

COMPUTER-ASSISTED SPOKEN ENGLISH LEARNING IN CHINA:  
BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

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Date: 3/7/2010

## Abstract

The problem presented in this paper was to find out the specific benefits and limitation of computer-assisted oral English learning. A brief review of literature on the computer assisted language learning was conducted. A second review of literature relating to some studies on computer assisted language learning and oral English in China was also conducted. Through the review of the literature, it became evident that computer assisted spoken English learning has both benefits and challenges for Chinese students learning English. In this thesis, the main benefits and challenges for Chinese students learning English in computer assisted spoken English learning model was concluded, and some suggestions were presented related to making the computer assisted oral English learning more effective in China.

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A Seminar Paper

Presented to

the Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science

in

Education

by

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2010

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPROVAL PAGE.....	i
TITLE PAGE.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background of the Research	
Purpose of the Research	
Statement of the Problem	
Definition of Terms	
Delimitations of the Research	
Method	
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	4
Computer assisted language learning	
Use of CALL for spoken English learning in China	
III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	13
IV. REFERENCES.....	16

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background of the Research

English is the most popular second language in the world. The event of globalization means English becomes more and more important and useful for communication all over the world, and there are more and more people learning English in China.

English teaching and learning in China, however, is full of challenges. The teaching objective of college English in China is to cultivate students' comprehensive ability, especially the ability of listening and speaking. Though oral English teaching has drawn a lot of attention from teachers, most of Chinese students' English level is still in the stage of "Mute English", which means that students can read and write, but can not converse in English.

Moreover, with the development of science and technology, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) pedagogy is used in English teaching and learning, which emphasizes participants' interaction around and through computers, thus it facilitates more student-centered and collaborative learning.

#### Purpose of the Research

Computer-assisted oral English learning, which is based on CALL environment, is a new teaching method in China. The purpose of this study is to find out the specific benefits and limitation of computer-assisted oral English

learning, and also to offer suggestions for improvement of this method in order to make it more effective for oral English learning.

### Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed as questions as follows:

What are the benefits and challenges of computer-assisted spoken English learning for Chinese students learning English?

### Definition of Terms

**Computer-assisted language learning:** any process in which a computer is used by a learner and, finally, helps him or her improve his or her language. This definition might seem fairly large; however, it involves a wide scope of current practice in the computer assisted language teaching and learning. A broad spectrum of activities is covered by CALL; and issues of materials design, technologies, pedagogical theories and model of instruction are also encompassed by it (Beatty, 2003).

### Delimitations of the Research

The research was conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over eighty-eight (88) days. Primary searches were conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google as the primary sources. Key search topics included “computer assisted language learning”, “oral English learning”.

## Method

A brief review of literature on the computer assisted language learning was conducted. A second review of literature relating to some studies on computer assisted language learning and oral English in China was also conducted. The findings were summarized and recommendations made.

CHAPTER 2  
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE  
Computer-assisted Language Learning

CALL, Computer Assisted Language Learning, can be defined narrowly or broadly. In a narrow way, it provides a language teaching and learning method in which the computer is used to help present, reinforce and assess the teaching materials with an interactive part (Li, 2004). Beatty (2003) defines computer assisted language learning as any process in which a computer is used by a learner and, finally, helps him or her improve his or her language. This definition might seem fairly large; however, it involves a wide scope of current practice in the computer assisted language teaching and learning. A broad spectrum of activities is covered by CALL; and issues of materials design, technologies, pedagogical theories and model of instruction are also encompassed by it. Based on the joint policy statements of CALICO, EUROCALL, and IALLT, computer-assisted language learning, which purpose is to find the role of information and communication technologies in language learning and teaching, is a relatively new and rapidly developing academic field. In other words, CALL is “the search for and study of applications on the computer in language teaching and learning” (Fotos & Browne, 2004). So CALL is generally used as the cover term for language learning based on multimedia, internet, and other technologies related to the computer.

