COMPUTER ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING (CALL): OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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The present era of information is dominated by the Digital Technology which has influenced all aspects of human life. Education is not an exception. Computer, the result of digital technology has become one of the most useful devices in the field of education. The Computer which can store, retrieve & process both qualitative & quantitative information fast and accurately proves to be very effective for improving quality of teaching learning process. It gave birth to CALL Computer Assisted Language Learning. Computer-assisted language learning is defined in a seminal work by Levy (1997: p. 1) as "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning".

CALL has opened up new vistas of opportunities for English teaching and learning as a Second language. Language teachers, who prefer student centred approach for learning, have been avid users of technology for a very long time. Various technological aids have been used in ESL classroom to acquaint the students with the peculiarities of the language e.g. Gramophone Records, Tape Recorders with recordings of native speakers, slide projectors, film projectors, Video cassette recorders and DVD players etc. However, the arrival of Multimedia Computer in the early 1990s was a revolution as it provided text images, sound video to be combined in one device which enabled to acquire all the basic four skills i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. It along with internet has opened new avenues like online learning, e-journals, computer conferencing etc.

Language teaching in the past was conducted mainly in the classroom with teachers teaching and students learning passively. Students are tired of traditional English teaching with the aids of blackboard, recorders and videos. They seem to give more attention to this new style of teaching and learning. As a result, when using a computer, students may study more actively. Hence, the language laboratory has become the need of the hour in any language learning process for communication.

CALL brings many radical changes in teaching- learning process. Computer and its language learning programs provide second language learners more independence from classrooms. It is a form of student-centred learning materials that helps learners achieve their goal of learning, at their own pace and ability. It is teachers   responsibility to motivate the students in the conventional classrooms but in computer assisted language learning, computer will take the job. The role of a teacher however can   t be neglected whose presence plays a prominence role when doing CALL activities. The teacher's role as facilitator of learning has increased in importance. Students need the supportive and remarkable presence of a teacher in CALL environments. Most of the students prefer to do work in a lab with a teacher   s or tutor   s presence, rather than completely on their own.

Noemi says that   In other words, instead of being directly involved in students   construction of the language, the teacher interacts with students primarily to facilitate difficulties in using the target language (grammar, vocabulary, etc.) that arise when interacting with the computer and/or other people   (Domingo Noemi, 2007: 13.

Teaching English by using modern technology includes a lot of advantages and opportunities for students as well as teachers which are described below.

· **Motivation**: Computers can motivate the students and fill them with confidence. Students easily get the concentration as they like computer-assisted language learning because of visualization   a major source of understanding. Computer assisted language learning programs can provide a lot of fun games and

communicative activities that leads the students towards learning free of stress and anxiety. Lessons can also be repeated as often as necessary which promotes second language learners learning motivation.

· **Active Learning**: Language learning involves all language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. CALL presents many activities that focus on the language skills. Though the learners get all the language skills in classroom teaching as well CALL provides opportunities to the learners to perform listening and speaking activities on a large scale. Students can listen to native speakers from the computer and practice dialogues. The computer or the internet provides dynamic and realistic situations with native speakers speaking. It motivates the learners towards language learning. The programmes which are designed by teachers may make the students to learn new things. It enables the learners to think in a critical way. Using the systems in the classrooms, the students can improve their mastery of basic skills.

· **Individualization:** Computer and its attached language learning programs provide language learners more independence from classrooms and allow learners the option to work on their learning material at any time of the day. Students from non-English medium background can greatly benefit by individualization. Computers are sensitive to the learner s level of proficiency. The programmes lead the learners to learn a language. The learners get freedom to practise pronunciations without any interference and escape from others comments on their pronunciation and errors of their sentences. Shy and hesitant students feel free in their own students'-centred environment. Thus without losing confidence they learn the language on their own pace with more zeal and dedication. This raises their self-esteem and their knowledge is improved. Learners also learn to interpret new information and experiences on their own terms.

· **Integrated group learning:** In CALL, students have opportunities to interact and discuss meaning. In the process of language learning by computer technology they can learn all subjects in a language consisting of grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. They are allowed to learn all the four skills i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Integration is a necessity for foreign language learning and communication. Students interact with the other members who attend the CALL so that they develop an integrated group. The computer or the internet provides vibrant and realistic situations with native speakers speaking. The teachers and students prove to be authentic audiences when they listen to native speakers from the computer and practise dialogues. Students can consult meaning and assimilate new information through interaction and collaboration with their classmates and teacher. Through such interaction they become more communicative in English with proper body language and eye contacts.

