Models for Teaching Culture in Computer-Assisted Language Learning

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CALL (computer-assisted language learning) has tremendously transformed the teaching of language, with its wide application in many aspects of language teaching. However, how to integrate CALL into the teaching of culture is still rarely discussed. The purpose of the paper is to explore feasible models for teaching culture in CALL and their effects on students' acquisition process. Based on two fundamental pedagogical approaches (participatory pedagogy and multiliteracies pedagogy) for teaching culture, this paper proposes three pedagogical models (problem-posing model, web-quest model, and computer-supported collaborative learning model) for teaching culture in CALL. In the end, this paper illustrates a combination of the three models in real CALL setting by a cultural teaching case. A questionnaire survey and interviews are conducted to reflect on students' feedback, which gives an insight into possible adjustments in teaching models and the paper also proposes future possibilities in applying these models into teaching culture.

Keywords: CALL (computer-assisted language learning), teaching culture, pedagogical models

Introduction

Language is considered to be first and foremost a socio-cultural resource constituted by “a range of possibilities, an open-ended set of options in behavior that are available to the individual in his existence as social man” (Halliday, 1973, p. 49). Language is the central means of learning culture in the language classroom. Many definitions have been suggested for culture. To best serve to the goals of this paper, the author just takes culture as the deposit of language, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving (Samovar, Porter, & Stefani, 2000, p. 36). For many years, both teachers and students believe that teaching culture and developing intercultural communication competence is a very important part of language teaching. Besides achieving language competence in English education, intercultural competence should also be highlighted.

According to Beatty (2005), given the breadth of what may go on in CALL (computer-assisted language learning), a definition of CALL that accommodates its changing nature is any key process in which a learner uses a computer and, as a result, improves his or her language. Over the years, efforts have been made by (CALL) experts to explore the capability of computer technology in supporting the developing intercultural

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communication by language teaching. The exploration for computer technology for culture teaching has gone through several phases. In the early stage, much computer-assisted language teaching software was developed. However, due to content and delivery isolation and adaptation of software across languages, students were presented with an ethnocentric view of the world. To compensate for the above-mentioned shortcomings, CALL for culture teaching began to integrate the use of computer networks. It advocates an integrated approach to language and culture training, describing how a “cultural syllabus” is designed to develop users’ understanding of key aspects of European work culture and practices alongside their professional language skills. Efforts have also been made to explore the feasible pedagogical approaches and models to teaching culture. A model for culture teaching in CALL is difficult to describe in absolute terms, partly because of the many variables involved, partly because of the ever-changing nature of the technology, and also because of the wide variety of applications that are considered as CALL programs. This paper makes efforts in proposing three practical pedagogical models.

Pedagogical Approaches for Teaching Culture

Several approaches to teaching language and culture from socio-cultural perspectives have emerged in the field of applied linguistics. In general, these approaches aim to develop in learners an extensive cultural repertoire that includes the development of communicative competence in a variety of communicative contexts. In this paper, two widely applied pedagogical approaches are discussed.

Participatory Pedagogy

Current formulations of participatory language pedagogy consider learning to be a socially situated, collaborative process of transformation whereby teachers and students, together, build a common base of knowledge, frameworks of understanding, and a shared system of meanings, values, and beliefs for purposes of mutual growth (Auerbach, 2000; Wallerstein, 1983).

Sometimes referred to as critical pedagogy, participatory pedagogy aims to create environments that assist learners in appropriating the knowledge and skills needed for full participation in their larger social worlds in ways that fully account for, and ultimately help to transform their particular circumstances. Rather than being imposed on them, the specific communicative skills and knowledge that become part of the curriculum emerge from learners’ needs and concerns and resources for analyzing their contexts as well as for taking action.

Multiliteracies Pedagogy

A second approach to language pedagogy that embodies a socio-cultural perspective is the multiliteracies pedagogy. The pedagogy was developed by a group of international scholars in response to what they had identified as two important challenges to education. The first is the increasingly cultural and linguistic diversity of communities around the world. The second challenge is the proliferation of means for communicating within and across these communities. Not only have additional communication technologies been created, but communication through them is “increasingly multi-modal in which written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5).

A pedagogy of multiliteracies is proposed, consisting of four interrelated spheres of learning opportunities: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice. The purpose of

situated practice learning opportunities is to socialize learners into those communicative activities in which they are expected to become competent. The purpose of overt instruction is to provide opportunities for learners to focus on, practice and eventually take control of the various linguistic and other relevant conventions needed for competent engagement in their communicative activities. The purpose of critical framing is to help learners to stand apart from their activities and identify the diverse and multiple perspectives embodied in them, with the aim of understanding their historical, social, cultural, political, and ideological contexts. The purpose of transformed practice is to provide learners with opportunities to take the lead in their own learning, to use what they know to chart alternative courses for action for realizing both their personal and social goals.

