accessed and downloaded. There will be no online tuition, but visitors may continue to address questions to the management team and to members of the discussion list.

Ways of integrating the materials into a Web-based learning environment such as *Blackboard* — with online tuition — are being considered. This is likely to be a lengthy process, however, and it is unlikely that the ICT4LT bank of materials in its present form will disappear. I shall continue to update the site on a regular basis.

One new module, *Assessment and testing*, is planned, and new case studies will be added to Module 3.1, *Managing a multimedia language centre*. Suggestions for further additions are welcomed.

V. A FINAL MESSAGE

I concludc this article with a final message to educational adniinistrators:

- Computers offer a wealth of learning opportunities to language learners.
- Computers don't work without software.
- Computers are tools for teachers — not replacenients.
- Training staff to use computers takes time and costs lot of nioney — but it's worth it in the cnd!

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