Educators (Jonassen, 1996; Salaberry, 1999; Rost, 2002) point out that second language learning benefit a lot by using current computer technology and its attached language learning programs, which can give students more freedom to study independently and allow them learning at any time of the day (Lai & Kritsonis, 2006).The main advantages of CALL include accessing to authentic resources, increasing learners' motivation, critical thinking skills and self-confidence, helping to develop linguistic skills and matching the individual students' learning styles and pace.

One of the most frequently mentioned features of CALL is that computer technology could provide easy access to rich information. With the development of CALL, language teachers and learners can easily access the materials on the World Wide Web. Osuna (2000) argues that the Internet provides "current, interesting, varied, and useful information that engages multiple modalities through combined text, sound and visuals". By connecting to the Internet, learners can get a huge number of authentic reading materials either at home or from school, which can be accessed freely at any time of the day. With various authentic resources, learners have a lot interdisciplinary and multicultural learning opportunities to carry out their independent studies (Lai & Kritsonis, 2006).

There have been reports that using CALL can increase learners' motivation, critical thinking skills and self-confidence. Stepp-Greany (2002) argues that the interest and motivation of learners can be increased by using many components of multimedia in one program or course. Further, he states that learners' higher-order thinking skills and self-confidence to their own learning can be created by using

computer technology in classrooms. Through an experimental research, Serkan and H.Ferhan (2008) find that “learning in the online problem based learning group has a significant effect on increasing the critical thinking skills”. “Currently, computer technology can provide a lot of fun games and communicative activities, reduce the learning stresses and anxieties, and provide repeated lessons as often as necessary” (Lai & Kritsonis, 2006). Zhou (2001) has the view that students’ motivation is increased through a variety of interesting, challenging activities offered by computer and CALL has the potential to help students build self-instruction strategies, which can promote self-confidence.

The use of technology in foreign language learning appears to influence the development of linguistic skills—reading, writing, listening and speaking skills as well. Both independent and collaborative learning environments are easily created by using computer technology and CALL programs. Thus, ESL (English as a second language) students will gain more language experiences (Kung, 2002).

Among the studies about using computer technology in second language writing or foreign language writing, the majority are relate to the development and increase of written communication skills using synchronous and/or asynchronous communication tools. Liu (2003) argues that, in China, some researchers discovered that language learners not only made substantial progress in contents and words but also became more highly motivated, confident English writers through e-mail exchange, which was considered as a powerful method of English learning and teaching.

There also have been reports of improvement in reading. The aspect that received major attention is the acquisition of vocabulary for supporting reading comprehension. A view claimed by Grace (2000) is that using visual media in multimedia technology to incorporate a variety of explanations for words can enhance vocabulary learning greatly.

Some studies are conducted on listening learning through multimedia and Internet technologies. Smidt and Hegelheimer (2004) found that ESL online instruction can be informed and listening comprehension can be enhanced by authentic web-delivered video.

The development of speaking skills was mentioned in few studies that mainly dealt with the use of speech recognition software (Derwing, 2000). This software requires a user to produce meaningful linguistic units that are then translated by a speech recognition program. The practical meaning for second language classroom and foreign language classroom is that this software can analyze learners' oral skills grammatically, assess learners' oral proficiency levels and offer feedbacks to them. Derwing (2000) states the reason why the software can improve learners speaking abilities is that nonnative utterances can be recognized and problem areas of student production can be identified with corrective feedback.

Matching the individual students' learning styles and pace is also reported in many researches. Traynor (2003) claims that CALL can help students to control their learning pace and allow them to make choices of the learning materials. Thus, students feel more confident and competent in their learning. Lai

and Kritsonis (2006) state that computer technology can be individualized to meet the needs of the language learners. It allows students to vary the time they spend on different tasks. For instance, they can use repeat and replay functions to hear and / or see phrases until they are understood. Students can choose to see printed text as well as listen to a spoken text. They can also set their own schedules and pace of their learning.

