

REVIEW OF *COMPUTER-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING: CONTEXT AND CONCEPTUALIZATION*

Michael Levy

Computer-Assisted Language Learning: Context and Conceptualization

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Whether you are a language teacher new to CALL (e.g., perplexed by the growing maze of acronyms in the field), or an author of multimedia language learning software, Michael Levy's *Computer-Assisted Language Learning: Context and Conceptualization* may be for you. The book also provides theorists who might have focused on specific angles of CALL with a broader historical and conceptual picture of the field. Levy's declared aim is to contribute to the understanding of "the scope of CALL and prominent areas of focus within it; the theoretical sources and conceptual frameworks of CALL authors; [and] the possible weaknesses or gaps between theory and practice" (p. 6).

Levy begins by evaluating landmark CALL projects of the 1960s and 1990s. His systematic approach to looking at CALL historically helps to identify recurring themes and to prevent re-inventing the wheel with new approaches (Chapter 2). In an attempt to create a theoretical framework for CALL, he argues that theorists and practitioners must take an interdisciplinary approach. Levy also discusses some emerging areas for progress, for example, the need for CALL design based on theories of second language acquisition and cognitive psychology (Chapter 3).

Chapter 4 summarises the conceptualization of CALL as reflected in its literature. Levy uses the term conceptualization "as a label to signify the mental picture a CALL author or a teacher has when envisaging the use and role of the computer in CALL" (p. 8). The author illustrates these different conceptualizations with a number of authoring packages and projects created on the Internet. Similarities and differences between traditional textbooks and CALL programmes are pointed out, as well as the varying roles and functions of teachers and computers.

Levy's international CALL survey conducted in 1990 highlights some interesting findings. Most of the survey respondents viewed the computer as a tool and considered for the most part word processing to be a valid area of the CALL discussion. CALL is therefore used in this book in a very broad sense, "as the general term to cover all roles of the computer in language learning" (p. 81), including word processing, e-mail, and use of the Internet. Among the aspects cited as obstacles to successful CALL materials development were the lack of funding and recognition of academic validity, as well as the failure of software development to lead to personal promotion or to institutional prioritisation. (Seen from my personal perspective, things have not changed that much during the last seven years since the survey was completed).

Several themes arise from the CALL survey and literature review, in particular, the need to codify CALL definitions. This is essential before a CALL theory can be developed. As the author puts it, "practical knowledge gained from experience needs to be put in a form where it can be shared and communicated. Codification makes practical knowledge tangible so that it can be used and refined by practitioners and, most importantly, taught to others" (p. 221).

The conceptualization of CALL projects is justified with both top-down and bottom-up approaches, even though a bridge between both may be desirable. There is obviously an important connection between computer capabilities and actual CALL materials, and an acknowledgement of the "fit" of technology with language pedagogy should be considered from the outset of CALL materials production (p. 175).

The role of the computer in CALL can broadly be divided into two main functions: (a) as a tutor and (b) as a tool. The implications for the language teaching/learning situation, including curriculum/syllabus design, teacher and learner expectations, programme design, and applied methodologies, are discussed at length. Strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats of both functions are highlighted.

Levy ends his book with an appeal to his readers to continue to write up and publish CALL projects not only in specialist journals, but also in mainstream teaching publications in order to disseminate knowledge widely. Furthermore, he encourages the production of CALL materials. After all, language teachers need to be actively involved in CALL if it is not to be marginalized.

The book has to be seen in this context: Levy justifies his contribution to the CALL discussion in book rather than electronic form because he believes "it should contain some invariant qualities, issues that remain pertinent to the theorist and the practitioner over time, notwithstanding the pace with which technology continues to develop" (p. xiii).

Even though the landmark CALL projects and developments are well documented, the attempt to draw them together and deliver and evaluate an overview was missing from the CALL literature. Michael Levy's book fills this gap successfully and opens a very useful starting point for all those who are interested in the CALL debate.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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