Pedagogical Models for Teaching Culture in CALL

Based on the theoretical frame work of two pedagogical approaches to teaching culture, this paper proposes three models that are applicable is CALL setting. CALL differs from the traditional classroom setting in many fundamental ways. CALL is learner-centered instead of the traditional teacher-centered. Traditionally learning a language is the grasp of linguistic knowledge, however, in CALL, language learning is more a process of the acquisition of communicative competence than a command of linguistic competence. Teachers' traditional role as chief presents, controllers, talkers, and criticizers has been transformed into directors, facilitators, reminders, monitors, and evaluators. Change is also occurring with advances in computer literacy among both teachers and students. Because of the changing nature of computers, CALL is an amorphous or unstructured discipline, constantly evolving both in terms of pedagogy and technological advances in hardware and software. Three pedagogical models are presented with an aim to adapt to these changes.

Problem-Posing Model

One kind of participatory pedagogy commonly used in CALL is problem-posing model. Learning happens in a complex and significant issues or concerns students face in their communities outside the classroom. Its aim is to help to acquire language points, cultural background information, and linguistic skills that are embedded in the problem-solving process. It differs from the traditional teaching model in many ways. Firstly, teachers' role has been changed from a traditional oracle and lecturer to consultant, guide, and resource provider; teachers are expected to become expert questioners, rather than providers of answers; teachers are no longer solitary working unit, they are encouraged to form a leaning team. Students' traditional role in the classroom has also been challenged. Students have been changed from acting as passive receptacles for hand-me-down knowledge, to students who are constructing their own knowledge. Students are involved in more activities in which they refine their own questions and search for answers. Instead of memorizing facts, students are more adept at complex problem-solving activities.

Web-Quest Model

This model encourages every learner to be an active finder. In the process of finding, students could acquire the methods of learning and thus find contentment in the learning process. Students acquire knowledge by various actions instead of rote listening and reading and a person's knowledge is constructed in a socio-cultural environment. The interaction between learners and the socio-cultural environment is of great importance.

Web-quest model is a combination of participatory and multiliteracies pedagogy. The purpose of web-quest model is to push learners to use information to analyze, synthesis, and assess information. There are five principles for this model, which is called FOCUS, i.e., find great sites, orchestrate your learners and resources, challenge you learners and resources, use the medium, and scaffold his expectations.

The web's multimedia capabilities and interactive functions have made it an attractive medium for ESL students. Documents on the web cover a huge range of topics, are mostly written in English and are constantly increasing in number. The web is thus a rich database of authentic material. Here is a model lesson based on web-quest model requires that students practice on-line navigation and research skills and carefully decode information found at the site in order to complete the assignment.

Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning Model

According to D. W. Johnson and R. Johnson (1999), there are five elements in collaborative learning: positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual and group accountability, interpersonal and group skills and group processing. This model takes on many forms in CALL setting. This paper proposes four basic forms. First is competition. Two or more learners focus on the same task in a web setting. The internet forum provides learning objectives and related information. Learners choose their competitor and agree on the competition rules. In the process, they can adjust their learning strategies according to the reference of their competitors. The second form is collaboration. Collaboration is defined as a process in which two or more learners need to work together to achieve a common goal, usually the completion of a task. Collaboration in the classroom begins with an activity that facilitates real communication, for example, verbal, written, or electronic discussion in the course of solving a problem. The third is role play: teachers and students switching roles, and situated role play. The former refers to students can be both learners and teachers, performing the task of learning, answering questions and instructions and assessment. The latter is to put students in different cultural setting, performing different roles in an effort to create real language setting. The fourth is group assessment. In a computer network setting, students should learn to assess individual student's performance and the group performance.

A more recent form of participatory pedagogy developed for community based adult language programme is what Bonnie Norton calls CBSR (classroom-based social research). Similar to the problem-posing approach, the aim of CBSR is to help "language learners claim the right to speak outside the classroom" (Norton-Pierce, 1995, p. 27). Using basic ethnographic skills of observation, interviewing, and reporting, students record their language habits or language games with the target language and then use the data for discussions on language and language use.

The role of computer network in classroom-based social research is resources provider. Students are required to log on to the websites to collect sufficient information about a specific cultural issue to become an informed learner. Then they are required to propose a research plan posted on the net forum, where other students' suggestions and comments are welcome. With a polished research proposal, students conduct the research, and an oral presentation and a written report are needed for assessment.