However, there are several problems in using computers for language teaching. First, the application of computer technology and CALL programs will increase educational costs and the inequity of education. The costs of CALL hardware and software are expensive, which means schools need enough money to get them. On the other hand, low budget schools and low-income students have no chance to implement CALL for teaching and learning, thus, the educational condition for them is unfair (A. Gips, DiMattia, & J. Gips, 2004).

Second, most learners lack the basic technology knowledge that assists second language learning. Roblyer (2003) states that learners cannot gain the benefits from CALL if they are not familiar with basic computer technology and cannot utilize a computer. Unfortunately, there is only limited technological training provided to teachers, who can guide their students to explore computer and its assisted language learning programs.

Third, the limitations of current computer technology can be problems as well. "Current computer technology mainly deals with reading, listening, and writing skills. Even though some speaking programs have been developed recently, their functions are still limited" (Lai & Kritsonis, 2006). Lai and

Kritsonis (2006) also argue that, due to the limitations of computer's artificial intelligence, computer cannot handle learners' unexpected learning problems and response to learners' questions immediately as teachers do. The way humans use information is different from computers, so the ability of computer for interaction is limited (as cited in Dent, 2006).

#### Use of CALL for spoken English learning in China

With the development of information and technology, oral English teaching and learning based on the CALL environment are studied in China. Through computers and the internet, creative teachers can find innovative ways to improve their pedagogy and acquire their students' attention. The studies attempt to explore a new teaching model on spoken English.

CALL doesn't improve students' proficiency of English listening and speaking, but it keeps students' language proficiency stable. Besides, CALL has subtle potential to motivate students since students who use CALL are more desirable to learn English and make more efforts (Xie, 2004). The effectiveness of CALL is achieved because of its capability of relieving students from anxiety and making students fell natural and unstrained.

A method of supporting collaborative learning using computers and the internet, which is called computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL), is becoming more and more popular. Dede (1996) indicates that CSCL supports the communication of ideas and information among learners and improve team performance through peer communication, structuring group dialogue and decision making, recording rationales for choices, and facilitating collective

activities (Wang, Hinn & Kanfer, 2001). Through an empirical study of computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL) in oral English classes, Zou (2008) finds that students make much progress in their oral English according to expectation. In addition, this method is more effective in promoting learners' confidence, students are motivated and autonomous to speak; the atmosphere in the CSCL class is more relaxing and active, therefore, students make genuine oral communication and have more engagement and better oral production. CSCL is gaining broad acceptance in language learning classrooms, because it improves the overall climate of the classroom and provides opportunities for learners to use the language, the oral classes are more learner-centered.

These technologies have created new growing fields of inquiry--web-based CALL. Web-based CALL technologies create an authentic language environment for students to communicate for the sake of need rather than practice (Zhang, 2007). Use of various synchronous and asynchronous Web-based tools for learning and teaching spoken English have become increasingly popular. Zhang (2007) states that asynchronous and synchronous computer mediated communications (CMC) make it possible for students to construct their own knowledge systems and schema by self-access learning and cooperative learning.

In web-based CALL spoken English class, the class is expended to a wider space, from mere classroom to online communities. Online groups interact with classroom groups. There is no need for teachers to rack their brains to create simulated situations which have never been authentic. The project itself provides

the context and opportunity for students to make authentic communication. The Internet provides unprecedented resources of knowledge and information than any kind of current textbooks. Teachers turn from knowledge resources to guide to those resources. A teacher is an organizer, a coordinator or even a participant as well as a monitor and an assessor in the project. Students play the major part without doubt in learning which is active instead of being passive like before. There is no practice, but rather only the actual use of the language. Students learn for the sake of use of the language. Students communicate for the sake of opinion exchange and meaning negotiation in authentic situations where cooperation and collaboration are encouraged and required in the learning process (Zhang, 2007).

Supported by computer and Internet, oral English training process focuses more on numerous information input, autonomous learning and communicative practice. The results show that such a teaching model is popular with students and effective in arousing students' enthusiasm and enhancing their English proficiency.