· **Useful for Teaching Composition:** Computers are very important for writing tasks. Computers have brought a revolution in this field. The writing assignment that used to be a hectic work has now become easier as well as interesting with the advent of computers. Writing is not only time-consuming, but also not easily kept afterwards. Students had to write their draft first and after editing, they used to retype or copy it again. But with computers, students can use a word processing program to write their compositions and make corrections easily so that they do not have to retype or copy for their final draft. They can also edit their writing before presenting it to the teacher, and then to improve the composition based on their teacher s comments.

· **No constraint of time and space:** In traditional classes, students must attend the classes at particular time whereas computer assisted language learning, students can call up the programs held by computers whenever and wherever they want; it generates autonomous learners. It allows students to study English at various places at any time only if they have the facility of network.

· **New role of teaching materials**: In traditional classes, teaching materials are passive. CALL gives a new role to teaching materials. In CALL materials become interactive by adapting themselves to the requirements of individual students. Suresh Kumar and Sreehari comments in this context: It is a form of student-centered learning materials, which promote self-paced accelerated learning. CALL is an interactive method of instruction that helps learners achieve their goal of learning, at their own pace and ability (2007: 3).

Thus CALL programmes provide the learners with a novelty. They teach in more interesting learning conditions and help a student to learn a language with proficiency to communicate. It provides a facility of self-assessment as well. It has become inevitable in the present context but, at the same time, it poses certain challenges.

1. **Accessibility of Technology:** CALL provides learning through computer based technology and accessibility of technology is the pre-requisite. The network of computer laboratories is needed which is not so easy to maintain especially in developing countries like India. It would take more than a decade to equip such countries with technological infrastructure. Moreover computers sometimes may have technical problems and then break down. It may be least frequent but a breakdown in the middle of classroom teaching may leave the teachers embarrassed, waste a lot of time and halt the learning process. A breakdown during students   autonomous can result in a loss of data   a great challenge for students who are not very dexterous with computers.

2. **Knowledge Based**: CALL is not possible without knowledge of the use of computer. Students need the basic knowledge about the computers. Teachers should have ample knowledge and mastery in the use of computers that is hard to achieve in developing countries such as India. Some of the students, especially those who do not have computer knowledge, do not take interest in language learning.

3. **Cost effective:** Many education institutions in India, especially in rural areas, cannot afford many computers for language teaching and learning. Educational institutions are unable to update their computers and software and add new equipments and new programs due to the high initial and overhead costs.

4. **Lack of versatility:** Computers are machines and they can only do what they are programmed to do. There is lack of originality, guidance and versatility of a teacher. They sometime cannot understand students questions. They can only respond to certain commands that are already programmed in advance. Thus, many programs fail to meet learners   individual demands.

5. **The instructional design**: Most classroom teachers have neither the skills nor the time to make programs. This has left the field to commercial instructional designers who often fail to base their programs on sound pedagogical principles. The poor quality of the programs defeats the aims of CALL.

6. **Possibility of misuse:** Computers are a rich source of knowledge. They provide correct spellings; indicate mistakes which make the learners dependent on the computers. This makes them forget the spelling but they do not put efforts to improve themselves. There is also a danger in the fact that the learners may copy others ideas or articles through Internet which mar their writing creativity. They discourage the learners to think deep on their own.

Thus one can observe the complexities of challenges in using the CALL. Therefore, whenever we apply CALL programs to help student learning, we should recognize the advantages and disadvantages in current CALL programs and derive maximum benefits for our ESL teaching and learning. Despite its limitations its importance in language learning can   t be denied. In fact, computers although they cannot replace the teachers, they help the learners to learn English language. Classroom teaching, though with some weaknesses, is itself an art. In the classroom, teachers and students communicate with each other on intellectual as well as on emotional ground, which, in particular, makes the classroom teaching more attractive. To take the maximum benefit from the potential of the computer for language learning and to motivate the students CALL should be used by the teaching specialists as a complementary tool in teaching process. It should be integrated with pedagogic programs that guarantee a real evolution of the teaching methodologies and procedures.

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