Case Study

Cultural Theme: Time Orientation

Intercultural communication is a selective course for Chinese college students with College English Test

Band 4 Scores 425 above, with a purpose to enhance cultural awareness and improve intercultural communication competence to be fully prepared to meet the challenges of a global economy. This case study is a part of the course, and the theme is “Time Orientation”.

(1) Audience: Chinese college sophomore students with College English Test Band 4 Scores 425 above;

(2) Teaching objectives: to access the internet for current new articles about time orientation, increase awareness of cultural differences in time orientation. Students will be able to understand how the people in the East and West use time differently, the different attitudes and perceptions of time, and how to solve the cultural conflicts caused by the difference in time orientation;

(3) Skills: Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Critical Thinking;

(4) Time: two classes period (three and a half hours);

(5) Procedures: (a) Teacher introduces the topic of the lesson by assigning students to surf the internet to get the basic knowledge about the topic to become informed learners; (b) Teacher gives necessary tutoring to students on the basic theoretical frame work of the concept. Students are divided into different groups to work out a questionnaire and they are required to go to the public places to interview people from different cultural backgrounds to get the first hand data; (c) Students analyze their data result and write a report on the difference time orientation between the East and the West; and (d) Students give oral presentations on the topic and there is a discussion and comments session followed.

Students' Feedback

To get insight into the effectiveness of these comprehensive integration of different pedagogical models, the author conducted a questionnaire survey to the students in the above-mentioned case study. They are Chinese college sophomore students with the language proficiency level of Chinese College English Test Band 4 Score 425 above. The author also did some interviews with the students. The data collected are of two types: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative data came form the questionnaire survey. Forty-five questionnaires were returned.

Table 1

Students Attitudes Towards Learning Culture in CALL (n = 45)

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
(1) It is a highly fruitful experience.	37	82.2
(2) It has improved cooperative learning among the classmates involved.	34	75.5
(3) It has added a great deal to my workload.	25	55.5
(4) It has enhanced my ability to learn by myself.	30	66.6

Table 1 clearly demonstrates that this comprehensive pedagogical model fits into students' needs. Not only do the students acquire the basic cultural notes, but also practice their abilities to learn by themselves and cooperation. However, it also emerges some problems, for example, 55.5% of students claim to confront extra study loads.

As to the problems and barriers to this teaching model, the inaccessibility of internet and computers ranks the first, with 80% of students experienced the difficulty (see Table 2). They also complained about the lack of

technical support, extra work load. The qualitative data were then supplemented by a number of semi-structured interviews with students. The questionnaires and the interviews were all given in Chinese to facilitate ease of expression.

Table 2

Barriers to EFL Students Learning Culture in CALL (n = 45)

Barriers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
(1) Lack of technical support	20	44.4
(2) Inaccessible when needed	36	80
(3) Extra workload involved	25	55.5
(4) Lack of preparation time	18	40

Interview

As an important complement to the data analysis, a number of semi-structured interviews were conducted.

The application of CALL to learning culture is quite stimulating. It made our class very vivid; With access to internet, I acquired much information on the related subject, and what is important, with a task at hand, I was encouraged to take the initiative to learn. Moreover, I learned a lot from my peers in the process of group work. (Student A, personal interview, December 26, 2012)

Generally speaking, this new way of teaching is more interesting than the traditional way of teaching. I practice my critical thinking by a research comparing the similarities and differences between the East and West will contribute to fewer conflicts between cultures. However, it was also demanding. I need to double my time and energy to complete the task. (Student B, personal interview, December 8, 2012)

I came from the countryside and my knowledge about computers and internet is limited. So I had difficulty learning and doing tasks on a computer and web based teaching curriculum. Although it is active and interesting, I tend to lose confidence in collaboration with my fellow students. (Student C, personal interview, December 15, 2012)

The interviews above show students' intense interest in this innovative pedagogical model and were greatly motivated by it. They claim to be the main agent of language acquisition, instead of passive listeners in the traditional language teaching class. They mostly deem it as a fruitful and constructive process. However, it also reveals some problems which need our further efforts.

Conclusions

Ever since the wide application of CALL, efforts have been made to explore its application in a diverse domain of teaching, among which teaching culture is an important arena. However, a model for CALL is difficult to describe in absolute terms, partly because of the many variables involved, partly because of the ever-changing nature of the technology, and also because of the wide variety of applications that are considered as CALL programs. To fully generalize the models for teaching culture in English teaching class, a comprehensive integrated model which combines the above-mentioned three is often adopted in real classroom setting. However, attempts need to be made to eliminate its current obstacles, for example, to ensure the accessibility of internet and computers at class, to improve students' computer literacy, and to provide consistent technical support.

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