However, Xu (2006) finds that the present CALL model lacks interactive communication, feedback, pressure, and learning methods guidance. All these weaknesses may not motivate students. First, in the CALL class, Communication in English happens mainly between individual students and computers. Communication among students also happens in CALL classes, but it is usually about the operational questions and generally in Chinese rather than English. Students have a feel that this human-computer communication is dull, inflexible, lack of interaction and humanity. Second, Chinese students, with a background of

teacher-directed learning and with little exposure to computers, depend a lot on teachers for 12 years or so in learning before they are enrolled into colleges and are usually incapable of learning autonomously, when entering colleges. Students in the present CALL context, who are more proficient in English and more self-disciplined in learning usually, make progress; however, those who are less self-restricted usually go to the other extreme. Some of them may even quit English learning. Third, no learning methods are provided according to individual differences. Though students can decide their own learning steps, they are eager to get some good suggestions for English learning. What's more, though there are some programmed exercises and quizzes, the computer cannot analyze each student's problems according to their real performance. It can only grade students without detailed comments. Actually a student benefits more from the learning process than pure outcome feedback. Additionally, the computer cannot offer the exact explanation for the wrong answer by analyzing where the problem is if they do not understand the question and answer clearly. Fourth, sometimes there is something wrong with the computer or network so that students cannot continue with their learning smoothly. Such kind of technological problems also influences CALL's effectiveness as well as the motivation of students.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through a review of the literature, it becomes evident that computer assisted spoken English learning has both benefits and challenges for Chinese students learning English. The main benefits and challenges for Chinese students learning English in computer assisted spoken English learning model are concluded here, and some suggestions presented to make the computer assisted oral English learning more effective in China.

First and foremost, students benefit a lot from computer assisted spoken English learning, including improving oral English performance, increasing motivation, critical thinking skills and self-confidence. Particularly, shy or inhibited students who suffer anxiety a lot in a traditional English classroom can benefit greatly from such personalized, student-centered learning.

Teachers also gain a lot benefits. For a long time, teachers have been thinking how to create a genuine oral communication environment for students learning English. CALL is instrumental in solving this problem. With the help of the computer and Internet, teachers can get authentic materials and rich culture background information easily, and design many interesting learning activities, which are attractive and helpful for students practicing oral English and other linguistic skills.

Though the benefits are obvious, there still challenges for using computer assisted spoken English learning in China. Some problems are caused from the CALL model itself, such as the limitation of current computer technology and the

high cost to implement it; others are from students and teachers' knowledge of CALL and their attitude to CALL, and also from the reality of current education condition in China.

Knowledge of the benefits and challenges which exist in current computer assisted spoken English learning in China allow for maximum benefits for Chinese teaching and learning English. It is this author's point of view that students and teachers should have a basic knowledge of CALL before using it for English teaching and learning. One way to gain knowledge of CALL is to give students and teachers training in the use of CALL. Once they have a basic knowledge of it, they will feel familiar and comfortable when CALL is implemented.

Moreover, no language learning model or method is a panacea to solve all teaching and learning problems, because each model has its own strengths and weaknesses. Research has shown time and time again that a computer-human environment provided by CALL is helpful for oral English learning, and that computer cannot handle learners' unexpected learning problems and answer learners' questions immediately as teachers do. All these findings provide oral English teaching in China with useful implication. No matter how developed and cultivated technology is, human contact in real time is the most important factor in creating a pleasant, nonthreatening atmosphere that is conducive to sharing and learning. So, a suggestion is to combine CALL with traditional Face-to-Face (FTF) model for speaking teaching and learning. In this way, the limitation of CALL can be complemented by FTF. With the teacher, students can

get detailed feedback and learning methods guidance. Teachers can also foster human-human communication and meet students' affective demands. Besides, CALL can integrate with many language learning methods according to specific learning and teaching demands.

Finally, with the development of technology and education conditions in China, it is no doubt that CALL will become a major model for spoken English teaching and learning in the near future. It is hopeful that Chinese students can communicate efficiently both orally and literally in English to adapt to the social developments and international exchanges.

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